

# Walking Among the Redwoods (3)

## *John Bunyan*

By Todd Pruitt

In 1660 John Bunyan began his twelve year stay in Bedford jail. What pain must have attended this judgment. He had been married for one year to Elizabeth, his second wife. His first wife died after ten years of marriage and four children. This left his new bride to care for her four stepchildren. It was the separation from his family that inflicted the most acute pain in Bunyan's heart. But Elizabeth was a rock and she supported his decision to not compromise with those who would have him stop preaching.

John Bunyan was born in Elstow, England in 1628. He became a metal worker like his father and received the ordinary education of a poor man of his day. Describing his life before conversion he wrote, "I was the very ringleader of all the youth that kept me company, in all manner of vice and ungodliness." Bunyan married a young woman from a godly home whose name has been lost. During those early days of marriage the Lord began to convict him until in 1652 or 53 he was dramatically converted to Christ. He moved his new family to Bedford where they joined the baptist church.

During his early years as a follower of Christ, Bunyan grappled mightily with temptations and doubts. He wrote, "Oh, no one knows the terrors of those days but myself." He felt many times, as it were, swallowed up by despair. But under the guidance of his pastor and the profound influence of reading Martin Luther's commentary on Galatians Bunyan came to know the joy of God's great salvation and in 1655 began preaching. His reputation as a truly great preacher spread and soon crowds of over 1,000 would gather to hear this former tinker and blasphemer preach the Gospel of Christ. John Owen, a highly educated man and England's greatest theologian befriended Bunyan and would go hear him preach frequently. When asked by King Charles why he would listen to an uneducated metal worker preach Owen said, "I would willingly exchange my learning for the tinker's power of touching men's souls."

To understand how Bunyan ended up imprisoned you must understand something about the days in which he lived. Beginning in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century a movement of godly men in Great Britain wanted to bring biblical purity to the Church of England. They came to be known as the Puritans. There was an ongoing battle between King Charles I who pushed the Church of England to closer conformity with Roman Catholicism. Parliament, on the other hand, led by Oliver Cromwell identified with the reforms advocated by the Puritans.

In 1642 civil war broke out between forces supporting the King and those supporting Parliament. In 1645 after bitter fighting, England came under the control of Parliament. The new Commonwealth was led by Cromwell until his death in 1658. Among the changes instituted during that time were sweeping religious reforms including freedom for the Puritans and even for Jews who had been exiled from England since the late 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Following Cromwell's death, England once again was returned to the Monarchy. Parliament now turned against those preachers who refused to conform to the Church of England. Charles II was enthroned in 1660 and that same year Bunyan was put in jail for preaching without the approval of the Monarchy. In 1662 laws were passed requiring all churches to accept and use the *Book of Common Prayer* (something the Puritans vigorously opposed) and for preachers to be ordained in the Episcopal Church. That same year two thousand Puritan preachers were ejected from their churches and forbidden to preach. Bunyan was released from jail in 1672 after the laws were relaxed. However, he was returned to jail a few years later during which time he wrote Pilgrim's Progress.

At any time during his imprisonments Bunyan could have been released if he had either agreed to the King's requirements for preachers or if he had just promised not to preach. Certainly, many would have understood if this husband and father had consented to the new laws. However, Bunyan, whose conscience was captive to the Word of God, refused and stayed in jail. But he paid a high price for a clear conscience. He wrote of those years in the Bedford jail:

"The parting with my wife and poor children hath often been to me in this place as the pulling of flesh from my bones; and that not only because I am somewhat too fond of these great Mercies, but also because I should have often brought to my mind the many hardships, miseries and wants that my poor family was like to meet with should I be taken from them, especially my poor blind child, who lay nearer my heart than all I had besides; O the thoughts of the hardship I thought my blind one might go under, would break my heart to pieces."

Even out of jail the pressure was never truly lifted. Though some of the laws were relaxed, Puritans continued to be arrested and fined. God was gracious to Bunyan during those days however. He preached with great power and comforted untold numbers of people through the Gospel of Christ and the testimony of his own faithfulness in suffering. In 1688 after preaching in London Bunyan became violently ill after a long horse ride through driving rains. At the age of 60 on August 31, 1688 John Bunyan died away from home and the comforts of his beloved family.

John Bunyan left the church of Jesus Christ an extraordinary legacy. Pilgrim's Progress is probably the greatest book ever written on the Christian life outside of Scripture. In it he teaches us about the reality of sufferings that come when one is faithful to Christ. Commenting on Bunyan and his book, George

Whitfield said, “Ministers never write or preach so well as when under the cross: the Spirit of Christ and of Glory then rest upon them.” This is a message that the American church needs desperately to hear. In a day when earthly comforts have become our idol and worldly pleasures our chief pursuit Bunyan signals us to come and follow Christ on the narrow path.

*“These troubles and distresses that you go through in these waters, are no sign that God hath forsaken you, but are sent to try you, whether you will call to mind that which heretofore you have received of His goodness, and live upon Him in your distress.”*

*From Pilgrim’s Progress*

Books by and about John Bunyan:

- *Pilgrim’s Progress* – A timeless classic.
- *Dangerous Journey* – an abridged and beautifully illustrated version of *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Take your kids through this one.
- *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* – Bunyan’s spiritual auto-biography. A puritan classic.
- *The Hidden Smile of God* by John Piper. A wonderful book on Bunyan and two others who teach us a great deal about faithfulness in suffering.