

John Bunyan

CONTENTS

<i>Rights Not Guarded</i>	1
<i>Offended Repeatedly</i>	2
<i>Pathetic Incidents</i>	3
<i>Kindness Cannot Compensate for Injustice</i>	4
<i>His Case Before Sir Matthew Hale</i>	5
<i>Did He Court Persecution?</i>	5
<i>Motive of His Release</i>	6

By A.T. Jones

From *American Sentinel*, May 21, 1896

JOHAN BUNYAN was born near Bedford, Eng., in 1628, the very year in which Charles I yielded to the Petition of Right which declared the “illegality of forced loans, of martial law in time of peace, and of the billeting of soldiers on private houses.”¹

But it was to a deep religious experience, to a sense of duty to his fellowmen and above all, to his God, and to a practical knowledge of the liberty wherewith Christ makes his people free, that Bunyan owed the inspiration of his life rather than to the demand of the times for redress of political grievances.

In 1653, at the age of twenty-five years, Bunyan was converted and became a member of the Baptist Church at Bedford. Two years later he began to preach the gospel. To the latter fact was due his long imprisonment in Bedford jail.

Rights Not Guarded

Charles II was placed upon the throne by the English people without giving proper guarantees that their liberties would be respected. True, he had given his word of honor to protect the religious liberty of his subjects, but political reasons and his lust for power soon led him to disregard this sa-

¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. V., p. 405.

cred pledge. Says Dr. Armitage:

Hardly was he seated on the throne, when Venner's petty insurrection furnish a pretext for vengeance upon all his opponents, and especially those of the dissenting sects, no matter how much they proved their loyalty.

Amongst the first victims of his tyranny we find Bunyan, charged with "devilishly" and "perniciously" abstaining from going to church, "as a common upholder of meetings contrary to the laws of the king," and with "teaching men to worship contrary to law."²

Offended Repeatedly

Bunyan was first sentenced to Bedford jail for three months, at the end of which time he was to be banished if he refused to conform to the established worship. He was, however, kept in prison for six years; when released he immediately resumed preaching. He was again imprisoned for another six years. Upon being released the second time, Bunyan began again to preach and was arrested the third time, but was detained only a few months.

His judges were harsh with him, but his real oppressors for these twelve weary years were the king and Parliament, who made it a crime for anyone to preach but a priest of the Church of England.³

It was while in Bedford jail that Bunyan wrote his *Holy War* and *Pilgrim's Progress*.

From all he loves on earth though sundered far,
And kept by bolted door, and iron bar;
His genius rises on devotion's wings,
And, soaring, with unwonted grandeur sings.⁴

Of *Pilgrim's Progress*, Dr. Armitage says:

While we are obliged to reprehend the base injustice

² Thomas Armitage, D.D., LL. D., author of *History of the Baptists*.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Rev. R. Furman, D.D.

which kept this grand preacher pining in prison, however leniently treated, the fact is forced upon us, that the wrath of man was made to praise God; for had not his zealous servant been compelled to this solitude we should not have had that masterpiece of literature.

Another, bringing “incense kindled at the muse’s flame,” sings:

Lo! Sundered from the converse of mankind,
For twelve long years in Bedford jail confined,
A lowly child of genius and of grace
A trophy rears, which time shall ne’er deface.⁵

Pathetic Incidents

There were some most pathetic incidents in connection with the long imprisonment of Bunyan. Says Dr. Armitage:

His wife was gentle to a proverb. When he was in prison she went to London to pray for his release, and induced a peer of the realm to present a petition to the House of Lords in his behalf; so the judges were directed to look into the matter afresh. She therefore appeared before Sir Matthew Hale, Chester, and Twisden.

With all the simplicity of a woman’s love she told her artless story. She said her husband was “a peaceable person,” and wished to support his family. They had four helpless children, one of them blind, and while he was in prison they must live on charity.

Hale treated her kindly, Twisden harshly, and demanded whether he would leave off preaching if released. In child-like honesty she replied that he dare not leave off preaching so long as he could speak.

Her request was denied, and she left the court-room in tears, not so much she said, “because they were so hard-hearted against me and my husband, but to think what a sad account such poor creatures would have to give at the coming of the Lord Jesus.”

Jesus wept because Jerusalem stoned the prophets, and

⁵ Rev. R. Furman, D.D.

Bunyan's wife was much like him. But, this giant in genius was just as tender-hearted as his wife. Where do we find such pathos in any passage as this, which he wrote in prison:

“The parting with my wife and poor children hath often been to me in this place as the pulling off my flesh from my bones; and that not only because I am too fond of those great mercies, but also because I should have often brought to my mind the hardships, miseries and wants my poor family was like to meet with should I be taken from them; especially my poor blind child, who lay nearer my heart than all I had besides. Poor child, thought I, what sorrow art thou like to have for thy portion in this world! Thou must be beaten, suffer hunger, cold, nakedness, and a thousand calamities, though I cannot now endure the wind should blow on thee. But yet, thought I, I must venture all with God, though it goeth to the quick to leave you. I was as a man who was pulling down his house upon the head of his wife and children. Yet, thought I, I must do it, I must do it.”

