

To Live upon God That Is Invisible: Suffering and Service in the Life of John Bunyan¹

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Introduction

In 1672, about 50 miles northwest of London in Bedford, John Bunyan was released from twelve years of imprisonment. He was 44 years old. Just before his release (it seems),² he updated his spiritual autobiography called *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. He looked back over the hardships of the last 12 years and wrote about how he was enabled by God to survive and even flourish in the Bedford jail. One of his comments gives me the title for this essay about Bunyan's life.

He quotes 2 Corinthians 1:9 where Paul says, "We had this sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God that raiseth the dead." Then he says,

By this scripture I was made to see that if ever I would suffer rightly, I must *first* pass a sentence of death upon every thing that can be properly called a thing of this life, even to reckon myself, my wife, my children, my health, my enjoyment, and all, as dead to me, and myself as dead to them. The *second* was, to *live upon God that is invisible*, as Paul said in another place; the way not to faint, is to "look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."³

The phrase that I have fastened on for the title and focus of this study of Bunyan is the phrase, "to live upon God that is invisible." He discovered that if we are to

suffer rightly we must die not only to sin, but to the innocent and precious things of this world including family and freedom. We must "live upon God that is invisible." Everything else in the world we must count as dead to us and we to it. That was Bunyan's passion from the time of his conversion as a young married man to the day of his death when he was 60 years old.

In my reading of Bunyan, what has gripped me most is his suffering and how he responded to it—what it made of him, and what it might make of us. All of us come to our tasks with a history and many predispositions. I come to John Bunyan with a growing sense that suffering is a normal, useful, essential, and God-ordained element in Christian life and ministry. We need suffering not only for the sake of weaning us off the world and teaching us to live on God, as 2 Corinthians 1:9 says, but also to make pastors more able to love the church (2 Tim 2:10; Col 1:24) and to make missionaries more able to reach the nations (Matt 10:16-28), so that we can learn to live on God and not the bread that perishes (John 6:27).

I am influenced in the way I read Bunyan by both what I see in the world today and what I see in the Bible. I see the persecution of the church in Indonesia with its church burnings; in Sudan with its systematic starvation and enslavement; in China with its repression of religious freedom and lengthy imprisonments; in

India with its recent Hindu mob violence and the murder of Graham Staines, a 30-year missionary veteran with his seven and nine year old sons; and the estimate reported in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* of 164,000 Christian martyrs in 1999.⁴

I see 16,000 new people infected with the HIV virus every day, with 2.3 million people dying of AIDS in 1997, 460,000 of these under age 15, and 8.4 million children orphaned by AIDS.⁵ And, of course, I see the people suffering in my own church with tuberculosis, lupus, heart disease, and blindness, not to mention the hundreds of emotional and relational pangs that people would trade any day for a good clean amputation.

And as I come to Bunyan's life and suffering, I see in the Bible that "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom" (Acts 14:22); and the promise of Jesus, "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20); and the warning from Peter not to "be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you" (1 Pet 4:12); and the utter realism of Paul that we who "have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body" (Rom 8:23); and the reminder that "our outer nature is wasting away" (2 Cor 4:16); and that the whole creation "was subjected to futility" (Rom 8:20).

As I look around in the world and in the Word, my own sense is that we need a glimpse into how Bunyan suffered and how he learned to "live on God that is invisible." I want that for myself, my people, and my readers, because nothing glorifies God more than when we main-

tain our stability and even our joy when we lose everything but God (Hab 3:17-18). That day is coming for each of us, and we do well to get ready, and to help our people get ready.

A Biographical Sketch

John Bunyan was born in Elstow, about a mile south of Bedford, England on November 30, 1628, the same year that William Laud became the bishop of London during the reign of King Charles I. The connection with Bishop Laud is important because you cannot understand the sufferings of Bunyan apart from the religious and political times in which he lived.

In those days tremendous conflicts erupted between Parliament and the monarchy. Bishop Laud, together with Charles I, opposed the reforms of the Church of England desired by the Puritans. Oliver Cromwell was elected to Parliament in 1640 and civil war broke out in 1642 between the forces loyal to the king and those loyal to Parliament. In 1645, the Parliament took control of the Monarchy. Bishop Laud was executed that year and the use of the Book of Common Prayer was overthrown. The Westminster Assembly completed the Westminster Confession for the dominant Presbyterian church in 1646, and the king was beheaded in 1649. Cromwell led the new Commonwealth until his death in 1658. His main concern was a stable government with freedom of religion for Puritans, like John Bunyan and others. Even Jews, banished from England since 1290, were permitted to return in 1655.⁶

After Cromwell's death, his brother Richard was unable to hold the government together. The longing for stability with a new king swelled. (How quickly

the favor of man can turn!) The Parliament turned against the Nonconformists like John Bunyan and passed a series of acts that resulted in increasing restrictions on Puritan preachers. Charles II was brought home in what is known as the Restoration of the Monarchy, and proclaimed king in 1660, which was the same year that Bunyan was imprisoned for preaching without state approval.

