

First Person Presentation: John Bunyan

Reformation Month 2000

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Good evening. Because I have heard in recent weeks that your Free Presbyterian Pastor has been making some very generous and charitable biblically ecumenical comments about nominal Baptists coming to his pulpit, I have chosen not to comment on the fact that when John Bunyan arrived, your pastor fled the country.

I would like to present myself as John Bunyan tonight. Bunyan, that's not a malady on the toe. It is spelled B-u-n-y-a-n. John Bunyan is of the 17th century. Surely the major emphasis of the Reformation is the 16th century, but Bunyan's life was in the same century as John Locke and Isaac Newton and Galileo and Descartes, and in England, very much troubled times, the 17th century, the Stuart monarchy, a civil war, finally a revolution overthrowing the king. These were times in which a state church dominated and that state church was almost taking the place of the dominant church of the 16th century, which was to Rome. It is into that context that I want you to learn of John Bunyan.

How many of you have read books by John Bunyan? Yes, of course.

"As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted upon a certain place where there was a den and I lay down in that den and slept, and as I slept, I dreamed, and in my dream I saw a man with a book in his hand, his face from his house, a heavy burden on his back. As I watched, I saw he opened the book and read and he trembled and soon he exclaimed, 'What must I do?'"

This is very much the story of John Bunyan's life. The wilderness of this world in that opening line of "The Pilgrim's Progress" was that life that Bunyan lived before his conversion, before he came to know Jesus Christ, and that den he lighted upon was a jail cell in which he was to spend the total of 12 ½ years in the course of his life, and that dream was "The Pilgrim's Progress."

I marvel to know that "The Pilgrim's Progress" has been edited and published and translated in more editions, in more languages, read more widely than any other book in the world which was written originally in England. Among these many editions is the fine one recently issued by Stephen Reed of your congregation, a very attractive volume

including a CD rom, whatever that is, in the 17th century of my life, that didn't mean a thing. And among these many editions and versions is also a recording on audiotape by a certain Betty Panosian that is published by the Bob Jones University Press. I recommend both, having good acquaintance with both.

"The Pilgrim's Progress," from this world to that which is to come. Delivered under the similitude of a dream wherein is expressed the manner of his setting out, his dangerous journey, and at last his safe arrival at the desired country. Hosea 12, "I have used similitudes."

Let me tell you the story of my life. Imagine that I was born in 1628 and forget about matters of language since the English of that century was different from yours. Matters of dress, electricity, automobiles and all that, we'll ignore all that and just assume that I have come to you from the 17th century. 1628, my birth. 1688, my death. History students remember significant events in both those years, a few of you remember those events. The Petition of Right, a restraint in the power of the king imposed by Parliament so that revenue bills must originate in the House of Commons. The king could not tax indiscriminately. And 1688, the glorious Revolution, a virtually bloodless overthrow of a monarch and the invitation of a Stuart monarch in the so-called Restoration of 1660, and then 1688, the glorious Revolution, the year of my death. Sixty years.

Sixty years. A total of 60 works came from my pen, a few books among them, a number of booklets, tracts, monographs. Someone has said a total of a million words. I did not count them. And Dean Fararr of the 19th century said that of more value to humanity is one page of the tinker's writings than all the banks of the Rothschilds. Surely, a gross overestimate.

Tinker. My father was a tinker. I became his apprentice. A tinker, do you know what a tinker is, you modern, sophisticated, 20-21st century people? A tinker is a craftsman who travels among the villages with a portable forge and bellows. He is a maker and repairer of implements for kitchen and barn. Pots and pans. He travels among the people. He performs a worthy work, a needful one. I became known as the Tinker of Bedford and on one occasion, the king, Charles II, asked Dr. John Owen, the Puritan preacher, why he went to hear that ignorant tinker preach? And Dr. Owen, that great scholar, said, "Your Majesty, I would give all my learning if I could preach like that ignorant tinker." But that is a fact of much later years.

I had a grammar school education at best. My father was a widower in my early years and he married again and I could not get along with the woman he married again. I had set out to become the paragon of evil in my village, and well nigh succeeded. I took pride in blasphemy and swearing and being a wonder to the town, a fearful wonder to the town. This was my early youth. I did such things as bell-ringing. Bell-ringing, not unusual in itself, bells in those days were the means of communicating news in the village. There were happy bells and there were mournful bells that tolled danger and death, and whenever the bells were rung in the steeple of the church, the townspeople took notice and when we, my ruffians and I, would ring them at odd unseasonable hours for no

reason with no news, just to upset the town and make them wonder, "Why? What?" we took delight in that mischief. It was worse than mischief. We played sports on the Lord's Day and that was not done by the godly in our town, and we delighted in scandalizing the upright by our doing wrong.

