

Life of John Bunyan

In 1628 John Bunyan was born to Thomas Bunyan and Margaret Bentley in [[Harrowden, Bedfordshire|Harrowden]] (one mile southeast of [[Bedford, Bedfordshire|Bedford]]), in the Parish of [[Elstow]], England. He was baptised John Bunyan, on 30 November 1628 as recorded in the Elstow parish register.

The surname 'Bunyan' has been found spelled over thirty-four different ways: Binyan, Buniun, Bonyon, Buignon, being the most common – Bunyan being the most recent.

1623 Thomas had married his first wife in 1623 and, like his father before him, would marry two more times within months of being widowed.

1627 Thomas married Margaret Bentley on 23 May. Like her husband, Margaret was from Elstow; and like him, she was born in 1603.

In 1628 Margaret's sister, Rose Bentley, married Thomas' half-brother Edward Bunyan. They were working-class people, with Thomas earning a living as a [[chapman]] but he may also have been a brazier - one who makes and/or mends kettles and pots. Bunyan wrote of his modest origins, "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".

John was probably educated at his father's house, possibly with other poor country boys, but in his writings he refers to his days in school. So it is possible that he also spent some time at the school in [[Houghton Conquest]]. Either way, his later writings demonstrate a high degree of literacy. Like his father, he chose a job 'on the road', by adopting the trade of Tinker. This was a fairly skilled but lowly occupation - the tinker's trade was a respected one - few people could afford to purchase new pots when old ones became holed, so pots would need to be oft-mended - but the semi-nomadic nature of their life lead to Tinkers being regarded (by some) in the same poor light as gypsies.

In June 1644 Bunyan lost his mother and then in July his sister Margaret. His father married (for the third time) to Anne Pinney (or Purney) and a step-brother, Charles was born.

It may have been the arrival of his stepmother which, in following his 16th birthday lead to John leaving the family home and enlisting in the parliamentary army.

1644–1647 John served at [[Newport Pagnell]] garrison () as the civil war was nearing the end of the first stage. He was saved from death by a fellow soldier who volunteered to go into battle in his place and was killed while walking sentry duty<ref>Grace Abounding</ref>.

After the civil war was won by [[Roundhead|The Parliamentarians]], Bunyan returned to his former trade.

In his autobiographical book, "[[Grace Abounding]]", Bunyan writes that he led an abandoned life in his youth, and was morally reprehensible as a result. However, there appears to be no outward evidence that he was worse than his neighbours. Examples of sins to which he confesses in "Grace Abounding" are profanity, dancing and bell-ringing. The increasing awareness of his (in his view) un-Biblical life led him to contemplate acts of impiety and profanity; in particular, he was harassed by a curiosity in regard to the "[[unpardonable sin]]", and a prepossession that he had already committed it. He was known as an adept linguist as far as profanity was concerned, even the most proficient swearers were known to remark that Bunyan was "the ungodliest fellow for swearing they ever heard". While playing a game, [[Tip-cat]], on the village square, Bunyan claimed to have heard a voice which asked: "Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to heaven or have thy sins and go to hell?" He believed it was the voice of God chastising his indulgent ways, as [[Puritan]]s held sacred the Sabbath day and permitted no sport. His spirituality was born from this experience and he struggled both with his sense of guilt and self-doubt and his belief in the Bible's promise of Christian damnation and salvation.

In 1649, when he was about 21, he moved into a cottage on Elstow High Street and in 1650 married a young woman, whose name is unknown. (As their first, blind, daughter, born in 1650 was called Mary, it is possible that this was also John's wife's name.) Her only dowry appears to have been two books, [[Arthur Dent (Puritan)|Arthur Dent]]'s "Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven" and [[Lewis Bayly]]'s "Practice of Piety", by which John was influenced towards a religious life. She was an orphan, her father leaving only those two books as her inheritance and their life was modest to say the least. Bunyan writes that they were "as poor as poor might be", not even "a dish or spoon between them".

As he struggled with his newfound Christian faith, Bunyan became increasingly despondent and fell into mental turmoil. During this time of conflict, Bunyan began a four year long discussion and spiritual journey with a few poor women of Bedford, who belonged to a nonconformist sect which worshipped in St. John's Church. He increasingly identified himself with St. Paul, who had characterised himself as "the chief of sinners", and believed he was one of the spiritual elite, chosen by God.

As a result of these experiences, he was baptised and received into St John's church and he began to follow the teachings of its pastor, John Gifford. A second daughter, Elizabeth was born and then in 1654 his son John.

In 1655 Bunyan moved his family to St Cuthberts Street Bedford. That same year John Gifford died and John started preaching.

In 1656, his son Thomas was born. Bunyan's 1st book "Some gospel truths" was published and John Burton appointed minister at St Johns.

In 1657, he became a [[deacon]] of [[St. John's Church, Bedford]] and his second book "Vindication" was published.

In 1658, John's 2nd son, Thomas 5th, was born and his wife died. His 3rd book "A few sighs from hell" was published and John was indicted for preaching at Eaton.

1659, John re-married - to Elizabeth (surname unknown) and his 4th book "The doctrine of the law and grace unfolded" was published.