In 1662, the Act of Uniformity was passed that required acceptance of the Prayer Book and Episcopal ordination. In August of the same year, 2,000 Puritan pastors were forced out of their churches. Twelve years later there was a happy turn of affairs with the Declaration of Religious Indulgence that resulted in Bunyan's freedom, his license to preach and his call as the official pastor of the non-conformist church in Bedford. But political instability continued until he died in 1688 at the age of 60. He was imprisoned again in the mid 1670s and it was probably then that he wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*.⁷

We must be careful not to overstate or understate the terror of Bunyan's sufferings. We would overstate it if we thought he was tortured in the Bedford jail. In fact, some jailers let him out to see his family or make brief trips. But we would understate it if we thought he was not in frequent danger of execution. For example, in the Bloody Assizes of 1685, 300 people were put to death in the western counties of England for doing no more than Bunyan did as a non-conformist pastor.⁸

Bunyan learned the trade of metalworking or "tinker" or "brasyer"⁹ from his father. He received the ordinary education of the poor to read and write, but nothing more. He had no formal higher education of any kind, which makes his writing and influence all the more aston-

ishing. The more notable suffering of his life began in his teens. In 1644, when he was 15, his mother and 13-year-old sister died within one month of each other. To add to the heartache, his father remarried within a month. Also at this time, not many miles away in Leighton, the king attacked a church and "began to cut and wound right and left."¹⁰ And later that fall, when Bunyan turned 16, he was drafted into the Parliamentary Army. He was taken from his home for military service for about two years. There were harrowing moments, he tells us, like once when a man took his place as a sentinel and was shot in the head with a musket ball and died.¹¹

Bunyan was not a believer during this time. He tells us, "I had few equals, especially considering my years, which were tender, for cursing, swearing, lying, and blaspheming the holy name of God. . . . Until I came to the state of marriage, I was the very ringleader of all the youth that kept me company, in all manner of vice and ungodliness."¹²

He "came to the state of matrimony" when he was 20 or 21, but we never learn his first wife's name. What we do learn is that although she was poor, she had a godly father who had died and left her two books that she brought to the marriage, *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* and *The Practice of Piety*. Bunyan said, "In these two books I would sometimes read with her, wherein I also found some things that were somewhat pleasing to me; but all this while I met with no conviction."¹³ But God's work of drawing him had begun.

They had four children, Mary, Elizabeth, John, and Thomas. Mary, the oldest, was born blind. This not only added to the tremendous burden of his heart in

caring for Mary and the others, it made his imprisonment, when Mary was 10 years old, all the more agonizing.

During the first five years of marriage, Bunyan was profoundly converted to Christ and to the baptistic, non-conformist church life in Bedford. He came under the influence of John Gifford the pastor in Bedford and moved from Elstow to Bedford with his family and joined the church there in 1653, though he was not as sure as they were that he was a Christian.¹⁴ It is hard to put a date on his conversion because, in retelling the process in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, he includes almost no dates or times. But it was a lengthy and agonizing process.

He was poring over the Scriptures but finding no peace or assurance. There were seasons of great doubt about the Scriptures and about his own soul. "A whole flood of blasphemies, both against God, Christ, and the Scriptures were poured upon my spirit, to my great confusion and astonishment. . . . How can you tell but that the Turks had as good scriptures to prove their Mahomet the Savior as we have to prove our Jesus?"¹⁵ "My heart was at times exceeding hard. If I would have given a thousand pounds for a tear, I could not shed one."¹⁶

When he thought that he was established in the gospel there came a season of overwhelming darkness following a terrible temptation when he heard the words, "sell and part with this most blessed Christ. . . . Let him go if he will." He tells us that "I felt my heart freely consent thereto. Oh, the diligence of Satan; Oh, the desperateness of man's heart."¹⁷ For two years, he tells us, he was in the doom of damnation. "I feared that this wicked sin of mine might be that sin unpardonable."¹⁸ "Oh, no one knows the

terrors of those days but myself."¹⁹ "I found it a hard work now to pray to God because despair was swallowing me up."²⁰

Then comes what seemed to be the decisive moment.

One day as I was passing into the field . . . this sentence fell upon my soul. Thy righteousness is in heaven. And methought, withal, I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God's right hand; there, I say, was my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, he wants [=lacks] my righteousness, for that was just before him. 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, "The same yesterday, today, and forever." Heb 13:8. Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons; my temptations also fled away; so that from that time those dreadful scriptures of God [about the unforgivable sin] left off to trouble me; now went I also home rejoicing for the grace and love of God.²¹

Under God, one key influence besides Pastor Gifford in Bedford, was Martin Luther.

