



PREFACE

HENDRICKSON CHRISTIAN CLASSICS EDITION

John Bunyan
(1628–1688)

As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a den, and laid me down in that place to sleep; and as I slept, I dreamed a dream. I dreamed, and behold, I saw a man clothed with rags, standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back. I looked and saw him open the book, and read therein; and as he read, he wept and trembled; and not being able longer to contain, he brake out with a lamentable cry, saying, “What shall I do?”

—JB, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Part One

These words open *Pilgrim’s Progress*, one of the most influential books in the English language. It has been in print for over three centuries, with millions of copies published in hundreds of languages. In 1692, just four years after author John Bunyan’s death, there were more than 100,000 copies in print in English alone. For many generations, *Pilgrim’s Progress* was, after the Bible, the most deeply cherished book in the English-speaking household.

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Early Protestant missionaries would first translate the Bible, then *Pilgrim's Progress*.

John Bunyan was born into one of the first generations to have free access to the Bible in their native English language. The King James Version was published in 1611 and, by order of the king, was read in all churches in England. As a result, the English imagination had a rich common vocabulary of religious thought and poetic imagery. In *Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan brilliantly exploits this biblical imagery to create a theological primer, weaving biblical truth into a fictional saga vibrating with adventure, romance, and heroic endeavors. In the unpretentious voice of a seventeenth-century working man who relates his dream of a pilgrim, Bunyan weaves a simple but truly memorable tale of the travels of said pilgrim, named Christian, from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. The second part of the book relates a similar journey of Christian's wife, Christiana, and their four sons.

John was born in Elstow near Bedford in 1628, where his family had owned land for three hundred years. Vocationally, John followed in the footsteps of his father, a tinker. He received a rudimentary education at a local grammar school, and probably became an apprentice repairman at an early age.

To fully appreciate John Bunyan, it is necessary to view him within the context of history. John was born three years after Charles I became king in 1625, when opposition groups in Parliament had limited the king's powers. Resisting efforts to purify the government and the church (by the "Puritans"), Charles raised the stakes by dismissing Parliament and ruling without it for over a decade. By the time the Charles did summon Parliament, they chose rather to raise their own army to fight him. The Parliamentary forces found sympathizers in the Nonconformists, who believed the king and the Church of England were still much too sympathetic to Roman Catholics.

The English Civil War (1642–1648) pitted the king's forces against the Parliamentary army. In the political realm, the battle lined up between the king and Parliament: the divine right of the monarchy to rule absolutely set against the authority of Parliament and the civil and religious rights of individuals. In the religious realm, it was the Established Church of England versus the Nonconformists—Puritans, Baptists, Presbyterians, anyone who didn't "conform" to the Established Church. (To keep things lively, the

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Roman Catholics were feared and distrusted by everyone.) Socially, the “new money” of the rising middle class—the merchants, manufacturers, and financiers—was fighting the old money and power of the titled landed gentry for position and voice. All of English life was in upheaval, a bloody tangle of politics and religion.

At age sixteen, John Bunyan was drafted into and served two years in the Parliamentary army, which fought against Charles, who ultimately lost the war—and his head—in 1649. Oliver Cromwell became the leader of the Protectorate, essentially a military dictatorship. For us, these names and events are mere footnotes of history; but they rather defined the life and career of Bunyan. This humble tinker was swept into the political, religious, and civil uproar that would change England forever.

With Cromwell in power, everything changed—in favor of the “Protestants” and against the Anglicans and Roman Catholics. Cromwell codified godly living into law: theaters were closed, Sabbath rest enforced, and modest dress and manners were legislated. All churches were permitted—except for the Roman Catholic and the high-church Anglican.

Out of the army, John returned home to Bedford, and in 1649 he married his first wife Mary, with whom he had four children. Little is known of this woman, except that she brought with her to her marriage a dowry of two books: Arthur Dent’s *The Plaine Mans Path-Way to Heaven* and Lewis Bayly’s *The Practice of Piety*. Mary also brought to her marriage her own practical faith and stories of her father’s godliness, perhaps in the long run the greater gifts to her husband, John. As poor as these two people were—they did not have “so much household stuff as a dish or a spoon betwixt us both”—her gifts laid the spiritual foundation for Bunyan’s entire life and work.

Soon after he was married (in his early twenties), John met John Gifford, a local physician-turned-Baptist-minister of a newly formed congregation of Nonconformists. “Holy Mr. Gifford” introduced Bunyan to the message of salvation. It would be another two years before he was baptized (1653) and became a member of the Bedford congregation.

Bunyan may have lacked a formal education, but he was an enthusiastic reader, devouring the works of various theologians and preachers. He had an intimate knowledge of John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* (“The Book of Martyrs”). His most valued book except for the Bible was an English transla-

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tion of Martin Luther's *Commentary of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians*. And of course there were the books from his wife Mary.

It is clear from his writings that John Bunyan was well read and well informed, far more learned than he would admit. In an oddly modern spin of image control, he exploited his lack of academic credentials to gain credibility among common folks, people like himself. He claimed that the Bible was the source of his knowledge and the Holy Spirit provided the insights and guidance necessary to uncover the mysteries of God.

In the years following his conversion, Bunyan embraced his faith enthusiastically, studying the Scripture and his favorite teachers. He then wrote treatises and pamphlets, sharing his faith and arguing his case for his beliefs. Ultimately, he traveled throughout surrounding villages as a preacher, gaining a reputation for his powerful messages.

