

INTRODUCTION

‘This hill, though high, I covet to ascend;
The difficulty will not me offend.
For I perceive the way to life lies here.
Come, pluck up, heart; let’s neither faint nor fear.
Better, though difficult, the right way to go,
Than wrong, though easy, where the end is woe.’
(Christian, Ascending the Hill of Difficulty in
The Pilgrim’s Progress)

I first encountered the Tinker and his writings when I was around ten years old. As a gift, I had received a children’s edition of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. I dimly recall there being pictures of Christian making his journey, but the gist of the story was about all I learned at the time. I vaguely knew it was about a man who makes a journey to the eternal city that God has promised to all His faithful. But, in my young mind, I had confused John Bunyan with Paul Bunyan and mingled different stories together. I thought that Christian’s story in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* was somehow connected to the American legend of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox.

My next encounter with John Bunyan would not come until a few years later, when I was in middle school. When I was thirteen, my homeschooling curriculum sent me an abridged

edition of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It was missing various portions of the text and had been updated and modernized for a twenty-first century context. But I liked what I read and wanted more. I sought a full, unabridged edition of the text and, since then, have worked my way through it on more than one occasion.

Within *Pilgrim's Progress*, I found a beautiful and poetic articulation of the Christian faith in allegorical form. Later, I read *Holy War*, and found another allegorical tale that rivals the works of a Dante or Milton. I have often thought that Bunyan does not get enough credit in this regard: He was a fabulous writer, and his allegorical tales and poems deserve the attention of a modern readership.

Literary scholars take the writings of men like Milton and Dante seriously. Many Christians today are familiar with J.R.R. Tolkien's *Middle-Earth*, and a great deal more with the allegorical stories of C.S. Lewis' *Narnia*. Sitting on my shelf, in 2021, I have at least four biographies on Tolkien and a few more on Lewis. I have books devoted entirely to exploring their fictional worlds and universes. While I do appreciate these authors and their writings, none of them have personally touched me in the way that Bunyan's writings have. However, it often appears to me, in passing, that Bunyan is not in these literary conversations. But, oh, how he deserves to be!

There was a time when Bunyan was a household name. In some ways, maybe he still is. *The Pilgrim's Progress* has sold over 250 million copies and has the potential to reach an even wider audience, being now available in the public domain. But I have noticed that it seems more likely these days that Christians have a greater knowledge of *The Lord of the Rings* rather than *Pilgrim's Progress*. Comparatively fewer still are familiar with *Holy War*, or the plethora of other writings from Bunyan.

This ought not to be so. Bunyan's own writings, though far different from a Tolkien or a Lewis, can stand shoulder to shoulder with either of those men's best works and, doctrinally speaking, are far greater. I typically preface my enjoyment of Lewis' or Tolkien's works with the statement, 'I enjoy their writings, their worlds, and their characters, but I generally

would not seek to learn theology from them.’ This preface is unnecessary with Bunyan. Especially within Reformed circles, Bunyan ought to be remembered, in my earnest opinion, as a writer par-excellence who matched Tolkien’s and Lewis’ technical abilities, and at times possessed a far greater understanding of Scripture and theology than either of them did.

Part of the reason, then, for my desire to write this biography of the Tinker is because I long to see him mentioned within the same conversations as Dante, Milton, Lewis, and Tolkien. When it comes to allegorical works, there is, in my humble estimation, none that God equipped more greatly than the Tinker. Among preachers, Bunyan ought to be remembered alongside the Chrysostoms and Spurgeons of the Lord’s Church. Among the influential, Bunyan deserves recognition alongside the Augustines, Luthers, and Calvins. Among pious Christians, Bunyan ought to be named alongside the humblest and grace filled.

The point is this: Bunyan is so much *more* than a writer of allegory, so much *more* than a preacher, and so much *more* than a gifted pastor. He is not less than any of these things, but, when viewed as a whole, Bunyan rises as an example, imperfect though he was, of what a Christian ought to be.