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.²²

So in 1655, when the matter of his soul was settled, he was asked to exhort the

church, and suddenly a great preacher was discovered. He would not be licensed as a pastor of the Bedford church until 17 years later. But his popularity as a powerful lay preacher exploded. The extent of his work grew. "When the country understood that . . . the tinker had turned preacher," John Brown tells us, "they came to hear the word by hundreds, and that from all parts."²³ Charles Doe, a comb maker in London, said (later in Bunyan's life), "Mr. Bunyan preached so New Testament-like he made me admire and weep for joy, and give him my affections."²⁴ In the days of toleration, a day's notice would get a crowd of 1200 to hear him preach at seven o'clock on a weekday morning.²⁵ Once, while Bunyan was in prison, a whole congregation of 60 people were arrested and brought in at night. A witness tells us, "I . . . heard Mr. Bunyan both preach and pray with that mighty spirit of Faith and Plerophory of Divine Assistance, that . . . made me stand and wonder."²⁶ The greatest Puritan theologian and contemporary of Bunyan, John Owen, when asked by King Charles why he, a great scholar, went to hear an uneducated tinker preach said, "I would willingly exchange my learning for the tinker's power of touching men's hearts."²⁷

In 1658, after ten years of marriage, his wife died, leaving him with four children under ten, one of them blind—Bunyan was 30 years old. A year later, he married Elizabeth who was a remarkable woman. The year after their marriage, Bunyan was arrested and put in prison. She was pregnant with their firstborn and miscarried in the crisis. Then she cared for the children as step mother for 12 years alone, and bore Bunyan two more children, Sarah and Joseph.

One story about her valor in the way she went to the authorities in August of 1661 (a year after John's imprisonment) deserves attention. She had already been to London with one petition. Now she met with one stiff question from one of the judges she was petitioning (the following is an adaptation of the account by Bunyan's biographer):

Mr. Twisden asked, "Would he stop preaching?" She answered, "My lord, he dares not leave off preaching as long as he can speak." He retorted, "What is the need of talking?" She responded, "There is need for this, my lord, for I have four small children that cannot help themselves, of which one is blind, and we have nothing to live upon but the charity of good people." Matthew Hale with pity asked if she really has four children being so young. She replied, "My lord, I am but mother-in-law to them, having not been married to him yet full two years. Indeed, I was with child when my husband was first apprehended; but being young and unaccustomed to such things, I being smayed at the news, fell into labor, and so continued for eight days, and then was delivered; but my child died." Hale was moved, but other judges were hardened and spoke against him: "He is a mere tinker!" She retorted, "Yes, and because he is a tinker and a poor man, therefore he is despised and cannot have justice." One Mr. Chester is enraged and says that Bunyan will preach and do as he wishes. "He preacheth nothing but the word of God!" she says. Twisden, in a rage, said, "He runneth up and down and doeth harm." She responded, "No, my lord, it is not so; God hath owned him and done much good by him." The angry man continued, "His doctrine is the doctrine of the devil." Nevertheless, she insisted, "My lord, when the righteous Judge shall appear, it will be known that his doctrine is not the doctrine of the devil!"

Bunyan's biographer comments,

“Elizabeth Bunyan was simply an English peasant woman: could she have spoken with more dignity had she been a crowned queen?”²⁸

So for 12 years Bunyan chose prison and a clear conscience over freedom and a conscience soiled by the agreement not to preach. He could have had his freedom whenever he wanted it. But he and Elizabeth were made of the same stuff. When asked to recant and not to preach he said,

If nothing will do unless I make of my conscience a continual butchery and slaughter-shop, unless, putting out my own eyes, I commit me to the blind to lead me, as I doubt not is desired by some, 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.²⁹

Nevertheless, he was sometime tormented that he may not be making the right decision in regard to his family.

The parting with my Wife and poor children hath often been to me in this place as the pulling of the 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.³⁰

Yet he stayed. In 1672 he was released because of the Declaration of Religious Indulgence. Immediately he was licensed as the pastor of the church in Bedford, which he had been serving all along, even from prison, by writings and periodic vis-

its. A barn was purchased and renovated as their first building and this is where Bunyan ministered as pastor for the next 16 years until his death. He was never wooed away from this little parish by the larger opportunities in London. The estimate is that there were perhaps 120 non-conformists in Bedford in 1676 with others no doubt coming to hear him from the surrounding villages.

There was one more imprisonment in the winter and spring of 1675-76. John Brown thinks that this was the time when *The Pilgrim's Progress* was written. But even though Bunyan was not in prison again during his ministry, the tension continued to be extraordinary. Ten years after his last imprisonment, in the mid-1680s, persecution was heavy again. “Richard Baxter, though an old man now, was shut up in gaol, where he remained for two years more, and where he had innumerable companions in distress.”³¹

Meetings were interrupted, worshipers hurried to prison, “separatists changed the place of gathering from time to time, set their sentinels on the watch, left off singing hymns in their services, and for the sake of greater security worshipped again and again at the dead of night. Ministers were introduced to their pulpits through trap-doors in floor or ceiling, or through doorways extemporized in walls.”³² Bunyan expected to be taken away again and deeded over all his possessions to his wife Elizabeth so that she would not be ruined by his fines or imprisonment.³³

But God spared him—until August, 1688. He traveled the 50 miles to London to preach and to help make peace between a man in his church and his alienated father. He was successful in both missions. But after a trip to an outlying district,

he returned to London on horseback, through excessive rains. He fell sick of a violent fever, and on August 31, 1688, at age 60, followed his Pilgrim from the city of Destruction across the river to the New Jerusalem.

