

The Life of John Bunyan (part 3)

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[0:00] The life of John Bunyan is the study that we're engaging in as we're working our way into Pilgrim's progress. The Lord has his ways of humbleness, doesn't he?

When I was teaching on the life of John Newton, a visitor from England was in our class. Two weeks ago when I was teaching on the life of John Bunyan, we had a visitor with us who lives just 90 miles from Bedford.

And he reminded me that what I said was reading was really reading. It looks like reading, R-E-A-D-I-N-G, the city where Bunyan went to make peace between a father and his son at the end of his life.

But it's really reading. Well, in order to get to the end of Bunyan's life last time, we had to continue right along at a good clip. I'm wanting to stop this morning and go back and draw out principles then from the life of John Bunyan.

What is there in his life experience of God and his grace that would be helpful to us in our pilgrimage to heaven? And as I said earlier, most of the materials we've drawn on to this point have come from Bunyan's own words in his autobiography called *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*.

[1:26] Now today we're going to be drawing heavily from John Piper's book, *The Hidden Smile of God*, bringing several lessons then from the life of John Bunyan.

And Piper's title is taken from William Cooper's hymn, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way His Wonders to Perform*. And verse 4 says, Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace.

Behind a frowning providence, he hides a smiling face. Hence the title, *The Hidden Smile of God*. His smile, his favor is often hidden behind a life of great suffering and trials.

And so to read the life of John Bunyan is to realize that this man had trials beyond the normal. Here's a summary of them in that book, *Hidden Smile*.

The early, almost simultaneous death of his mother and his sister when he was but in his teens. And then the immediate remarriage of his father.

[2:39] And then in the midst of his teenage grief, to be drafted into the military to fight in a civil war at age 16. And to do so for three years.

And then after marriage, to find that his first child, Mary, was blind. To live for years in poverty. Spiritual depression and darkness during the early years of his marriage. The death of his first wife after 10 years of marriage. Being left with four children under the age of 10.

A second marriage that was interrupted after one year by 12 years in prison. And even when he was out of prison.

The constant stress and uncertainty of imminent persecution. And then one more persecution for six months later. Then the loss of much money through the sale of pirated editions of his *Pilgrim's Progress*.

[3:39] It was a hit from the beginning. But others then took his book and copied it and sold it and made the profits. Evidently, that's not a new thing.

He suffered that. What could have been great wealth. The final sickness and death of Bunyan. Far from those he loved most on earth.

And on top of these were the normal pressures and pains of the ministry. Of marriage. Of parenting. Of being involved in controversy.

And criticism. And slander. And sickness. Along the way. Well, that's a lot of suffering. And Piper asked the question. What did all that suffering produce by the grace of God?

Well, first of all, it confirmed Bunyan's lasting ministry of writing. Though Bunyan was a pastor, books would become his main legacy to the church and to the world.

[4:44] He wrote four books before going to prison. And he wrote some after his release. The year that he died, he had five books published. But most of the 60-some books that he wrote were written in prison.

One who knew him well said, It is doubtful whether most of these books would have ever been written had it not been for his imprisonment. So busy was he with preaching and mending pots and pans.

God knows how to draw his gifted servants aside to write. So instead of leaving him free to preach to his small congregation of 100 or so for 10 to 12 years, God put him into prison where he would write to nurture the faith of millions down to this present age.

So instead of 12 years of preaching to people, he has extended his usefulness for hundreds of years down to the present age. God moves in a mysterious way.

His wonders to perform. So don't judge him by sight. Don't judge what he's up to just by what your eyes can see. But trust him for his grace.

[6:00] He knows what he's up to. He knows how to open doors of ministry to people that otherwise we would never reach. We saw that in the book of Philippians when Paul was cast into prison.

And the upshot of that was that not only were other Christians outside the prison more bold in their witness, but the gospel actually reached to those in Caesar's household.

People that perhaps never would have been reached with the gospel. Soldiers who were chained to Paul for four hours at a stint now heard the gospel. So look for new people to witness to in your suffering.

Some of your sufferings bring you into contact with people you otherwise would never contact. So be ready to give a reason for the hope that you have in the midst of your suffering.

They know the suffering. They see it. And you have great opportunity. The variety of Bunyan's books is amazing. He had books dealing with controversies, the controversies with the Quakers, controversies over justification, over baptism.

[7:09] And then there are books that were collections of poems. There was children's literature. There were allegories like Pilgrim's Progress, The Holy War, and The Life and Death of Mr. Bad Man.