We played tip-cat. Tip-cat, you see how ignorant you are? Tip-cat. Tip-cat was a game played by a participant who stood in a circle about a yard in diameter holding a flat-sided paddle, like a bat but flat-sided, and propelling in a swing a shuttlecock, I guess you would say. Originally in the Middle Ages it was a dead cat, but that's offensive to you so I won't mention it. And he was to remain standing in the circle and estimate how far from the circle the shuttlecock had landed, and then those assisting would actually measure the distance and the average of the estimate with the actual, determined points, and that was the game. Simple and in the Middle Ages, very offensive.

We did such things and I had a foul mouth. I took delight in the fear that appeared in the eyes and face of people who heard our swearing, but in the midst of this, in the midst of this, God kept me morally pure. I could later say when my enemies challenged my purity that if all the adulterers and fornicators of England were hanged by the neck til they be dead, John Bunyan would be still alive. But that was no credit to me. God's grace was overlooking, was looking over, was overshadowing, was preserving. As the apostle had pled for the removal of that thorn in the flesh and God said rather, "My grace is sufficient for thee," and that became the theme of my years.

God's grace. Twice I narrowly escaped drowning and had a deep fear of dying. At the age of 16, I joined the army, the Parliamentarian Army. There was a civil war, I say, between crown and Parliament and the respective followers, and I went off to war, but God kept me in the midst of war. Had I been taken from this life in those tender years of prideful mischief and worse, I would have been forever damned.

God kept me. On one occasion I was assigned a sentinel post. At the last minute, I was removed from that assignment and a substitute was put in my place, of which I had no participation. Before that night was over, that substitute had his head exploded by a cannonball in my place. That should have been I. God's grace was sufficient.

He brought me back. I came back to this little village, Elstow is the village, some three miles outside Bedford. Bedford, where the jail was that was the den in which I was to lie down. Elstow, Ellen's stockade is the derivation of the name. Ellen, Helena, the mother of Constantine probably. That fortified village was the place of my birth.

I returned, I say, to Elstow, not to my father's home, married a young wife, her name was Mary. A pious girl, I say with great tenderness and seriousness. No sophistication. A simple girl but God in his grace, why she married me I will not know. Her whole dowry was two slender books, "The Practice of Piety," and "The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven," and together we read those books.

Her father was so poor that that, I say, was her entire dowry. That was our start but the reading of those books was also a start, and I set about now a reformation of life. I now attempted to be as upright and pious and remarkable and godly without knowing anything about the grace of God in my heart, and the same pride which had pelled me in the other direction now propelled to a self-righteousness which if I had died in it, not acknowledging the grace of God, I would have been equally damned. I set about, I say, and attempted and took pride in seeming to be.

We had children. One was Mary who was blind. Blind Mary. She was a dear daughter, as any daughter will be, but I had a special tenderness toward her because of her infirmity. And I overheard my dear wife Mary, we named Mary after her mother, I overheard her one day praying for her husband. I don't know if any of you have had praying mothers in your distance from the grace of God, praying fathers, praying husbands, praying brothers, sisters, wives, but I heard Mary pray. She didn't know I was hearing her. "God, help my poor husband. He is more sightless than Mary." And that struck me. That struck me and I began to desire something more than outward appearance, yet I knew not yet.

I came soon upon four ladies on the stoop of the home of one of them discussing with joy the grace of God. As I walked down a street, I overheard these four ladies who did not know the effect of their conversation upon me. To them, it was obvious that religion was a divine life kindled in the soul. That is the phrase I used, a divine life kindled in the soul. It was not regulations and duties and boring responsibility, it was heartfelt and that was eloquent to my soul, and I have wondered since how many times the walk, the unobserved walk, the casual walk of believers, broadcasts grace and truth or sham and hypocrisy. Those dear ladies kindled in me a desire for something more and then when that was accompanied by Mary's prayers, I sought now.