His last sermon was on John 1:13 (preached on August 19 in London at Whitechapel). His last words from the pulpit were, “Live like the children of God, that you may look your Father in the face with comfort another day.”³⁴ His wife and children were probably unaware of the crisis until it was too late. So Bunyan probably died without the comfort of family—just as he had spent so much of his life without the comforts of home. “The inventory of Bunyan’s property after his death added up to a total of 42 pounds and 19 shillings. This is more than the average tinker would leave, but it suggests that most of the profits from *The Pilgrim’s Progress* had gone to printers of pirated editions.”³⁵ He was born poor and never let himself become wealthy. He is buried in London at Bunhill Fields.³⁶

To sum up, we can include in Bunyan’s sufferings the early, almost simultaneous, death of his mother and sister; the immediate remarriage of his father; the military draft in the midst of his teenage grief; the blindness of his first child; the spiritual depression and darkness of the early years of his marriage; the death of his first wife leaving him with four small children; a twelve year imprisonment cutting him off from his family and church; the constant stress and uncertainty of imminent persecution, including one more imprisonment; and the final sickness and death far from those he loved most. And this summary does not include any of the normal pressures and pains of ministry, marriage, parenting, controversy, criticism, and sick-

ness along the way.

The Effects of Bunyan’s Sufferings

The question, then, that I bring to Bunyan’s suffering is: What was its effect? How did he respond to it? What did it bring about? What difference did it make in his life? Knowing that I am leaving out many important things, I would answer with five observations.

Bunyan’s suffering confirmed him in his calling as a writer, especially for the afflicted church

Probably the greatest distortion of Bunyan’s life in the portrait given you so far is that it passes over one of the major labors of his life, his writing. Books had awakened his own spiritual quest and guided him in it.³⁷ Books would be his main legacy to the church and the world.

Of course, he is famous for *The Pilgrim’s Progress*—“next to the Bible, perhaps the world’s best-selling book . . . translated into over 200 languages.”³⁸ It was immediately successful with three editions in the first year it was published in 1678. It was despised at first by the intellectual elite, but as Lord Macaulay points out, “*The Pilgrim’s Progress* is perhaps the only book about which, after the lapse of a hundred years, the educated minority has come over to the opinion of the common people.”³⁹

But most people do not know that Bunyan was a prolific writer before and after *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Christopher Hill’s index of “Bunyan’s Writings” lists 58 books.⁴⁰ The variety in these books is remarkable: controversy (e.g., the Quakers, justification, and baptism), collections of poems, children’s literature, allegory (e.g., *The Holy War* and *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*). The vast majority were

practical doctrinal expositions of Scripture built from sermons for the sake of strengthening, warning, and helping Christian pilgrims make their way successfully to heaven.

He was a writer from beginning to end. He had written four books before he went to prison at age 32 and the year he died (1688) five books were published. This is extraordinary for a man with no formal education. He knew neither Greek nor Hebrew, and had no theological degrees. This was such an offense even in his own day that his pastor, John Burton, came to his defense, writing a foreword for his first book in 1656 (when he was 28):

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.⁴¹

Bunyan's suffering left its mark on all his written work. George Whitefield said of *The Pilgrim's 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."⁴²

The fragrance of affliction was on most of what he wrote. In fact, I suspect that one of the reasons the Puritans are still being read today with so much profit is that their entire experience, unlike ours, was one of persecution and suffering. To our chipper age (at least in the prosperous West) this may seem somber at times, but the day you hear that you have cancer or that your child is blind or that a mob

is coming, you turn away from the chipper books to the weighty ones that were written on the precipice of eternity, where the fragrance of heaven and the stench of hell are both in the air.

Bunyan's writings were an extension of his pastoral ministry mainly to his flock in Bedford who lived in constant danger of harassment and prison. His suffering fit him well for the task. This leads to the second effect of Bunyan's suffering I want to mention.

Bunyan's suffering deepened his love for his flock and gave his pastoral labor the fragrance of eternity

His writings were filled with love to his people. For example, three years into his imprisonment he wrote a book called *Christian Behavior* which ended like this:

Thus have I, in a few words, written to you before I die, a word to provoke you to faith and holiness, because I desire that you may have the life that is laid up for all them that believe in the Lord Jesus, and love one another, when I am deceased. Though then I shall rest from my labors, and be in paradise, as through grace I comfortably believe, yet it is not there, but here, I must do you good. Wherefore, I not knowing the shortness of my life, nor the hindrance that hereafter I may have of serving my God and you, I have taken this opportunity to present these few lines unto you for your edification.⁴³

In his autobiography, written about halfway through his imprisonment, he spoke of his church and the effect he hoped his possible martyrdom would have on them: "I did often say before the Lord, that if to be hanged up presently before their eyes would be means to awake in them and confirm them in the truth, I gladly should consent to it."⁴⁴ In

fact, many of his flock joined him in jail and he ministered to them there. He echoed the words of Paul when he described his longings for them: "In my preaching I have really been in pain, I have, as it were, travailed to bring forth Children to God."⁴⁵