Get a hold of that one. But the vast majority of his books were practical expositions of scriptures. They were sermons that opened up and applied the text of the Bible.

So God's ways are far above our ways. We would not have chosen John Bunyan to impact the world through writing. We would have looked for one with far greater education in his upbringing for such a work.

But is that not like God to take a man who barely knew how to read and write and to use him as his choice instrument to impact the world through writing?

Why does God do that? Why does God surprise us by taking an instrument that seems unfit to the task?

[8:19] I'm asking you that. Any reasons? Dare? So he gets the glory. All right? Nobody can say, well, it was just his natural gift.

No. He barely had any natural education. It was God. But that also be taken as an encouragement to those who believe seeing God working in the background, maybe not actually doing it, but seeing how he works everything out.

Yeah. That's right. We ought to be encouraged when it looks like something bad, prison, to know that God is indeed working something good. So man is humbled and God is exalted.

And that's his whole plan for everything. That in the end, the pride of man may be humbled and the Lord alone be exalted. You find it throughout the scriptures.

And so Paul writes, he chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things. That was Bunyan. He was despised. He was scorned in his day.

[9:23] Bunyan. And the things that are not to nullify the things that are so that no one may boast before him. Therefore, as it is written, let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.

First Corinthians one. Bunyan didn't know any Greek, didn't know any Hebrew. He had no theological degrees. And it caused many to despise him when he first set to writing.

And so his pastor, at this time it was John Burton, wrote the foreword for Bunyan and defended him. And when Bunyan wrote his first published book in 1656 at age 28, his pastor says, 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 temptation of Satan, which do more to fit a man for that mighty work of preaching the gospel than all university learning and degrees that can be had.

So when the public was scorning the tinker, what can the tinker say? Why read his book? His pastor says, because he's got three degrees. Namely, union with Christ, he's joined to Jesus.

[10 : 50] The anointing of the spirit. He has the spirit of all wisdom within him and the experiences of the temptation of Satan. And these make a man fit for the mighty work of preaching.

Well, his most famous book, Pilgrim's Progress, was born in prison as well. As I said, it was immediately successful. It went through three editions in its first year that we know of, the non-pirated editions.

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.

For the spirit of Christ and of glory then rests upon them. So George Whitefield, who profited from the Pilgrim's Progress. Piper says, The smell of affliction was on most of what Bunyan wrote.

In fact, I suspect that one of the reasons the Puritans, Bunyan was one of them. 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.

[12 : 11] To our chipper culture, this may sound sober 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 light 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.

So God prepared his servant to write for the prophet of his church by putting him through severe suffering.

These were hard times, not just for Bunyan, but for his church people as well. The village congregation, they lived in constant danger of harassment and imprisonment, of confiscation of property.

He wrote largely for them, to minister to their souls and to their needs. So we have the sufferer writing to the suffering. And is that not one of the purposes for which we endure suffering?

Again, the Apostle Paul, 2 Corinthians 1, 3 and 4, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

[13 : 38] So Bunyan's in prison suffering, and he's receiving the comfort of God. And so he's able, with that comfort he's received, to minister to his suffering congregation by writing for them.

So his suffering and imprisonment were God's means of equipping him to minister through his writing to the afflicted church of his own day and any day.

I wonder if we thought of our own sufferings in that light. Our temptations, our trials are equipping us to make us better ministers of God's grace to others who are in need.

So that's the first thing that God did through his sufferings. It confirmed that his ministry would be one of writing, and it would be filled with comfort to those who are suffering like he was.

Secondly, suffering helped Bunyan realize the truth that the Christian life is hard. I wonder what Bunyan would say if he sat down and watched three hours of Christian TV in our day.

[14 : 47] What would he say about the health, wealth, and prosperity teaching of our day? That say, things go better with Christ. Following Jesus is the way to the easy life.

The way to wealth and health and prosperity. Well, he rather answers that following Jesus means having the wind in your face. Six years before his death, he wrote a book called The Greatness of the Soul.

He based it on the words of Jesus in Mark 8. 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?

And he states his declared aim in writing this book, quote, To awaken you, to 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.

He's writing to his fellow Christians here. He's not talking about the salvation of their souls in conversion. He's talking about persevering to the end. That's salvation.

[16 : 05] In this book, he has Jesus warning us that life with him is hard. Puts these words into the mouth of our Lord. Following of me is not like following some 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 side of the bark of the boat 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. The call to discipleship is the call to endure suffering with Christ.

