

# John Bunyan

**Quote:** "He who runs from God in the morning will scarcely find Him the rest of the day" (John Bunyan).

**Spiritual Condition of the Times:** When studying *Pilgrim's Progress*, it is important to understand the religious background from which John Bunyan was writing. Studying the reformers and kings/queens before and during Bunyan's lifetime gives additional insight into the spiritual climate in which *Pilgrim's Progress* was written.

- Roman Catholicism – 530 to 1530 (1000 years)
  - The cry was, "Be a Catholic or die!"
  - Exclusive papal rule during the Dark Ages
- The power of Catholicism began to lessen by the time Bunyan was born

## Reformers:

- 1320 to 1384 – John Wycliffe
  - Called the "The Morning Star of the Reformation"
  - Produced the first handwritten version of the Bible in English
- 1369 to 1415 – John Huss continued the work of John Wycliffe
  - Called for church reformation
  - Was burned to death at the stake
  - Before he died, he said, "You are now going to burn a goose, but in a century you will have a swan whom you can neither roast nor boil."
    - Huss means "goose" in the old German language
    - Thus, the phrase "your goose is cooked"
    - 100 years later Martin Luther dealt a deadly blow to Roman Catholicism
- 1517 – Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the church door at Wittenberg, Germany
  - Luther had received light on Romans 1:17 – "The just shall live by faith"
  - Cried out against the error of indulgences
  - Declared a heretic by the Pope & excommunicated
  - Luther: "Unless I am convinced by proofs from Scriptures or by plain and clear reasons and arguments, I can and will not retract, for it is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."
  - Luther then translated the Bible into the language of the German people
- 1525 – William Tyndale translated the New Testament into English
  - Used the printing press invented by Johann Gutenberg
  - When a priest told Tyndale, "We are better to be without God's laws than the Pope's," Tyndale replied: "I defy the Pope and all his laws. If God spare my life ere many years, I will cause the boy that drives the plow to know more of the Scriptures than you."
  - Tyndale was strangled and burned at the stake in 1536
  - Tyndale's last words were, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes!"

## Rulers of England:

- 1509 – King Henry VIII (king when Tyndale died)
  - broke away from Roman Catholic Church (Pope wouldn't grant him a divorce)
  - doctrinally remained a Catholic
- 1547 – King Edward VI (son of King Henry VIII)
  - sympathetic to the reformers
  - died after only ruling 7 years (at the age of 16)
- 1553 – Queen Mary I (daughter of King Henry VIII)

- "Bloody Mary"
- Staunch Catholic
- "Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow? With silver bells and cockle shells and pretty maids all in a row."
  - "cockle shells" – with the symbol of pilgrimage to the Catholic Shrine of St. James in Spain
  - "pretty maids all in a row" – with Catholic nuns
- 1558 – Queen Elizabeth I (daughter of King Henry VIII)
  - "Good Queen Bess"
  - Tried to restore peace
  - Act of Uniformity
    - required every man read the *Book of Common Prayers* and attend church once a week or be fined
    - this prayer book contained teachings that the Puritans considered unbiblical
    - people separated from the church (Separatists)
- 1603 – King James I (Elizabeth's cousin)
  - King James Version (1611)
  - 1608 – Pilgrims left England for Holland (and later America)
- 1625 – King Charles I (James' son)
  - Worked to force people to conform to the teachings of the church
  - Severe persecution for people who would not conform to the church's teachings
  - 1628 – John Bunyan was born
  - Religious and political turmoil caused a divide between Parliament and the king
    - War
    - Oliver Cromwell (Puritan) became commander of the parliamentary army
      - (Discuss what it meant to be a Puritan)
  - King Charles I was tried for treason and executed
  - Cromwell abolished the monarchy and became Lord Protector of the Realm
    - Puritans had great religious freedom during this time (1649-1658)
  - 1660 Cromwell died – monarchy restored: King Charles II
    - religious freedom began to be restricted at once
    - punishment was imprisonment

### Life of John Bunyan:

- **Born** 1628 in Elstow, England
- **Father:** a tinker
  - Mender of pots & kettles
- **Early years:** As a boy, John had a lively imagination (hence *Pilgrim's Progress*) and the sternness of the times (no doubt) caused him to have many nightmares. One habit in particular John had as a young man was vulgar language.
- **Age 15:** In 1644 his mother and sister died within one month of each other. His sister was 13. To add to the heartache, his father remarried within a month.
  - At the same time, not many miles away, the King attacked a church in Leighton and "began to cut and wound right and left."
- **Age 16:** Bunyan was drafted into the army to fight in the Civil War.
  - Bunyan was drawn to go to the siege of Leicester. Just when he was ready to start one offered to go in his stead.
    - "To which," says Bunyan, "when I had consented, he took my place; and coming to the siege, as he stood sentinel, he was shot in the head with a musket ball and died."
    - Bunyan at this time was 17 years of age, and referring to the circumstance afterwards, he said, "Here were judgments and mercy, but neither of them did awaken my soul to righteousness, wherefore I

sinned still and grew more and more rebellious against God and careless of my own salvation."