He gloried in the privilege of the gospel ministry. This too flowed from his suffering. If all is well and this world is all that matters, a pastor may become jealous of prosperous people who spend their time in leisure. But if suffering abounds, and if prosperity is a cloak for the true condition of frisky, fun-loving perishing Americans, then being a pastor may be the most important and glorious of all work. Bunyan thought it was: "My heart hath been so wrapped up in the glory of this excellent work, that I counted my self more blessed and honored of God by this, than if I had made me the emperor of the Christian world, or the lord of all the glory of the earth without it."⁴⁶

He loved his people, he loved the work and he stayed with it and with them to the end of his life. He served them and he served the world from a village parish with perhaps 120 members.

Bunyan's suffering opened his understanding to the truth that the Christian life is hard and that following Jesus means having the wind in your face

In 1682, six years before his death, he wrote a book called *The Greatness of the Soul* based on Mark 8:36-37, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" He says that his aim is to "awaken you, rouse you off of your beds of ease, security, and pleasure, and fetch you down upon your knees before him, to beg of him grace to be concerned about the salvation of your

souls."⁴⁷ And he does not mean the point of conversion but the process of perseverance. "The one who endures to the end, he will be saved" (Mark 13:13). He hears Jesus warning us that life with him is hard:

Following of me is not like following of some other masters. The wind sits always on my face and the foaming rage of the sea of this world, and the proud and lofty waves thereof do continually beat upon the sides of the bark or ship that myself, my cause, and my followers are in; he therefore that will not run hazards, and that is afraid to venture a drowning, let him not set foot into this vessel.⁴⁸

Two years later, commenting on John 15:2 ("Every branch that bears fruit, He prunes"), he says, "It is the will of God, that they that go to heaven should go thither hardly or with difficulty. The righteous shall scarcely be saved. That is, they shall, but yet with great difficulty, that it may be the sweeter."⁴⁹

He had tasted this at the beginning of his Christian life and at every point along the way. In the beginning: "My soul was perplexed with unbelief, blasphemy, hardness of heart, questions about the being of God, Christ, the truth of The Word, and certainty of the world to come: I say, then I was greatly assaulted and tormented with atheism."⁵⁰ "Of all the temptations that ever I met with in my life, to question the being of God and the truth of his gospel is the worst, and the worst to be borne."⁵¹

In *The Excellency of a Broken Heart* (the last book he took to the publisher) he says,

Conversion is not the smooth, easy-going process some men seem to think. . . . It is wounding work, of course, this breaking of the hearts, but without wounding there is no saving. . . . Where there is grafting

there is a cutting, the scion must be let in with a wound; to stick it on to the outside or to tie it on with a string would be of no use. Heart must be set to heart and back to back, or there will be no sap from root to branch, and this I say, must be done by a wound.⁵²

Bunyan's suffering made him passionate about these things—and patient. You can hear his empathy with strugglers in these typically earthy words in a book from 1678 called *Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ*:

He that comes to Christ cannot, it is true, always get on as fast as he would. Poor coming soul, thou art like the man that would ride full gallop whose horse will hardly trot. Now the desire of his mind is not to be judged of by the slow pace of the dull jade he rides on, but by the hitching and kicking and spurring as he sits on his back. Thy flesh is like this dull jade, it will not gallop after Christ, it will be backward though thy soul and heaven lie at stake.⁵³

It seems to me that Bunyan knew the balance of Philippians 2:12-13, "So then, my beloved . . . work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." First, he publishes a book called *Saved By Grace* based on Ephesians 2:5, "By grace you are saved." And then in the same year he follows it with a book called, *The Strait Gate*, based on Luke 13:24, "Strive to enter at the strait gate; for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able."⁵⁴ Bunyan's sufferings had taught him the words of Jesus first hand, "The way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Matt 7:14).

Bunyan's suffering strengthened his assurance that God is sovereign over all the

afflictions of his people and will bring them safely home

There have always been, as there are today, people who try to solve the problem of suffering by denying the sovereignty of God—that is the all-ruling providence of God over Satan, over nature, and over human hearts and deeds. But it is remarkable how many of those who stand by the doctrine of God's sovereignty over suffering are those who suffered most and who found in the doctrine the most comfort and help. Bunyan was among that number. In 1684 he wrote an exposition for his suffering people based on 1 Peter 4:19: "Let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator." The book was called *Seasonable Counsel or Advice to Sufferers*. He takes the phrase "according to the will of God," and unfolds the sovereignty of God in it for the comfort of his people.