Two years later, commenting on Jesus' words in John 15, 2, Every branch that bears fruit he prunes. Bunyan writes, It is the will of God that they that go to heaven should go thither hardly or with difficulty.

Indeed, as 1 Peter 4, 18 says, The righteous shall scarcely be saved. That is, they shall, but yet with great difficulty, that it may be the sweeter. And this note is often struck in the pilgrim's progress, as you're fully aware.

[17 : 20] Pilgrim does not float through life and arrive unscathed in the celestial city, does he? He does have refreshing times at the cross. He does have refreshing times in an interpreter's house, and in the house beautiful, and along the river of the water of life, and at the delectable mountains and in Beulah land, yes, there are periods of delight.

Yet these were surrounded by trials and difficulties and dangers and suffering of every kind. For instance, it's true that Christian on his journey came to a pleasant arbor, a place of rest that the Lord of the hill had built for weary travelers.

But it's just that, that it was halfway up the hill of difficulty. It's just a resting point along the way in the otherwise difficult and dangerous journey.

That's Bunyan's picture of the Christian life. And the Apostle Paul said much the same, we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God, Acts 14, 22.

So Bunyan's pilgrim goes through many hardships on his way to the celestial city, fully in line with Jesus' words in Matthew 7, 14, that the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

[18 : 43] And so Bunyan's suffering made him passionate about these things. And soft 21st century Western Christianity that has long enjoyed prosperity and freedom and respect from the world could profit from a long drink from Bunyan's well.

To bring our expectations into line so that we're not surprised when persecution comes. Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial that you are suffering as though something strange were happening to you, Peter says in 1 Peter 4, 12.

And Bunyan removes the strangeness from suffering in the Christian life by confronting us with its reality and so its health for the soul.

Well, that's the second thing his sufferings did. It emphasized, it drew out the reality that the Christian life is hard. But thirdly, suffering strengthened his assurance that God is sovereign over all the afflictions of his people.

Now we read that. We read the sovereignty of God. That God is in control of all things, including our sufferings and the people who cause our sufferings.

[19 : 59] But suffering itself strengthened his assurance in that reality. Some people try to solve the problem of suffering by removing it from God's sovereignty.

Well, God does not have anything to do with that, with the suffering and death of that person. He's not in charge of that.

That's something outside of his control. And in that way, they seek to vindicate God, to help out God. And Bunyan could not disagree more.

He found great comfort in the Bible's teaching that God is sovereign over absolutely everything, including his suffering. And he wrote a book for his suffering people called Seasonable Counsel or Advice to Sufferers.

Who better fit to write such a book? It's an exposition of 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.

[21:09] And he unpacks that phrase, those who suffer according to the will of God, in this way. 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. Even so, no man can save himself out of their hands when God will deliver him up for his glory. We shall or shall not suffer even as it pleases him. And he draws out this theme in this way. Point one, God appoints who will suffer.

He says suffering comes not by chance or by the will of man, but by the will and appointment of God. And he quotes 1 Thessalonians 3, 3, that no man should be moved by these afflictions, for you yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto.

We're appointed to them. God is the one who determines and appoints who will suffer. Second point in his sermon, God has appointed when they shall suffer. The times and the seasons, even for the sufferings of the people of God, are not in the hands of their enemies, but in the hand of God.

[22:25] As David said, my times are in your hands. Thirdly, God has appointed where this, that, or the other good man shall suffer. Moses and Elijah, when they appeared on the mount with Jesus, told Jesus of the sufferings which he should accomplish at Jerusalem.

Luke 9, 31. But why there? Why should Jesus suffer at Jerusalem? Because God had appointed that he should suffer there.

So then who, when, and where is at the will of God, and they accordingly are ordered by that will. And fourth, God has appointed what kind of sufferings this or that saint shall undergo.

Acts 9, 16. God said that he would show Paul how much he must suffer for his sake. John 21, 19. Christ signified to Peter beforehand by what death he would glorify God.

And so Bunyan says, it is appointed which saint should die of hunger, which with the sword, which go into captivity, and which should be eaten up of beasts. Nothing is left to chance, but all is ordered by the will of God.

[23:40] So what is Bunyan's aim in so proving God's sovereignty, ordering everything about the sufferings that we face?

Well, he tells us that you might always, when you come into troubles for his name, not stagger, nor be it a loss, but be stayed, composed, and settled in your mind, and say, may the will of the Lord be done.