- Bunyan was not a believer during this time.
- "I had few equals, especially considering my years, which were tender, for cursing, swearing, lying, and blaspheming the holy name of God . . . I was the very ringleader of all the youth that kept me company, in all manner of vice and ungodliness."
- **Marriage:** Two or three years after this Bunyan was married, his age at the time probably being 19 or 20.
  - His wife was a godly young woman, and they "came together as poor as might be, not having so much household stuff as a dish or a spoon betwixt them both."
  - Her dowry consisted of the two books: "The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven" and "The Practice of Piety."
    - at the time of writing *Pilgrim's Progress* it is believed Bunyan had only read these two books and the Bible
    - The only books Bunyan ever read:
      - two volumes from his wife's dowry
      - The Bible
      - *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*
      - *Luther on the Galatians*
- **God's Dealings with Bunyan:**
  - After a Sunday sermon, Bunyan went out to play a game of Tip-Cat
    - seemed to hear a voice from heaven asking him whether "he would leave his sins and go to heaven, or keep his sins and go to hell."
  - "Ye wicked wretch! The Devil take your obscenity. Get away from our shop. Your profanity spoils all the youths of our town!"
    - spoken to Bunyan by an immoral woman of the town because of Bunyan's profanity
    - this greatly bothered Bunyan
- **Spiritual Journey**
  - Bunyan began going to church, stopped swearing, and began reading his Bible
  - The Bible became precious to him
  - Bunyan was greatly affected by John Calvin's teaching of predestination
    - afraid he couldn't be saved
  - John Gifford (Evangelist is believed to be patterned after this pastor) helped Bunyan to understand that he could be a child of God
- **Preaching**
  - 1655 Bunyan started preaching
  - 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."
  - In the days of toleration, a day's notice would get a crowd of 1200 to hear him preach at 7:00 o'clock in the morning on a weekday.
  - 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."
  - Bunyan was in danger when preaching (without a license and outside of established churches)
    - 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.
- **Bedford Jail**
  - In 1658 he was indicted for preaching without a license. The authorities were tolerate of him for awhile, but in November of 1660 he was taken to the Bedford Jail.
  - With the exception of a few weeks in 1666, Bunyan was in jail for 12 years.
  - **Jail Conditions:**
    - The Bedford jail was like all English jails of the day, and long after — "a stink hole, foul and filthy

- almost beyond belief."
- The stench in the prisons was so nauseating and overpowering that those coming to visit doused their handkerchiefs with turpentine and held them tight against the nose.
  - There were no sanitation facilities except the most primitive. The only source of water was the hand pump in the prison yard.
  - The food was meager, monotonous, unwholesome.
  - Men and women prisoners were herded together, without privacy of any kind.
  - All slept on straw, usually without a bedstead to keep it off the hard floor.
  - Bedford prison had no fireplace so that it was freezing in winter.
  - In summer, it was steaming hot because it had only a few small windows to let in a little light and air.
  - Prisons were frequently swept by dread jail fever, which often carried off half the inmates.
  - A long jail sentence at the time amounted, as often as not, to a death sentence.
    - That Bunyan survived his long prison ordeal testifies to the health and strength of both his body and spirit — though Bunyan ascribed his survival to the direct intervention of God.
  - Over & over Bunyan was told if he would promise to quit preaching, he could go home whenever he wished. His answer was always the same: "If you let me out today, I will preach again tomorrow."
  - Bunyan had several small children, including a blind daughter whom he cherished, at home. The family was forced to beg for food while Bunyan was in prison.
    - "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."
  - While in prison, Bunyan taught himself how to make "long tagged laces."
    - He used the money earned to help his family
    - Able to meditate & think while making these laces
  - He was released in 1672 and imprisoned again for 6 months in 1675. Finally, after this Bunyan was free to follow his conscience.

### **Pilgrim's Progress:**

- Written toward the end of Bunyan's imprisonment
- **Allegory**
  - characters or events represent or symbolize ideas and concepts
  - Examples:
    - King David & Prophet Nathan
    - The kingdom of Heaven is like:
      - Parable of the Sower
      - Parable of Talents
  - While in prison, Bunyan began to write of the stages of the Christian progress. He compared it to a pilgrimage (define: a journey to a sacred place).
  - "Images came crowding on his mind faster than he could put them into words, quagmires and pits, steep hills, dark and horrible glens, soft vales, sunny pastures, a gloomy castle of which the courtyard was strewn with the skulls and bones of murdered prisoners, a town all bustle and splendour, like London on the Lord Mayor's Day, and the narrow path, straight as a rule could make it, running on up hill and down hill, through city and through wilderness, to the Black River and the Shining Gate."<sup>1</sup>
- **Popularity**
  - Next to the Bible, "perhaps the world's best-selling book . . . translated into over 200 languages."
  - Never been out of print
  - 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 pointed out:

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nndb.com/people/910/000095625/>

- "*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."
- The common people saw the value and merit of this book long before the educated people did.
- **Further Writings:**
  - Bunyan is credited with writing 58 books
  - The variety in these books was remarkable:
    - controversy (like the Quakers and justification and baptism)
    - collections of poems
    - children's literature
    - allegory (like *The Holy War* and *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*).
  - 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."<sup>2</sup>
- **Bunyan's Death**
  - Traveled on horseback to reconcile a father and son
  - Successfully reunited father & son
  - While traveling home, caught in a downpour
  - Already unwell, he caught a fever & died

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/biographies/to-live-upon-god-that-is-invisible>