It is not what enemies will, nor what they are resolved upon, but what God will, and what God appoints; that shall be done. . . . No enemy can bring suffering upon a man when the will of God is otherwise, so no man can save himself out of their hands when God will deliver him up for his glory . . . [just as Jesus showed Peter "by what death he would glorify God"]. We shall or shall not suffer, even as it pleaseth him. . . .⁵⁵ God has appointed *who* shall suffer [Rev 6:11—the full number of martyrs]. . . . God has appointed . . . *when* they shall suffer [Acts 18:9-10 Paul's time of suffering was not yet come; so with Jesus in John 7:30]. . . . God has appointed *where* this, that or the other good man shall suffer ["it cannot be that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem" Luke 13:33; 9:30f]. . . . God has appointed . . . *what kind of sufferings* this or that saint shall undergo [Acts 9:16 "how great things he must suffer;" John 21:19 "by what

death he would glorify God"]. . . . Our sufferings, as to the nature of them, are all writ down in God's book; and though the writing seem as unknown characters to us, yet God understands them very well [Mark 9:13; Acts 13:29]. . . . It is appointed who of them should die of hunger, who with the sword, who should go into captivity, and who should be eaten up of beasts. Jer 15:2, 3.⁵⁶

What is Bunyan's aim in this exposition of the sovereignty of God in suffering? "I have, in a few words, handled this . . . to show you that our sufferings are ordered and disposed by him, that you might always, when you come into trouble for this name, not stagger nor be at loss, but be stayed, composed, and settled in your minds, and say, 'The will of the Lord be done.' Acts 21:14."⁵⁷

Bunyan is also careful to warn against feelings of revenge. For example, he says,

Learn to pity and bewail the condition of the enemy. . . . Never grudge them their present advantages. "Fret not thy self because of evil men. Neither be thou envious at the workers of iniquity." Prov 24:19. Fret not, though they spoil thy resting place. It is God that hath bidden them do it, to try thy faith and patience thereby. Wish them no ill with what they get of thine; it is their wages for their work, and it will appear to them ere long that they have earned it dearly. . . . Bless God that thy lot did fall on the other side. . . .⁵⁸

How kindly, therefore, doth God deal with us, when he chooses to afflict us but for a little, that with everlasting kindness he may have mercy upon us. Isa 54: 7-8.⁵⁹

The key to suffering rightly is to see in all things the hand of a merciful, good, and sovereign God and "to live upon God that is invisible."⁶⁰ There is more of God to be had in times of suffering than any other time.

There is that of God to be seen in such a day as cannot be seen in another. His power in holding up some, his wrath in leaving of others; his making of shrubs to stand, and his suffering of cedars to fall; his infatuating of the counsels of men, and his making of the devil to outwit himself; his giving of his presence to his people, and his leaving of his foes in the dark; his discovering [disclosing] the uprightness of the hearts of his sanctified ones, and laying open the hypocrisy of others, is a working of spiritual wonders in the day of his wrath, and of the whirlwind and storm. . . . We are apt to overshoot, in the days that are calm, and to think ourselves far higher, and more strong than we find we be, when the trying day is upon us. . . . We could not live without such turnings of the hand of God upon us. We should be overgrown with flesh, if we had not our seasonable winters. It is said that in some countries trees will grow, but will bear no fruit, because there is no winter there.⁶¹

So Bunyan begs his people to humble themselves under the mighty hand of God and trust that all will be for their good. "Let me beg of thee, that thou wilt not be offended either with God, or men, if the cross is laid heavy upon thee. Not with God, for he doth nothing without a cause, nor with men, for . . . they are the servants of God to thee for good. (Ps 17:14; Jer 24:5). Take therefore what comes to thee from God by them, thankfully."⁶²

*Bunyan's suffering deepened in him a confidence in the Bible as the Word of God and a passion for Bible memory and Biblical exposition as the key to perseverance*⁶³

If "living upon God that is invisible" is the key to suffering rightly, what is the key to living upon God? Bunyan's answer is: to lay hold on Christ through the Word of God, the Bible. Prison proved for Bunyan to be a hallowed place of communion with

God because his suffering unlocked the Word and the deepest fellowship with Christ he had ever known.

I never had in all my life so great an inlet into the Word of God as now [in prison]. Those scriptures that I saw nothing in before were made in this place and state to shine upon me. Jesus Christ also was never more real and apparent than now. Here I have seen him and felt him indeed. . . . I have had sweet sights of the forgiveness of my sins in this place, and of my being with Jesus in another world . . . I have seen *that* here that I am persuaded I shall never, while in this world, be able to express.⁶⁴

He especially cherished the promises of God as the key for opening the door of heaven. "I tell thee, friend, there are some promises that the Lord hath helped me to lay hold of Jesus Christ through and by, that I would not have out of the Bible for as much gold and silver as can lie between York and London piled up to the stars."⁶⁵

One of the greatest scenes in *The Pilgrim's Progress* is when Christian recalls in the dungeon of Doubting-castle that he has a key to the door. Very significant is not only what the key is, but where it is:

What a fool I have been, to lie like this in a stinking dungeon, when I could have just as well walked free. In my chest pocket I have a key called Promise that will, I am thoroughly persuaded, open any lock in Doubting-Castle. "Then," said Hopeful, "that is good news. My good brother, do immediately take it out of your chest pocket and try it." Then Christian took the key from his chest and began to try the lock of the dungeon door; and as he turned the key, the bolt unlocked and the door flew open with ease, so that Christian and Hopeful immediately came out.⁶⁶