So he can write from his Bedford jail, let the rage and malice of men be ever so great. They can do no more, nor go any farther than God permits them.

But when they have done their worst, we know that all things work together for good to them that love God. That's not written from the study in the home in Bedford.

It's written from the jail in Bedford. Experiential knowledge of Scripture. God's sovereignty helped ward off feelings of revenge.

[24:45] Isn't that one of the things that happens when we suffer unjustly, that we then wrestle with feelings of revenge and wanting to get even? And yet it's when we recognize God's sovereignty that we have help.

Isn't that what Pastor Taylor was showing us last Sunday night with David? Saul was mistreating him, seeking his life, and David had an opportunity to get even with him, and his soldiers encouraged him to do so.

But he saw it as God. He saw the sovereign God, and he was set free from any personal revenge because he saw God was in control of this suffering of his.

And so Bunyan 2 found it to be so. He said, Learn to pity and bewail the condition of the enemy. Learn to pity and bewail the condition of the enemy.

Never grudge them their present advantages. Fret not thyself because of evil men. Neither be envious at the workers of iniquity. Fret not, though they spoil your resting place.

[25:53] It is God that has 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.

But bless God that thy lot did not fall on the other side. You see what he's saying? In suffering, learn to pity those persecuting you.

It's God who has bidden them. It is God's plan to try your faith. So when they confiscate your things, don't begrudge them. It's the wages for their work.

And they will find that they will pay dearly for those wages. Bless God that your lot did not fall on the other side. that you're the one being persecuted and not persecuting.

You have God to thank for that as well. It's reminiscent of David being chased out of Jerusalem by his own son Absalom in the rebellion. And as they're going along weeping, and the faithful of David are with them as they're fleeing for their lives from Jerusalem, that man, Shimei, throws dirt clods and stones and dust down on him.

[27 : 19] And some of the men around David says, let me go over and cut off that dog's head. And David says, no, it is the Lord who has bidden him.

Perhaps the Lord will show me kindness for this wrong that I am suffering. that's conviction that God is sovereign over every stone thrown at us and it keeps us from personal revenge.

The sovereignty of God is a large foundation stone in Bunyan's heart and that's why he wasn't bitter against his jailer. Remember, he became a friend of the jailer at Bedford, the man who kept him locked up.

Such a friend that sometimes he let him go home at night. That says something about the man, doesn't it? Had Bunyan been bitter against him and had a harsh word for him whenever he saw him?

Do you think for a moment the jailer would have set him free for periods? Not at all. We see something of the reality of the sovereignty of God affecting Bunyan's treatment of his own persecutor, the jailer.

[28 : 34] The same spirit was seen in Elizabeth Bunyan who burst into tears when leaving the judges who refused her petition. She wept not because they did not give her what she requested, but because of the answer that they would have to give one day to God for the way they've used their authority.

Well, that's one of the positive things that comes from the sovereignty of God in suffering. Let me beg of thee that thou wilt not be offended either with God or men in suffering if the cross is laid heavily upon thee.

Don't be offended with God for he doth nothing without a cause nor with men for they are the servants of God to thee for good. Take therefore what comes to thee from God by them thankfully. He's ratcheting it up a notch, not only not taking revenge, but receiving thankfully. In everything give thanks for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.

Now, the question comes up, is it ever right to run from suffering, to escape from suffering? Bunyan chose not to in the sense of he was tipped off that the authorities were coming the night that he was arrested and he says I'm called to preach and preach I will and he stayed and preached.

[29 : 58] He could have escaped suffering and been released had he just agreed to not preach anymore but he chose to stay and suffer rather than to be released.

And so the question comes, is it ever right to flee? Listen to Bunyan. If one should ask may we ever then avail ourselves of opportunities to escape suffering?

Bunyan answers, thou mayest do in this as it is in thy heart, that is in your conscience. If it is in your heart to fly then fly. If it is in thy heart to stand then stand.

Anything 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, Exodus 2, Moses stood, Hebrews 11. David fled, 1 Samuel 19. David stood, 1 Samuel 24.

[31 : 07] Jeremiah fled, Jeremiah 37. Jeremiah stood, 38, 17. Christ himself withdrew himself, Luke 19. Christ stood, John 18.

Paul fled, 2 Corinthians 11. Paul stood, Acts 20. There are a few rules in this case, he says. 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 to fly.

But 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 is countenance by God's word, Matthew 10, 23.

If, therefore, when you have fled, you are taken, you're caught, be not offended at God or man, not at God, for you are his servant, thy life and thy will and thy all are his, and not at man, for he is but God's rod, and is ordained in this to do thee good.