Bunyan: Tinker and Thinker

After I rediscovered Bunyan in my teens, I sought out some of his other writings. One of the beauties of the twenty-first century is the ease of availability when it comes to the writings of the Puritans and Bunyan is no exception to this. Around age fourteen, I downloaded as many of his works as I could to my e-reader. I remember how shocked I was to find that, compared to many others, he was practically unlearned and uneducated—reading his writings would never reveal it! The occupation of humble Tinker must have confused many in his own day when they learned that he was also an incredible *Thinker*. That is to say, he was a gifted theologian and interpreter of Scripture.

In the preface to Bunyan’s *Works*, George Offer writes that:

Of all the objections that have been made to Bunyan's works, the most absurd is, that he was poor and unlettered. To despise the poor is an impious reflection upon Divine wisdom. It is true that great grace can keep the scholar humble, and bless his learning to the welfare of the church, but for the welfare of the world we want many Bunyans, and can manage with few Preistleys or Porsons.

Bunyan, although unlearned as to the arts and sciences of this world, was deeply versed in the mysteries of godliness, and the glories of the world to come. He was a most truthful, ingenious, persuasive, and invaluable writer upon the essentials of human happiness. To refuse his Scriptural instruction, because he was not versed in chemistry, mathematics, Greek, or Latin, would be to proclaim ourselves void of understanding.¹

Bunyan may have been uneducated in these finer points and, academically speaking, would fall woefully short of a John Owen. But when it came to practical and experiential mastery of the Scriptures and their theology, Bunyan was as gifted as they come. If it is true that a man cannot be said to have mastered material unless he is able to explain it in a simple way so that even young children can understand, then it also must be granted that Bunyan was an uneducated genius who understood Scripture with a certain amount of depth and clarity seldomly found in even the supreme theologians of our own day.

As I searched for and found Bunyan's other writings, I was continually impressed by the beauty and practicality of what he wrote and even the way he wrote. I had never really encountered any sort of Christian writing that combined beauty and practicality. Usually, if the prose was beautiful, the practicality of what I read was lacking. Purely practical writings, on the other hand, were seldom beautiful. Rarely did either sort move me to praise.

Not so with Bunyan. His writings, even now, almost always move me to doxological praise of our Triune God. He can, in the same paragraph, teach a great truth about God, offer a great exhortation and challenge to pursue holiness and piety

1. George Offer, *Preface to The Works of John Bunyan* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 1:vii.

in earnest, and then encourage and comfort the stumbling Christian. This is a rare talent even in modern writers and is an evidence of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the Tinker.

Furthermore, as already stated above, his writing and preaching is a fantastic example of the Puritan spirit of Reformed, experiential theology. Bunyan, perhaps more than any other theologian, teaches that theology and doctrine are not to be reserved for stuffy academic halls or the rote machinations of armchair theologians. Theology and doctrine are practical for the Christian life and are meant to be understood and lived out. The greater the Christian's understanding of truth, the stronger their own passion for Jesus will be, and the greater their worship and doxology will become. Bunyan evidenced this in his own life, as I hope to show throughout this book, and then taught this truth to others.

The Tinker and the Twenty-First Century

If you've read this far, I truly hope that you will stick with this work. But you may be wondering: What can I learn in my modern context from a Puritan who lived nearly four centuries ago?

As it turns out, there is a great deal to learn from Bunyan. He can teach men how to be mature men, fathers how to be loving fathers, husbands how to be faithful husbands, pastors how to be tender pastors, suffering saints how to suffer well, and Christians how to be steadfast Christians. Yet, perhaps one of his greatest lessons to modern Christians is how one may live faithfully to Christ in a world that is antagonistic to God.