Three times Bunyan says that the key

was in Christian's "*chest pocket*" or simply his "*chest*." I take this to mean that Christian had hidden it in his heart by memorization and that it was now accessible in prison for precisely this reason. This is how the promises sustained and strengthened Bunyan. He was filled with Scripture. Everything he wrote was saturated with Bible. He poured over his English Bible, which he had most of the time. This is why he can say of his writings, "I have not for these things fished in other men's waters; my Bible and Concordance are my only library in my writings."⁶⁷ Charles Spurgeon put it like this:

He had studied our Authorized Version . . . till his whole being was saturated with Scripture; and though his writings . . . continually make us feel and say, "Why, this man is a living Bible!" Prick him anywhere; and you will find that his blood is Bibling, the very essence of the Bible flows from him. He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his soul is full of the Word of God.⁶⁸

Bunyan revered the Word of God and trembled at the prospect of dishonoring it. "Let me die . . . with the Philistines (Judg 16:30) rather than deal corruptly with the blessed word of God."⁶⁹ This, in the end, is why Bunyan is still with us today rather than disappearing into the mist of history. He is with us and ministering to us because he revered the Word of God and was so permeated by it that his blood is "Bibling" and that "the essence of the Bible flows from him."

And this is what he has to show us. That "to live upon God who is invisible" is to live upon God in his Word. And to serve and suffer out of a life in God is to serve and suffer out of a life drenched with the Word of God. This is how we shall live, this is how we shall suffer, and this is how

we shall help our people get safely to the Celestial City. We will woo them with the Word. We will say to them as Bunyan did to his people:

God hath strewed all the way from the gate of hell, where thou wast, to the gate of heaven, whither thou art going, with flowers out of his own garden. Behold how the promises, invitations, calls, and encouragements, like lilies, lie round about thee! Take heed that thou dost not tread them under thy foot.⁷⁰

ENDNOTES

- ¹This essay will appear as a chapter in a forthcoming Crossway book in the Swans Are Not Silent Series by John Piper. Used by permission.
- ²According to Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press, 1978) 109, the first part of this "autobiography" was written after Bunyan had been in prison for about 5 years. But on p. 120 he says, "I . . . have lain now complete for twelve years, waiting to see what God would suffer those men to do with me."
- ³*Ibid.*, 122 (emphasis added).
- ⁴David Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, "Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 23.1 (1999) 25.
- ⁵*Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Nov. 27, 1997, pp. A1,15.
- ⁶"Cromwell, Oliver," *Microsoft® Encarta® 98 Encyclopedia*. © 1993-1997 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.
- ⁷Scholars differ on when they think *The Pilgrim's Progress* was actually written. Some conclude that it was during the first imprisonment of 1660-1672 (Barry Horner, ed., *The Pilgrim's Progress, John Bunyan, An Outlined Study Manual with Accurate Text Revision* [North Brunswick, NJ: 1997] xvii), and some that it was written during the second imprisonment of 1675 (John Brown, *John Bunyan: His Life, Times and Work* [London: The Hulbert Publishing co., 1928] 174). We do know that it was finally published for the first time in 1678.
- ⁸"Bloody Assizes," *Microsoft® Encarta® 98 Encyclopedia*. © 1993-1997 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.
- ⁹This is the term he uses to describe his occupation in his own will. Brown, *John Bunyan*, 29. It refers to repairing tools with hammer and forge.
- ¹⁰*Ibid.*, 42.
- ¹¹*Ibid.*, 45.
- ¹²Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 10-11.
- ¹³*Ibid.*, 13.
- ¹⁴*Ibid.*, 33. Pastor Gifford was willing to think him a Christian, he says, "though, I think, from little grounds."
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*, 40.
- ¹⁶*Ibid.*, 43.
- ¹⁷*Ibid.*, 54-55.
- ¹⁸*Ibid.*, 57.
- ¹⁹*Ibid.*, 59.
- ²⁰*Ibid.*, 63.
- ²¹*Ibid.*, 90-91.
- ²²*Ibid.*, 52-53.
- ²³Brown, *John Bunyan*, 105.
- ²⁴*Ibid.*, 369.
- ²⁵*Ibid.*, 370.
- ²⁶*Ibid.*, 160.
- ²⁷*Ibid.*, 366. This is a paraphrase of an indirect quote.
- ²⁸*Ibid.*, 149-150.
- ²⁹*Ibid.*, 224.
- ³⁰Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 123.
- ³¹Brown, *John Bunyan*, 336.
- ³²*Ibid.*, 336.
- ³³*Ibid.*, 340.
- ³⁴*Ibid.*, 372.
- ³⁵Christopher Hill, *A Tinker and a Poor Man: John Bunyan and His Church, 1628-*

1688 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989) 367.

³⁶According to Brown (*John Bunyan*, 378) the date of death on his tomb, August 17, is a mistake.

³⁷See above notes 13 and 22 and recall the role of *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* and *The Practice of Piety* and Luther's *Commentary on Galatians*.

³⁸Hill, *A Tinker and a Poor Man*, 375.