Kindness Cannot Compensate for Injustice

Bunyan's jailer was very kind to him. His blind daughter was permitted to visit him at will, and latterly even Bunyan himself was permitted to visit his church unattended and even to preach. But these facts do not abate from the iniquity of his imprisonment. No amount of favor at the hands of an individual can compensate for injustice on the part of the law and the courts.

The chapter of wrong and oppression for Christ's sake is a long one, and yet the world has only partially learned the lesson. We talk of religious liberty, and yet practice only toleration.

The imprisonment of J. W. Lewis, in Tiptonville, Tenn., and of Wm. Simpson, in Chatham, Ont., for ordinary quiet Sunday labor that interfered with nobody and required nobody else to work, is just as indefensible from the standpoint of religious liberty and of equal rights as was Bunyan's imprisonment for holding meetings and preaching contrary to “the statutes

made and provided.”

His Case Before Sir Matthew Hale

Bunyan’s imprisonment was according to “due process of law.” As already stated, his case came before Sir Matthew Hale, that eminent justice whose name is revered by all. This only proves the inspired declaration that “great men are not always wise.”

Bunyan was not an enemy of civil order, nor did he needlessly defy the authorities. He believed that God had called him to preach the gospel, and he felt that he had no right to forbear. Says the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

His persecutors tried to extort from him a promise that he would abstain from preaching; but he was convinced that he was divinely set apart and commissioned to be a teacher of righteousness, and he was fully determined to obey God rather than men.

He was brought before several tribunals, laughed at, caressed, reviled, menaced, but in vain. He was facetiously told that he was quite right in thinking that he ought not to hide his gift; but that his real gift was skill in repairing old kettles. He was compared to Alexander the coppersmith.

He was told that if he would give up preaching he should be instantly liberated. He was warned that if he persisted in disobeying the law he would be liable to banishment; and that if he were found in England after a certain time his neck would be stretched. His answer was, “If you let me out today, I will preach again tomorrow.”

Year after year he lay patiently in a dungeon, compared with which the worst prison now to be found in the island is a palace.⁶

Did He Court Persecution?

Some might reason that Bunyan might as well have given the required pledge not to preach as he was not able to preach

⁶ Vol. IV., p. 528.

while in prison, and that therefore he courted persecution. This is a shortsighted view of the matter.

The living preacher's voice is hushed, but not
The voice of noble and unfettered thought;
In that lone dungeon Bunyan breathes the air
Of a celestial clime, for God is there.⁷

Bunyan preached more loudly and effectively in prison than he could possibly have done any place else; and his patience and endurance under persecution did much to secure a greater degree of religious toleration in England.

Count me o'er earth's chosen heroes,—they were souls that
stood alone,
While the men they agonized for hurled the contumelious
stone,
Stood serene, and down the future saw the golden beam in-
cline
To the side of perfect justice, mastered by their faith divine,
By one man's plain truth to manhood and to God's supreme
design.
By the light of burning heretics Christ's bleeding feet I track,
Toiling up new Calvaries ever with the cross that turns not
back,
And these mounts of anguish number how each generation
learned
One new word of that grand Credo which in prophet-hearts
hath burned
Since the first man stood God conquered with his face to
heaven upturned.
For Humanity sweeps onward: where to-day the martyr
stands,
On the morrow crouches Judas with the silver in his hands;
Far in front the cross stands ready and the crackling fagots
burn,
While the hooting mob of yesterday in silent awe return
To glean up the scattered ashes into History's golden urn.⁸

⁷ Rev. R. Furman, D.D.

⁸ Lowell's *Present Crisis*.

Motive of His Release

Even Bunyan's release was not the result of the desire on the part of the authorities to do justice.

He owed his complete liberation to one of the worst acts of one of the worst governments that England has ever seen. In 1671 the Cabal was in power. Charles II. had concluded the treaty by which he bound himself to set up the Roman Catholic religion in England. The first step which he took towards that end was to annul, by an unconstitutional exercise of his prerogative, all the penal statutes against the Roman Catholics; and in order to disguise his real design, he annulled at the same time the penal statutes against Protestant Nonconformists. Bunyan was consequently set at large.

In the first warmth of his gratitude he published a tract, in which he compared Charles to that humane and generous Persian king, who, though not himself blessed with the light of the true religion, favored the chosen people, and permitted them, after years of captivity, to rebuild their beloved temple. To candid men, who consider how much Bunyan had suffered, and how little he could guess the secret designs of the court, the unsuspecting thankfulness with which he accepted the precious boon of freedom will not appear to require any apology.⁹

Nevertheless the sacrifice which he made was not lost. More than two centuries have passed since Bunyan's suffering for the truth ceased. But the result of his heroic life survives today, and in this year of grace 1896, men are nerved and encouraged to endure as he endured for the love of the same truth and the same Saviour for which he counted it a privilege to suffer.

⁹ *Encyclopedia Britannica.*