

Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners - Introduction

~Other Speakers A-F: John Bunyan:

GRACE ABOUNDING TO THE CHIEF OF SINNERS:

A BRIEF AND FAITHFUL RELATION OF THE EXCEEDING MERCY OF GOD IN CHRIST TO HIS POOR SERVANT, JOHN BUNYAN;

WHEREIN IS PARTICULARLY SHOWED THE MANNER OF HIS CONVERSION, HIS SIGHT AND TROUBLE FOR SIN, HIS DREADFUL TEMPTATIONS, ALSO HOW HE DESPAIRED OF GOD'S MERCY, AND HOW THE LORD AT LENGTH THROUGH CHRIST DID DELIVER HIM FROM ALL THE GUILT AND TERROR THAT LAY UPON HIM.

Whereunto is added a brief relation of his call to the work of the ministry, of his temptations therein, as also what he hath met with in prison. All which was written by his own hand there, and now published for the support of the weak and tempted people of God.

"Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul."—Psalm 66:16.

London: Printed by George Larkin, 1666.

This title page was afterwards altered, and instead of what follows the first line, he inserted,

Or a brief and faithful relation of the exceeding mercy of God in Christ to his poor servant, John Bunyan; namely, in his taking of him out of the dunghill, and converting of him to the faith of his blessed Son, Jesus Christ. Here is also particularly showed, what sight of, and what trouble he had for sin; and also what various temptations he hath met with, and how God hath carried him through them.

Corrected and much enlarged now by the Author, for the benefit of the tempted and dejected Christian.

ADVERTISEMENT BY THE EDITOR.

The great utility of remarkable accounts of the ways of God in bringing his sheep into the fold, must be admitted by all. The Bible abounds with these manifestations of Divine grace from the gentle voice that called Samuel, even unto the thunder which penetrated the soul of one, who followed the church with continued malignity, calling unto him, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?"—a voice so terrible, and accompanied by such a flood of light, as to strike the persecutor to the earth, and for a season to deprive him of sight.

The 'Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners' is doubly interesting, as it unfolds to us not only the return of a notorious prodigal, but a wondrous system of education, by which a chosen man was fitted for a wondrous work; heavenly and spiritual learning, which could not have been obtained in all the schools and universities in the world. It enabled a poor, vile, unlettered rebel—a blasphemous travelling tinker, to become a most eminent preacher; one whose native powers, sanctified by harrowing but hallowing feelings, attracted the deep attention of the most learned and pious of his contemporaries, while it carried conviction to the most impious and profane. Even beyond all this, his spiritual acquirements fitted him, without scholastic learning, to become the most popular, the most attractive, the most useful of English authors. His works increase remarkably in popularity. As time rolls on, they are still read with deeper and deeper interest, while his bodily presence and labours mingle in the records of the events of bygone ages.

Bunyan's account of his singular trials and temptations may have excited alarm in the minds of some young Christians lest they should be in an unconverted state, because they have not been called to pass through a similar mode of training. Pray recollect, my dear young Christian, that all are not called to such important public labours as Bunyan, or Whitfield, or Wesley. All the members of the Christian family are trained to fit them for their respective positions in the church of Christ. It is a pleasant and profitable exercise to look back to the day of our espousals, and trace the operations of Divine grace in digging us from the hole of the pit; but the important question with us all should be, not so much HOW we became enlightened, but NOW do we love Christ? Now do we regret our want of greater conformity to his image? If we can honestly answer these questions in the affirmative, we are believers, and can claim our part in that precious promise, "Whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." Spiritual life is ours, and eternal life is essentially connected with it, and must be our portion, without an inquiry into the means by which we were called, whether by the thunders and lighting of Sinai, as Paul was smitten, or by the "still small voice" (Acts 9:3,4; 1 Kings 19:12; Job 4:16,17).

The value of such a narrative to a terror-stricken prodigal is vividly shown by Bunyan, in his 'Jerusalem Sinner

Saved,' in one of those colloquial pieces of composition in which he eminently shone. 'Satan is loath to part with a great sinner. "What, my true servant," quoth he, "my old servant, wilt thou forsake me now? Having so often sold thyself to me to work wickedness, wilt thou forsake me now? Thou horrible wretch, dost not know, that thou hast sinned thyself beyond the reach of grace, and dost think to find mercy now? Art not thou a murderer, a thief, a harlot, a witch, a sinner of the greatest size, and dost thou look for mercy now? Dost thou think that Christ will foul his fingers with thee? It is enough to make angels blush, saith Satan, to see so vile a one knock at heaven-gates for mercy, and wilt thou be so abominably bold to do it?" Thus Satan dealt with me, says the great sinner, when at first I came to Jesus Christ. And what did you reply? Saith the tempted. Why, I granted the whole charge to be true, says the other. And what, did you despair, or how? No, saith he, I said, I am Magdalene, I am Zacheus, I am the thief, I am the harlot, I am the publican, I am the prodigal, and one of Christ's murderers; yea, worse than any of these; and yet God was so far off from rejecting of me, as I found afterwards, that there was music and dancing in his house for me, and for joy that I was come home unto him. O blessed be God for grace, says the other, for then I hope there is favour for me.'

The 'Grace Abounding' is a part of Bunyan's prison meditations, and strongly reminds us of the conversation between Christian and Hopeful on the enchanted ground.

'Christian. Now then, to prevent drowsiness in this place, let us fall into good discourse.

'Hopeful. With all my heart.

'Christian. Where shall we begin?

'Hopeful. Where God began with us.'

