

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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John Bunyan (1628-1688)

John Bunyan is most famous for his once extremely well-known and widely-read allegory of a Christian's quest for redemption, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1675). For years it was like a companion to the Bible (which it frequently quoted). Later it was sometimes joked about (Mark Twain has Huckleberry Finn describe it as "a book about a man who left his family it didn't say why") but it had left its mark on the English language. Its names and places like "Mr. Worldly-Wise Man," "the slough of despond," and "Vanity Fair" are used by millions of people who no longer know their source. His *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) is not so famous, but it nevertheless has been called "one of the most enthralling autobiographies in the language." Bunyan is the archetypal sinful poor boy who finds religion and then struggles, with the help of God and the Bible, to become a true Christian.

He was born in a village in Bedfordshire, the son of a chapman, or peddler-trader, who also mended pots and pans. As he says in *Grace Abounding*, "My descent was of a low and inconsiderable generation, my father's house being of that rank that is meanest and most despised of all the families of the land." He had a simple grammar school education and became a tinker, like his father. He swore a lot, hung out with rough young men, and had no concern for religion. His mother died. His father remarried. And in 1644, age 16, he joined the Parliamentary army, aligning himself with the Puritans and enemies of the king and Anglican church. Leaving the army after the Civil War, he returned to his trade and his profanity and impiety. In 1650 he married a young woman whose father had left her an inheritance of only two books, the *Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* and the *Practice of Piety*. They led him to religion and to try to become a Christian. But it was difficult, as his autobiography explains at length. Nevertheless, in 1655, thanks in part to the teaching of his pastor, John Gifford, he began preaching.

As an unlicensed preacher, he became very popular, but also controversial for his unorthodox views and style and supposedly immoral life. He was arrested, but still managed to stay out of jail, until 1660, when the restoration of the monarchy, under Charles II, and the re-establishment of the Anglican Church made it illegal to conduct divine services other than Anglican and for non-Episcopal ministers to preach.

Thus began Bunyan's nearly twelve years in jail. He supported himself and his large family by weaving shoelaces and preaching to other prisoners. He also wrote *Grace Abounding* and other books and entertained himself and others by making and playing a violin he made out of tin and a flute made from a chair leg. He was briefly released in 1666, but soon arrested for again preaching. His release in 1672 followed King Charles's issue of the Declaration of Religious Indulgence. He again became a popular preacher, but in 1675 was imprisoned again for six months with the revocation of the Declaration of Religious Indulgence. After that his immense popularity as a preacher and writer saved him from further arrest.

These facts and dates are important to know, but *Grace Abounding* goes far deeper into Bunyan's life. It is spiritual autobiography in the fullest sense. It is concerned less with his physical state than the state of his soul, less with his arrests than with the arresting thoughts and fears that seem to hold him suspended between heaven and hell, with only God's grace to depend on. Thus there is drama and conflict as Bunyan converses with the "Tempter" and battles with Satan. It can also be called intellectual autobiography, as when Bunyan describes his evolving interpretations of many passages from the Bible and importance to him of reading Martin Luther's *Commentary on Galatians*.

One of the many interesting differences between this autobiography and Margery Kemp's is the reliance that Bunyan places Biblical verses, compared to her reliance on her visitations and instructions from Jesus, Mary, and God. She seems barely to have known the Bible. It was just being translated by Wycliffe, and copies were only in manuscript, print not yet having been invented. But Bunyan knew the English Bible intimately. Living after the introduction of print and the publication of translations, he was also at the end of the Renaissance and in the continuing controversies of the Reformation in England. For Margery Kemp authority was personal, from her mystical encounters with Jesus and Mary; for Bunyan authority is in the words of Jesus, the Old Testament prophets, and the disciples, as preserved in

the Bible. Such authority was to him and his readers more objective. It could be read by all. It did not need, like hers, to be proven by miracles, which themselves had to be proven and attested to and ultimately written down by a third party. But the objectification of Bunyan's authorities left all the more room for his expansive descriptions of his doubts, fears, guilt, anxieties, exultations, and other mental conditions.

The fact that Bunyan is writing in the first person singular intensifies these descriptions of his inner life. He can quote a verse from the Bible or a sentence from another book, such as "Man knows the beginning of sin, but who can tell where it will end?" and then tell how, "For whole days at a time it caused my mind to shake and totter under the sense of the dreadful judgment of God that I was sure was upon me. And I felt such heat at my stomach, by reason of my terror, that it felt as though my breast bone would split apart;..."

Passages such as these are typical. Bunyan makes emotion physically real as few other writers do. In *Grace Abounding* he turns the Christian experience of conversion into a vivid drama of one man confronting his Devils and his God. It is indeed "enthraling autobiography."

Questions for Further Study:

1. Bunyan wrote *Grace Abounding* in prison. Many autobiographers also wrote in prison or about prison. How do you think his time and experience there affected what he wrote?
2. Do you think Bunyan exaggerates his sins and his sense of guilt? If so, why? What are the rhetorical and moral advantages of such exaggeration?
3. Read *Pilgrim's Progress* and compare the Bunyan of *Grace Abounding* with the Pilgrim.