³⁹Quoted in Barry Horner, *The Pilgrim's Progress: An Evangelical Apologetic, Themes and Issues* (Lindenhurst, NY: Reformation Press, 1998) 7-8.

⁴⁰Hill, *A Tinker and a Poor Man*, xv-xvii.

⁴¹John Burton, "The Epistle Writ" for *Some Gospel Truths Opened*, in *The Works of John Bunyan* (1854; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991) 2:141.

⁴²Quoted in Horner, ed., *The Pilgrim's Progress*, iii.

⁴³John Bunyan, *Christian Behavior*, in *The Works of John Bunyan*, 2:574.

⁴⁴Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 110.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 110.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 111.

⁴⁷John Bunyan, *The Greatness of the Soul*, in *The Works of John Bunyan*, 1:105.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹John Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel* (otherwise known as *Advice to Sufferers*), in *The Works of John Bunyan*, 2:725.

⁵⁰Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 96.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 128.

⁵²Quoted in a collage in Brown, *John Bunyan*, 373. See the fuller original in *The Acceptable Sacrifice: The Excellency of a Broken Heart*, in *The Works*

of John Bunyan, 1:720.

⁵³Quoted in Brown, *John Bunyan*, 299.

⁵⁴See John Bunyan, *Saved by Grace*, in *The Works of John Bunyan*, 1:335-361 and *The Strait Gate* in *The Works of John Bunyan*, 1:362-390.

⁵⁵Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel*, in *The Works of John Bunyan*, 2:722.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 2:723. Jeremiah 15:2-3 says, "It shall come to pass, if they say unto thee, Whither shall we go forth? then thou shalt tell them, Thus saith the LORD; Such as *are* for death, to death; and such as *are* for the sword, to the sword; and such as *are* for the famine, to the famine; and such as *are* for the captivity, to the captivity. And I will appoint over them four kinds, saith the LORD: the sword to slay, and the dogs to tear, and the fowls of the heaven, and the beasts of the earth, to devour and destroy."

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 2:724.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 2:725.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 2:737. If one asks whether God is sovereign over the temptations of soul as well as sufferings of body, Bunyan answers, yes. Looking back on his own dark seasons of doubt and despair he writes, "Now I saw that as God had his hand in all the providences and dispensations that overtook his elect, so he had his hand in all the temptations that they had to sin against him, not to animate them to wickedness, but to choose their temptations and troubles for them, and also to leave them for a time to such things only as might not destroy, but humble them—as might not put them beyond, but lay them in the way of the renewing of his mercy." *Grace Abounding*, 61

⁶⁰Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 109.

⁶¹Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel*, 2:694.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 2:694. If one asks, may we ever then avail ourselves of opportunities to escape suffering, Bunyan answers, "Thou mayest do in this as it is in thy heart. If it is in thy heart to fly, fly; if it be in thy heart to stand, stand. Any thing but a denial of the truth. He that flies, has warrant to do so; he that stands, has warrant to do so. Yea, the same man may both fly and stand, as the call and working of God with his heart may be. Moses fled, Exod 2:15; Moses stood. Heb 11:27. David fled, 1 Sam 19:12; David stood. 24:8. Jeremiah fled, Jer 37:11-12; Jeremiah stood. 38:17. Christ withdrew himself, Luke 19:10; Christ stood. John 18:1-8. Paul fled, 2 Cor 11:33; Paul stood. Acts 20:22-23. . . .

There are few rules in this case. The man himself is best able to judge concerning his present strength, and what weight this or that argument has upon his heart to stand or fly. . . . Do not fly out of a slavish fear, but rather because flying is an ordinance of God, opening a door for the escape of some, which door is opened by God's providence, and the escape countenanced by God's Word. Matt 10:23. . . . If, therefore, when thou hast fled, thou art taken, be not offended at God or man: not at God, for thou art his servant, thy life and thy all are his; not at man, for he is but God's rod, and is ordained, in this, to do thee good. Hast thou escaped? Laugh. Art thou taken? Laugh. I mean, be pleased which way soever things shall go, for that the scales are still in God's

hand." Ibid., 2:726.

⁶³I do not say this to the exclusion of prayer and faith. Concerning the reliance on God by prayer he said, "Christians, pray for me to our God, with much earnestness, fervency, and frequently, in all your knockings at our Father's door, because I do very much stand in need thereof, for my work is great, my heart is vile, and the devil lieth at watch, the world would fain be saying, Aha, aha, thus would we have it! And of myself, keep myself I cannot, trust myself I dare not; if God do not help me I am sure it will not be long before my heart deceive, and the world have their advantage of me." Brown, *John Bunyan*, 119.

⁶⁴Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 121.

⁶⁵Quoted from *Sighs from Hell* (1658) in Brown, *John Bunyan*, 112.

⁶⁶Horner, ed., *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 172.

⁶⁷Brown, *John Bunyan*, 364.

⁶⁸Charles Spurgeon, *Autobiography* (1897-1900; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973) 2:159.

⁶⁹Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 114.

⁷⁰Quoted from *Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ* (1678), in Brown, *John Bunyan*, 300.