But politically, the tide was again turning. Cromwell was never able to give the Parliamentarians what they had fought for: a free Parliament and freedoms of speech and press. And the middle and lower classes did not gain the political rights they had fought for; power remained with the landed and titled. Ultimately, the Protectorate was a failure, outliving Cromwell by only two years. In 1660, Charles II (the son of Charles I) returned from exile in Europe and restored the monarchy, and with it the established Anglican Church. Power swung back to Canterbury: new laws forbade religious meetings that did not follow the forms of the Anglican Church under the penalty of imprisonment or deportation. Thousands of Nonconformist ministers were severed from their incomes and their ministries.

John Bunyan was one of those Nonconformist preachers—one who would not stop preaching, though it was outlawed. In 1660 he was sentenced to jail for three months, the usual sentence for this offense. But Bunyan was jailed for twelve years, because he would not promise to stop preaching; rather, he vowed that he would do what God had commanded him to do—or remain in prison until the moss grew on his eyelids.

His wife Mary had died in 1658, leaving Bunyan with two daughters and two sons. The following year he married Elizabeth, who was only seventeen or eighteen years old. When John was jailed shortly after their marriage and she was left to care for his four children, Elizabeth proved her mettle, traveling to London to appeal for his release. When her petition failed, she appeared before local authorities to again plead her husband's case. The stress and

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strain of Bunyan's imprisonment contributed to the miscarriage of their first child, but ultimately they did have two children. Elizabeth remained a faithful encouragement to her husband, visiting him often with the children.

There's no doubt but that Bunyan's twelve years in jail shaped his faith, his thinking, and his writing. A full 20 percent of his life, from age thirty-two to forty-four, was spent in prison. Being jailed for one's religious convictions must bring with it a particular sort of suffering, one in which conscience and faith are criminalized.

Bunyan feared for his family, for their welfare and their safety. He writes of his deep suffering on behalf of his children—particularly his beloved older daughter “blind Mary”—should they be orphaned by his death or deportation. To support his family, Bunyan writes, he made shoelaces, “many hundred gross of long tagg'd laces.”

Despite the intentions of authorities to suppress Bunyan, the prison afforded Bunyan new opportunities to share his faith. For a time he was granted occasional forays out of prison to attend services at the Bedford Church and even to preach. He also spent time teaching fellow inmates and providing guidance to those who came to him for help. But most important was his writing. In the twelve years of his imprisonment, Bunyan wrote nine books, among them *Profitable Meditations*, *Christian Behavior*, *The Holy City*, and his autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, which is considered by many his finest work. And it was in prison that he wrote the first part of what would be his classic work, *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Bunyan remained jailed until 1672, when Charles II issued his Declaration of Indulgence, suspending all the laws against both Nonconformists and Roman Catholics. But Parliament revoked the declaration the following year, and John was imprisoned briefly again in 1677—for not attending an established parish church.

Upon his release from prison in 1672, John obtained the appropriate license and resumed his preaching, pastoring the Bedford congregation in which he discovered the healing and comfort of godly fellowship. He also preached throughout the surrounding villages, traveling as far as London and Reading, where people flocked to hear him. His sermons carried an increased sense of authority, as a result of his imprisonment and his books, including the first part of *Pilgrim's Progress*, which was published in 1678.

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His zeal and dedication for the Lord ultimately caused him to be dubbed “Bishop Bunyan.” In short, Bunyan was a celebrity.

He maintained a heavy pastoral schedule that included writing. After the publication of *Pilgrim's Progress*, he released *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman* and, in 1684, *Pilgrim's Progress* (Part Two), among others. All told, Bunyan wrote more than sixty books.

The two parts of *Pilgrim's Progress* are quite distinct in style and in tone; not surprisingly, they mirror Bunyan's own personal situation. The first part reflects a view of the Christian life as a life-long, often terrifying struggle. This perspective of fear and danger dominates his other prison writings as well, especially *Grace Abounding*. The second part of *Pilgrim's Progress*—the more tranquil pilgrimage of pilgrim Christian's wife Christiana—reflects the calm and peace that John finally enjoyed at the end of his life.

In August 1688, John set out on horseback to Reading to help settle a family dispute. Along the forty-mile journey, he encountered heavy rains. Catching a chill, he was forced to stay with a friend in London. Worn out by his work and his travel, he could not shake the fever and died, on August 31. John is buried in Bunhill Fields, London.

To readers today, Bunyan's tale of a pilgrim named Christian may seem difficult to read, perhaps too out of date. Not so! Our journey of faith is modeled on the example of Abraham and Sarah: “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Heb. 11:13–14 kjv).

We are strangers and pilgrims on earth, on a journey in which virtues and temptations, both great and ordinary, present themselves. Certainly each of us, like the pilgrim Christian, has struggled with a burden too heavy to bear, one we long to lay down. We've faced the Hill of Difficulty, the Slough of Despond, and the Valley of Humiliation. We've met Mr. Worldly Wiseman, who would try to deceive us away from the path; we've been distracted by Sloth, Presumption, and Hypocrisy.

In Bunyan's skillfully drawn tale, we become pilgrims ourselves, traveling along a muddied and dangerous seventeenth-century road, exposed to the elements, fearful of the dangers, and happy for any refuge along the way. And like Bunyan's hero, we are tested by external hazards and internal anxieties, all threatening to waylay our journey to the Celestial City. How

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do we avoid the dangers and pitfalls? How do we reach our heavenly goal? By setting aside fear and taking one step at a time. On this spiritual pilgrimage, join Christian and learn of God's faithfulness.

*Since, Lord, Thou dost defend
Us with Thy Spirit,
We know we at the end
Shall life inherit.
Then fancies flee away!
I'll fear not what men say,
I'll labor night and day
To be a pilgrim.*

—from “He Who Would Be Valiant,” a hymn based on text from
Pilgrim's Progress, Part Two