I sought to Pastor Gifford of the local congregation, Pastor Gifford, and I proceeded to go to him and hear him preach. I had not been before and every time Pastor Gifford would invite his hearers in his praise to close with Christ, close with Christ, I understood what he meant but I was in turmoil still. I feared election. I feared I was beyond redemption. I feared I could not hold out. I argue within. I was in torment and near despair until one day hearing Pastor Gifford inviting us in his hearing to close with Christ, the water stood in my eyes, that's the way I put it, and the water overflowed from those eyes and I came to know the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and now what I had first turned from and then attempted to turn to in the energy of the flesh, and I now knew that Christ was my justification, my redemption, my propitiation, my all.

It was a Baptist church so I became a Baptist. I was to be baptized and it was customary to give a testimony of my conversion and my spiritual condition at the time of my baptism. I was 25 years old. It was 1653. I gave my testimony and people were blessed by the hearing because they had known this boy now become a man, and they had seen a transformation that only the grace of God could work and, again, God's grace was sufficient.

Then I became now requested to share my testimony here and there and did so, and was remarkably surprised that God bore fruit from the testimony, and I reveled and joyed in the privilege of ministering truth. Uneducated except for grammar school, but the Lord was giving me by regular study, a knowledge, an intimate knowledge, a careful knowledge of the content of the Scriptures and I reveled and I said this was to me greater joy than if I had been made Emperor of the Christian world. Such a privilege.

Well, a total of four children were born to Mary and Mary died. I later married again and my Elizabeth miscarried when I was sent to jail. We later had two more children.

Sent to jail. Preaching the Gospel, why jail? The king and Parliament had restricted public meeting to those authorized by the Church of England. The Church of England, the state church. A so-called Conventicle Act was passed by Parliament prohibiting any gathering without the assent and sponsorship of the Church of England, the priest of the Church in the community. Anything else was an unlawful assembly. Now this was not only directed against dissenters, Protestants opposed to the state Church, but against seditious and those who would have political uprising as their intention, and the law did not discriminate between the two. So any unauthorized assembly was considered potentially seditious.

Well, I did not have any interest in the Church of England or in the Book of Common Prayer or in the precise ritual dictated by that Church. I was not preaching in church even, I was preaching wherever people gathered and invited me to speak, in farmhouses; in villages. I would walk for many miles and continued tinkering. I was not pastoring. I had no salary. My people were poor and I continued to tinker and came to be known as the ignorant tinkerer from Bedford, of Elstow and then later Bedford.

Well, I had on one occasion walked 13 miles outside Bedford to a farmhouse where a group of people had gathered and invited me to come and address them with the Gospel. Word was sent on ahead just before the meeting began that the Magistrate was approaching intending to arrest me. Deliberately word was set on ahead because the Magistrate knowing my purpose was not seditious, was reluctant to arrest me, wished to give me ample time to flee so he would not have to do it.

I was now in a dilemma. I had taught the people that God was sufficient for every circumstance; that God was able to care for his own. Should I now flee in fear? Or should I remain to see what God would do and how this would instruct God's people? I chose to remain. I announced my text as the Magistrate approached. I requested of him, knowing the reason for his arrival, I requested of him time to address briefly my people and he did not answer but he also did not move. I proceeded, therefore. I announced my text, "Must thou fear God?" And this Magistrate trembled at that text, and then I followed, "Behold, how this man trembles at the word of God," and by inference, why don't the rest of you? He remained silent and unmoving as I continued and finished and then he said to me rather sheepishly, "I'm going on ahead to the Bedford jail. Follow me." He did not put me in chains. He did not arrest me. He, again, hoped I would flee.

He went on ahead. I followed not because of any great courage, but because I was conscious that this was right for me in this hour and I was almost curious as to what God was going to do. You know, my friends, the book that you remember primarily from my pen was itself the product of imprisonment. I will not ask what might have been, but the occasion for blessing to millions whom I never knew was a result of incarceration that God in his mercy and grace permitted this tinker to experience.

I went on. We arrived at Bedford and I was put in jail. Jail, 17th century. You have a very different conception of incarceration in your time. In my century, three groups of people were put together in jail, indistinguished and not separated, and not in individual cells but in large rooms, variously chained to rings in the walls, given a degree of liberty within the large room. Three groups of people: debtors. It always seemed to me very stupid to put debtors in prison. That would surely guarantee they would never pay their debts. But debtors, criminals, who surely belonged there, and the insane. Now that is a combination and a madhouse, but it was also a congregation. They needed preaching to so I preached to them and I said later, "If I be fruitless, it matters not who condemns me, but if I be fruitful, I care not who condemns." And God brought fruit in the jail.