Bunyan was a Nonconformist and knew what it was to be persecuted for his faith. He knew the harsh reality of what it means to pick up the cross and follow Jesus. He had counted the cost and esteemed the riches of following Christ as greater than anything the world could ever offer, but personally experienced the reality of deep suffering for Christ. Like Moses before him, Bunyan lived his life, 'Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater

riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible' (Heb. 11:25-27). Perhaps it would be better to say that in esteeming the reproach of Christ as greater riches than the treasures of this world, Bunyan forsook both his former life of sin and the ease of conforming to rules and laws that he saw as profoundly unbiblical.

It seems likely that many who will read this will have experienced suffering of one kind or another for the sake of Christ. It is also possible that some reading will have experienced a threat to stop preaching the gospel, and even witnessed governments outlawing the public assembling together of Christians on the Lord's Day. Others still may also read this work because they are seeking help for following Christ in the midst of extreme turmoil and persecution.

Knowing what I know of Bunyan through his writings, I think he would wholeheartedly endorse the statement, 'Obey God, Defy Tyrants.' In his own obedience to God, he was willing to be imprisoned and even refused release when given the ultimatum of freedom if he would just stop preaching. Such a spirit is peculiar to those Christians who are truly passionate about Christ, His glory, and His Kingdom. To receive the favor of men for rejection of Christ was not an option for the Tinker. His dignity was found within his total commitment to his sovereign Lord. The shame and reproach of the world he would gladly bear if it meant the glory of God.

It is often the case that *Pilgrim's Progress* sheds light on and provides insight into Bunyan's own state of mind. At one point, Christian meets another character named Faith. During this part of the story, Christian and Faith are conversing with one another and Christian asks Faith about Shame; the shame one may feel for following Christ when ridiculed by the world, the shame one may endure when harshly persecuted by sinners; the shame one may experience when all have abandoned them because of their faith in Christ. Faith responds:

Therefore, thought I, what God says is best—is best, though all the men in the world are against it. Seeing, then, that God prefers His religion; seeing God prefers a tender conscience;

seeing they that make themselves fools for the kingdom of heaven are wisest, and that the poor man that loveth Christ is richer than the greatest man in the world that hates Him; Shame, depart! thou art an enemy to my salvation. Shall I listen to thee against my sovereign Lord? how, then, shall I look Him in the face at His coming? Should I now be ashamed of His way and servants how can I expect the blessing?²

Bunyan's own life is a testament to the strengthening power of faith against shame. Threatened, persecuted, arrested, and imprisoned, Bunyan never turned away his gaze from Christ. His writing, preaching, pastoring, and Christian resistance to tyranny were not manufactured fronts. This was who Bunyan was, both in public and behind closed doors. He was a man deeply committed to Christ, His Church, and the doctrines of Scripture. He can teach us today what it means to follow Christ and how a Christian can do so in the face of severe suffering.

A Hebrews 11 Sort of Christian

While certainly far from perfect, Bunyan is an example of what it means to be a Christian. His is a life that, when studied, reveals the necessity of God's grace to grow and mature in Christ. Just as Christian progresses in his journey in Bunyan's most famous story, Bunyan himself was a pilgrim progressing through the Christian life. I think Bunyan would be most pleased if, when examining his life, we would continually be redirected to Jesus Christ, who is the author and perfecter of our own faith.

In fact, I often imagine what the Hebrews 11 'Hall of Faith' might look like in the twenty-first century. I like to imagine it would include many of the Church Fathers like Athanasius and Augustine, Reformers like Luther and Calvin, and Puritans like Owen, Edwards, and, of course, Bunyan. These men stood boldly and courageously for Christ and His Kingdom, suffered well, and did all for the glory of God.

2. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress, Works*, 3:120.

Hebrews 11:33-40 is clearly about those Old Testament saints who are mentioned in previous verses, but I think that they speak well of men like Bunyan as well:

Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions. Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.

It is my earnest prayer that this work will help to bring Bunyan back into the households of modern Christians, edify God's children through the life of this great saint of the past, and, above all else, glorify God.

Soli Deo Gloria

Jacob Tanner, 2022