



# Heroes of Faith

John Bunyan is best known as the author of the second most published book in history (next to the Bible), *Pilgrims Progress*. Many may not know that he was actually a prolific writer—all the more remarkable as he never had any formal higher education or training. In eternity, however, this dear man of God may be best known for the sufferings and trials he endured for the gospel of Jesus Christ: an example all of us can follow.

Bunyan lived in England during the 1600's and grew up in a poor family. He learned how to read and write, but afterwards did not receive any other education. He became a "tinker," a tradesman who worked with metal. When he was 15 his mother and sister died, and at the age of 16 he joined the Parliamentary Army and was away on military service for about two years. Even during this time the Lord was watching over John and preserved his life from death. John did not know Christ at this time and therefore got himself involved with many vices. He recalls: *"I had few equals—especially considering my years, which were tender—for cursing, swearing, lying, and blaspheming...I was the very ring-leader of all the youth that kept me company, in all manner of vice and ungodliness."*

John's life changed in his early twenties, after he got married. He married a poor woman, who brought into the marriage great treasures—two books that impacted John: *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* and *The Practice of Piety*. John's conversion to Christ did not take place at one point in time, but it was rather a progression as he battled many thoughts, insecurities,

depression and doubts. (His autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, relates this conversion process well.) He writes about one day: *"I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ Himself. Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons; my temptations also fled away...now went I also home rejoicing for the grace and love of God."*

In 1655 he was asked to give some exhortations to the church. This would mark the beginning of a great preacher. Although he was a lay preacher for about 17 years, only receiving his license as a pastor many years later. Hundreds would come and be captivated as Bunyan delivered his sermons. It was hard to believe that a simple tinker without higher education could expound the word of God in such a convincing manner. It truly was the power of the Holy Spirit resting upon him that caused an unknown man to be used by God to bring so many to Christ. It is easy to draw a comparison to the Apostle Peter who was but a simple fisherman, but changed into a mighty preacher by the power of the Holy Spirit. With only a day's notice, a crowd of 1200 would gather to hear Bunyan preach at 7 am in the morning on a weekday! One of the greatest theologians and scholars of that time, John Owen—well respected even today—would often go to hear Bunyan preach in the fields. King Charles asked Owen why he, being a great scholar, would go to hear an uneducated tinker preach. Owen replied, *"I would willingly*

*exchange my learning for the tinker's power of touching men's hearts."*

Yet Bunyan's ministry was at a time of great political unrest and instability. There were times when he could freely preach and minister, and then there were other times where he would face death for it. In 1660, when Bunyan was 32 years old, he was arrested and put in prison for preaching. This was especially hard on Bunyan because he had four small children with the eldest being blind and requiring special care. He spent 12 long, hard years in prison. He could have been set free if he would only recant and promise not to preach. But he chose to stay in prison and keep a clear conscience with the Lord. He wrote: *"I have determined, the Almighty God being my help and shield, yet to suffer, if frail life might continue so long, even till the moss shall grow on mine eyebrows, rather than thus to violate my faith and principles."* One must understand the gravity of this decision: his family needed him. They went through much suffering as well without his support and this burdened his heart continually in prison. But he stayed...in the prison and true to his convictions. He was released in 1672 because of a new law that was passed, yet he still faced one more imprisonment from 1675-76. Some believe it was during this second time in prison that he wrote his most famous book, *Pilgrims Progress*.

John Bunyan was a gifted writer. *Pilgrims Progress* had three editions in its first year (1678) and was widely popular. It is now translated into over 200 languages. Bunyan wrote at least 58 books throughout his life, and his writings were diverse, ranging from controversial topics to poems to children's literature to allegories like *"The Life and Death of Mr. Badman."* However, the majority of his writings were practical teachings of doctrine that would help Christians in their spiritual journey to heaven. Bunyan himself had

been greatly helped by a book of this sort written by Martin Luther. It was Luther's practical commentary on the book of Galatians that helped him in his conversion to Christ. He wrote: *"The God in whose hands are all our days and ways, did cast into my hand one day a book of Martin Luther's; it was his 'Comment on Galatians'...I found my condition in his experience so largely and profoundly handled, as if his book had been written out of my heart...I do prefer this book of Martin Luther upon the Galatians, excepting the Holy Bible, before all the books that ever I have seen, as most fit for a wounded conscience."* It is only fitting that a man who was so benefited by the writings of another would go on to bless, encourage and edify many others with his own writings.

He was an uneducated man with no theological training or degrees and no knowledge of Greek or Hebrew. He was a lay preacher for many years, but used by the Lord so mightily to convince hundreds of the truth of the gospel and the way of salvation. His writings and doctrinal expositions were borne from his life experiences and were the fruits of the life of suffering he endured so patiently. Bunyan's pastor wrote the forward to his first book. It said: *"This man is not chosen out of an earthly but out of the heavenly university, the Church of Christ...he hath through grace taken these three heavenly degrees, to wit, union with Christ, the anointing of the Spirit, and experiences of the temptations of Satan, which do more fit a man for that mighty work of preaching the gospel than all university learning and degrees that can be had."* The great evangelist George Whitefield said of *Pilgrims Progress*, *"It smells of the prison. It was written when the author was confined in Bedford Jail. And ministers never write or preach so well as when under the cross: the Spirit of Christ and of glory then rests upon them."* On August 31, 1688, at the age of 60, John Bunyan entered the celestial city to be with his Savior. □