My condition in the jail was determined by the change of jailers from time-to-time. Some were more lenient than others. In those days, by the way, you were not supplied all your necessities by the state, by the village, in jail. You purchased from the jailer the straw on which you lay your head on the stone floor of the cell. You purchased or your family did what food you ate in jail and I was so reluctant to see my children, my family, deprived of what they needed for themselves that their husband and father could have his needs supplied.

I could see through a barred window high in the wall, blind Mary out in the lane peddling tagged laces which I made. I acquired a spool, a large spool of heavy twine and a small spool of very narrow small thread, and I would cut the twine to lengths appropriate for laces for clothing and boots and shoes, and then with the thread, wind about an inch or two at the end to create an end which could be stiff enough to fit through the eyelets of...you follow me. Then I would pass these out through the window and my family and blind Mary would peddle them on the street to get a few pence. And I said I could hardly stand to see the wind blow on Mary's face, and yet I must bring my house down upon my wife and children. But oh, I must do it. I must do it.

I could have been released any day of any week or month or year that I chose to sign a paper that had been placed under the door of the cell ready for me to sign. That paper would be my guarantee that I would not again meet and preach unauthorized by the Church of England. I had the power to sign my own release but I could not do it, and I said, "If necessary, I will remain until the moss grows on my eyebrows, but I will not sign." And that was not an unlikely possibility, considering the dampness of the situation and the size of the eyebrows. I should tell you that I had a medium frame, red hair, robust build, and a curled mustache which curled on the ends, and the resounding voice. That was John Bunyan. And those tools, particularly that voice, were used for the outdoor preaching.

Ah, I should tell you too that not only was my condition in the jail various depending on who the jailer was, but I was often given liberty. I was permitted to go out with the promise that I would return before nightfall, and I was not to tell what it was I was doing while I was out and I went out into country and preached, to gatherings that had been called not by me. In fact, they cajoled me, the authorities did, and said, "Just sign the paper that you will not call any such meetings. Now, if you happen to stumble upon one and speak there, that would not be a problem." And that was skirting the intent of the law and focusing on the letter and I saw through and would not sign. But sometimes I went out to preach and came back to the cell at nightfall, a strange imprisonment, you will say, and indeed it was.

Six years later, the imprisonment had begun in 1660, in 1666 because of a temporary change in the law, I was released for what turned out to be six months before my re-arrest and re-imprisonment for six years more. Was not six years enough? But God in his wisdom gave me six more and six more years of experience, six more years of experiencing the grace of God sufficient for me and for my family, and then released a second time in 1672. At the age of 44, now 16 years remained in my life and then in 1675, three years after the second release, imprisoned again for six months.

I had difficulty with that. I could abide the six years times two but the taste of liberty for those three years intervening was very sweet and time with my family, and preaching, and tinkering were glorious times, and yet God in his wisdom and graceful mercy, gave me six more months in jail, and I tell you today, it was those six more months in jail that saw the birth of "The Pilgrim's Progress." But for those six months more, perhaps it would not have been so. God was pleased and eventually I was pleased, that I was given opportunity now to express what was the experience of my own journey, as it were, for that is what "The Pilgrim's Progress" is.

It has been said that I was the only man who ever wrote a classic without ever having read one. No education beyond grammar school. I'm told that it is possible often to find sections of two or three pages in length without finding more than a word of two syllables, without finding a word of more than two syllables. Simple truth presented in allegory as a witness to the grace of God.

My autobiography, you know, "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners." And also "The Holy War," and many others. My entire library from which I drew, in addition to the library of life which was experience, were two books. My library was two books: the Bible and "The Acts and Monuments of the Martyrs," by John Foxe. You know it as "Foxe's Book of Martyrs." Indeed, when young theologues later came to my village to visit me and see the tinkerer of Elstow, they asked to see my library and were much disappointed. In addition to those two books were publisher's copies of the other things I had written but it was not a very impressive collection.

A million words. Sixty writings. Sixty years of life. Six children. Twelve and a half years in prison. And the only monument is a few books. But God has used those books and to his glory, I thank him.

A simple man. A simple beginning. No reputation. No gifts beyond that of simplicity and yet God used a man, and if I can say again to you, God uses human instruments and one observation from the biographies of those whom God has used is that all were simple, had feet of clay, were unlikely servants, but the grace of God was more than sufficient for each of them.

Let me conclude with a conclusion of the first book of "The Pilgrim's Progress," when the Pilgrim and Hopeful approach the gates of glory.