1660 The Minister of St. Johns, John Burton, died. St. Johns Church buildings were taken from congregation by Restoration of King Charles. On 12th November John was arrested at Lower Samsell for preaching and he was imprisoned at Bedford County Goal (on the corner of High/Sliver Street)

1661 John was tried by magistrates in Chapel of Herne (on corner of the now Horne Lane, Bedford) for not attending the parish church and for holding unlawful meetings. He was jailed for 3 months but, after just one month, he was visited by the magistrates clerk, who sought to persuade John to give a promise to cease preaching at 'private gatherings'. He told John that what the magistrates were concerned about was not the fact that John was not a licensed preacher but that he was preaching at conventicles. These were private gatherings around England which (or so the authorities suspected) were being used as a cover for meetings where plots were being made to overthrow the King. The clerk told John that, if he would promise not to preach at these private gatherings, he would be set free. John argued that he had a higher obligation than to the king, that he had an obligation to God, to preach His word wherever and whenever he could. John argued that, if he promised not to preach in private places, this would prevent him - for example - from preaching to his neighbour in the privacy of his home and thus John would be failing in his obligation to God. And so John was left in goal to consider his situation. And there he remained, mostly, for the next 12 years!. In that same year John published "Profitable meditations".

- 1661 The Gaoler let John out of goal for while, to go preaching
- 1662 John published "Praying in the Spirit"
- 1663 John published "Christian behaviour" on 17th April
- 1664 John published "Serious meditations" & "Ebal & Gerizm",
- 1665 John published "The Holy City", "Resurrection of the dead" & "Prison meditations"
- 1666 John published "Grace abounding" and has a few weeks release from goal
- 1667 John's second daughter Sarah was born
- 1668-72 Jailors sometimes let John have his liberty. He publishes "Confession of faith" & "A defense of the doctrine of justification by faith"
- 1672 Under King Charles' Declaration of Indulgence John is released from prison and 9th May was licensed as a teacher. He was officially pardoned by Charles in September. His 3rd son, Joseph, was born. John was elected church pastor and a barn at end of Mill Street, Bedford was purchased and this becomes his new chapel.
- 1675-6 John's preaching licences are recalled. John was imprisoned for six months (winter 75-spring 76) in Bedford County Goal (on corner of High St/Silver St) and he wrote the first part of "Pilgrim's progress"
- 1676 Thomas Bunyan (John's father) died
- 1677 John's daughter, Elizabeth, married Gilbert Ashley on 16th April
- 1678 1st and second editions of "Pilgrim's Progress" were published
- 1679 3rd edition of "Pilgrim's Progress" was published
- 1680 John's 1st daughter, Mary, died. His step-mother, Anne, also died. "Life & death of Mr Badman" was published
- 1681 "The Holy War" was published
- 1684 Second part of "Pilgrim's Progress" published
- 1687 John's 1st grandson, Stephen, is born (to son Thomas)
- 1688 On August 31st, during a visit to a friend, John Strudwick, in London - John Bunyan contracted a chill (pneumonia) and died. He was buried in Strudwick's family tomb in Bunhill Fields, City Road, London.
- 1691 John's second wife, Elizabeth, died
- 1692 John's 1st granddaughter, Elizabeth, born (to son Thomas)
- 1694 John's great-granddaughter, Hannah, born (through son, John)
- 1695 John's step-brother, Thomas 5th, died
- 1696 John's 2nd grandson, Stephen born (to son Thomas, through 2nd wife, Katherine)
- 1707 The Mill Street barn chapel was pulled down and the Bunyan Meeting and hall were built

- 1801 Bedford County goal pulled down

- 1968 Bunyan's cottage Elstow, damaged by passing traffic, was demolished

John Bunyan was open to all who had biblical faith in Jesus Christ, and was opposed to those who caused divisions over the form and time of baptism. The first recorded assertion that Bunyan was a Baptist appears to come much later, as repeated by a Dr Armitage in 1887 from an anonymous source supposedly around 1690, after John's death. . Bunyan again claimed to have heard voices and to have had visions similar to [[St. Theresa]]'s and [[William Blake]]'s religious experiences.

Bunyan fiercely disagreed with the teachings of the [[Religious Society of Friends|Quakers]] and took part in written debates during the years 1656–1657 with some of its leaders. First, Bunyan published "Some Gospel Truths Opened"

in which he attacked Quaker beliefs. The Quaker [[Edward Burrough]] responded with "The True Faith of the Gospel of Peace". Bunyan countered Burrough's pamphlet with "A Vindication of Some Gospel Truths Opened", which Burrough answered with "Truth (the Strongest of All) Witnessed Forth". Later, the Quaker leader [[George Fox]] entered the verbal fray by publishing a refutation of Bunyan's essay in his "The Great Mystery of the Great Whore Unfolded". The Bedford Baptists were moderate in their views; they were considered more liberal on issues of church governance than the Presbyterians but more conservative on church tenets than supposed antinomian sects, such as the Quakers. He attacked the Quakers for their reliance on their own "inner light" rather than the literal word of the Bible. The Puritans were diligent biographers of their own lives in relation to their faith and they sought clues to religious meaning in their lives and literature. Bunyan writes to his readers in the conclusion of the first part of "[[The Pilgrim's Progress]]":

:Now reader, I have told my dream to thee,
:See if thou canst interpret it to me,
:Or to thyself or neighbour: but take heed
:Of misinterpreting; for that instead
:Of doing good, will but thyself abuse:
:By misinterpreting evil ensues.