Have you escaped? Laugh. Are you caught? Laugh. I mean, be pleased which way soever things shall go, for that the scales are still in God's hand.

[32 : 27] Unusual thoughts into the sovereignty of God. Whether you stand or flee, be sure you're not running out of slavish fear, or doing what you're doing because of fear, but rather you're convinced that in God's ordering, he means it to be so, and whichever way it goes with you, whether you're set free or caught, you can rest in the fact that that too was in the hands of a sovereign God.

Well, lastly, what did God do through all this suffering in Bunyan's life? Well, suffering deepened his commitment to and confidence in the Bible as the Word of God.

He says it's through the Word of God that we lay hold of Christ. He tells how his suffering drove him into the Word and how it opened the Word to him, giving him deeper insight into its truth.

He says, 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 in this state to shine upon me. Jesus Christ 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.

[33 : 49] I have seen that here that I am persuaded I shall never while in this world be able to express. I never knew what it was for God to stand by me at all times and at every offer of Satan to afflict me as I have found him since I came in hither.

So suffering unlocked the Word of God and it gave him the deepest fellowship with Christ that he had ever known. He says, if it were lawful I would pray for greater trouble for the greater comfort's sake for as the sufferings of Christ abound in us so our consolation also abounds by Christ.

He's saying the blessings of this place have been so great if it were lawful which it is not I would pray for greater trouble. We're not told to pray for trouble to seek trouble. We're told that when we face trials of many kinds we ought to count them all joy.

So that from Bunyan. David found the same thing in his suffering didn't he? It is good for me that I was afflicted that I may learn your statutes.

There's something about afflictions that teaches us the Word of God in a deeper way than merely sitting at the study. And I don't diminish our time of reading and meditating on Scripture.

[35 : 07] I simply say that it is the experience of many that in suffering truth is opened up and we find deeper insight into it. Martin Luther drew from this Scripture of David in Psalm 119.

71 the principle that suffering is essential to know the Word of God as we ought. He said three things make a theologian prayer, meditation, and temptation. The trials that drive you to seek and love the Word of God.

He says, this is Luther, I owe the Roman Catholics many thanks for their so beating and pressing and frightening me because they have turned me into a fairly good theologian, driving me to a goal I should never have reached otherwise.

So Bunyan found that. And he especially treasured the promises of God as the key for opening up the door of heaven in his sufferings. 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.

The preciousness of the promises comes home in times of affliction. So you have it in Pilgrim's Progress. Christian and Hopeful are in the dungeon and it's the key of promise that opens the door to every lock in the castle.

[36 : 32] Where had it been? The key had been in his chest pocket. I believe Bunyan referring to the word having been hidden in his heart now in the midst of his trial and his affliction in his prison.

He remembers it. He calls it to mind and finds it unlock his depression, help in time of need. He poured over his English Bible. Remember he just had two books in prison.

He poured over the Bible memorizing much of it. Spurgeon, Charles Spurgeon read Pilgrim's Progress every year. And he says of Bunyan, he had studied our authorized version till his whole being was saturated with Scripture.

And though his writings are charmingly full of poetry, yet he cannot give us his Pilgrim's Progress without continually making us feel and say, why, this man is a living Bible.

Prick him anywhere and you will find that his blood is bibline. 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.

[37:40] He served and he suffered saturated with the Bible. He says, God has strewn all the way from the gate of hell where you were to the gate of heaven where you're going, 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.

So our sufferings drive us to Christ, drive us deeper into the Bible where the promises are found that give us hope and lift us up, encourage us.

And that's where we find a sovereign Lord over the particular circumstances of our suffering. And that's what enables us to expect nothing but good from them. thank God for the Bible and for suffering that opens it up to us.

So that's four lessons from suffering in the life of John Bunyan. May we profit from it in our own trials, though they be less. Any questions or comments before we leave this subject?

[38:50] And next week start the pilgrimage. The pastor, I'd say it was clear from the Sunday this morning he read what James had to say later on when he told us how to consider pure joy to suffer trials many times.

And he goes on to also tell us that when the first appears to that trial will receive the problem that God has promised him. More on that later. Amen. Well, next week we'll start our study of Pilgrim's Progress.

If you'd like to read the first several pages in preparation for that, I think I'll probably be using the modern English translation, probably be using them both, but get a hold of a copy of Pilgrim's Progress and we'll open up with that next week.

We're dismissed.