"Now, while they were thus drawing towards the gate, behold a company of the heavenly host came out to meet them: to whom it was said by the other two shining ones, These are the men that have loved our Lord when they were in the world, and that have left all for his holy name; and he hath sent us to fetch them, and we have brought them thus far on their desired journey, that they may go in and look their Redeemer in the face with joy. Then the heavenly host gave a great shout, saying, 'Blessed are they that are called to the marriage-supper of the Lamb.' There came out also at this time to meet them several of the King's trumpeters, clothed in white and shining raiment, who, with melodious noises and loud, made even the heavens to echo with their sound. These trumpeters saluted Christian and his fellow with ten thousand welcomes; and this they did with shouting and sound of trumpet.

This done, they compassed them round on every side; some went before, some behind, and some on the right hand, and some on the left, continually sounding as they went, with melodious noise, in notes on high; so that the very sight was to them that could behold it as if heaven itself was come down to meet them. Thus, therefore, they walked on together; and, as they walked, ever and anon these trumpeters, by mixing their music with looks and gestures, still signify to Christian and his brother how welcome they were into their company, and with what gladness they came to meet them. And now were these two men, as it were, in heaven, before they came at it, being swallowed up with the sight of angels, and with hearing of their melodious notes. Here also they had the city itself in view; and they thought they heard all the bells therein to ring, to welcome them thereto. But, above all, the warm and joyful thoughts that they had about their own dwelling there with such company, and that for ever and ever; oh, by what tongue or pen can their glorious joy be expressed!

Now when they were come up to the gate, there was written over it, in letters of gold, 'Blessed are they that do His commandments, that they may

have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.'

Then I saw in my dream, that the shining men bid them call at the gate: the which when they did, some from above looked over the gate, to wit, Enoch, Moses, and Elijah, to whom it was said, These pilgrims are come from the City of Destruction, for the love that they bear to the King of this place; and then the pilgrims gave in unto them each man his certificate, which they had received in the beginning: those therefore were carried in unto the King, who, when he had read them, said, Where are the men? To whom it was answered, They are standing without the gate. The King then commanded to open the gate, 'That the righteous nation (said he) that keepeth the truth may enter in.'

Now I saw in my dream, that these two men went in at the gate; and lo, as they entered, they were transfigured; and they had raiment put on that shone like gold. There were also that met them with harps and crowns, and gave them to them; the harps to praise withal, and the crowns in token of honor. Then I heard in my dream, that all the bells in the city rang again for joy, and that it was said unto them, 'Enter ye into the joy of your Lord.' I also heard the men themselves, that they sang with a loud voice, saying, 'Blessing, honor, glory and power be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever.'

Now, just as the gates were opened to let in the men, I looked in after them, and behold the city shone like the sun; the streets also were paved with gold; and in them walked many men, with crowns on their heads, palms in their hands, and golden harps, to sing praises withal.

There were also of them that had wings, and they answered one another without intermission, saying, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord. And after that they shut up the gates; which, when I had seen, I wished myself among them."

And then this sober note in conclusion.

"Now, while I was gazing upon all these things, I turned my head to look back, and saw Ignorance come up to the river side; but he soon got over, and that without half the difficulty which the other two men met with. For it happened that there was then in that place one Vain-Hope, a ferryman, that with his boat helped him over; so he, as the other I saw, did ascend the hill, to come up to the gate; only he came alone, neither did any man meet him with the least encouragement. When he was come up to the gate, he looked up to the writing that was above it, and then began to knock, supposing that entrance should have been quickly administered to him; but he was asked by the men that looked over the top of the gate, Whence

come you? and what would you have? He answered, I have ate and drank in the presence of the King, and he has taught in our streets. Then they asked him for his certificate, that they might go in and show it to the King: so he fumbled in his bosom for one, and found none. Then said they, Have you none? but the man answered never a word.

So they told the King, but he would not come down to see him, but commanded the two shining ones, that conducted Christian and Hopeful to the city, to go out and take Ignorance, and bind him hand and foot, and have him away. Then they took him up, and carried him through the air to the door that I saw in the side of the hill, and put him in there. Then I saw that there was a way to hell, even from the gate of heaven, as well as from the City of Destruction. So I awoke, and behold it was a dream."

Ignorance had no certificate and at the very gates of heaven, there was an entrance to hell. Be sure the righteousness of Christ is your righteousness. Trust not in hope and expectation unfounded upon the matchless finished work of the blessed Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.