To prevent drowsiness, to beguile the time, he looks back to his past experience, and the prison became his Patmos—the gate of heaven—a Bethel, in which his time was occupied in writing for the benefit of his fellow-Christians. He looks back upon all the wondrous way through which the Lord had led him from the City of Destruction to Mount Zion. While writing his own spiritual pilgrimage, his great work broke upon his imagination.

'And thus it was: I writing of the way,
And race of saints, in this our gospel day,
Fell suddenly into an allegory
About their journey, and the way to glory.'

'As you read the "Grace Abounding," you are ready to say at every step, here is the future author of the "Pilgrim's Progress." It is as if you stood beside some great sculptor, and watched every movement of his chisel, having seen his design; so that at every blow some new trait of beauty in the future statue comes clearly into view.' 1

A great difference of opinion has been expressed by learned men as to whether Bunyan's account of himself is to be understood literally, as it respects his bad conduct before his conversion, or whether he views himself through a glass, by which his evil habits are magnified. No one can doubt his perfect honesty. He plainly narrates his bad, as well as his redeeming qualities; nor does his narrative appear to be exaggerated. He was the son of a travelling tinker, probably a gipsy, 'the meanest and most despised rank in the land'; when, alarmed at his sins, recollection that the Israelites were once the chosen people of God, he asked his father, whether he was of that race; as if he thought that his family were of some peculiar people, and it was easy for such a lad to blend the Egyptians with the Israelitish race. When he was defamed, his slanderers called him a witch, or fortune teller, a Jesuit, a highwayman, or the like. Brought up to his father's trade, with his evil habits unchecked, he became a very depraved lad; and when he states his sad character, it is with a solemn pledge that his account is strictly true. Probably, with a view to the full gratification of his sinful propensities, he entered the army, and served among the profligate soldiers of Charles I at the siege of Leicester. 2

During this time, he was ill at ease; he felt convinced of sin, or righteousness, and of judgment, without a hope of mercy. Hence his misery and internal conflicts, perhaps the most remarkable of any upon record. His own Giant Despair seized him with an iron grasp. He felt himself surrounded by invisible beings, and in the immediate presence of a holy God. By day, he was bewildered with tormenting visions, and by night alarming dreams presented themselves to him upon his bed. The fictitious appeared to his terrified imagination realities. His excited spirit became familiar with shapeless forms and fearful powers. The sorrows of death, and the pains of hell, got hold upon him. His internal conflict was truly horrible, as one who thought himself under the power

of demons; they whispered in his ears—pulled his clothes; he madly fought, striking at imaginary shades with his hands, and stamping with his feet at the destroyer. Thoughts of the unpardonable sin beset him, his powerful bodily frame became convulsed with agony, as if his breast bone would split, and he burst asunder like Judas. He possessed a most prolific mind, affording constant nourishment to this excited state of his feelings. He thought that he should be bereft of his wits; than a voice rushed in at the window like the noise of wind, very pleasant, and produced a great calm in his soul. His intervals of ease, however, were short; the recollection of his sins, and a fear that he had sold his Saviour, haunted his affrighted spirit. His soul became so tormented, as to suggest to his ideas the suffering of a malefactor broken upon the wheel. The climax of these terrors is narrated at paragraph No. 187. 'Thus was I always sinking, whatever I did think or do. So one day I walked to a neighbouring town, and sat down upon a settle in the street, and fell into a very deep pause about the most fearful state my sin had brought me to; and, after long musing, I lifted up my head, but methought I saw as if the sun that shineth in the heavens did grudge to give light; and as if the very stones in the street, and tiles upon the houses, did bend themselves against me; methought that they all combined together, to banish me out of the world; I was abhorred of them, and unfit to dwell among them, or be a partaker of their benefits, because I had sinned against the Saviour.' In this deep abyss of misery, THAT love which has heights and depths passing knowledge, laid under him the everlasting arms, and raised him from the horrible pit in miry clay, when no human powers could have reached his case. Dr. Cheever eloquently remarks, that 'it was through this valley of the shadow of death, overhung by darkness, peopled with devils, resounding with blasphemy and lamentations; and passing amidst quagmires and pitfalls, close by the very mouth of hell, that Bunyan journeyed to that bright and fruitful land of Beulah, in which he sojourned during the latter days of his pilgrimage.' The only trace which his cruel sufferings and temptations seen to have left behind them, was an affectionate compassion for those who were still in the state in which he had once been.

Young Christians, you must not imagine that all these terrors are absolute prerequisites to faith in the Saviour. God, as a sovereign, calls his children to himself by various ways. Bunyan's was a very extraordinary case, partly from his early habits—his excitable mind, at a period so calculated to fan a spark of such feelings into a flame. His extraordinary inventive faculties, softened down and hallowed by this fearful experience, became fitted for most extensive usefulness.

To eulogize this narrative, would be like 'gilding refined gold'; but I cannot help remarking, among a multitude of deeply interesting passages, his observations upon that honest open avowal of Christian principles, which brought down severe persecution upon him. They excite our tenderest sympathy; his being dragged from his home and wife and children, he says, 'hath oft been to me, as the pulling my flesh from my bones; my poor blind child, what sorrow art thou like to have for thy portion in this world! thou must be beaten, must beg, suffer hunger, cold, nakedness, and a thousand calamities, though I cannot now endure the wind should blow upon thee. O, I saw I was as a man who was pulling down his house upon the head of his wife and children; yet, recollecting myself, thought I, I must venture you all with God.' How awful must be the state of the wretched persecutor, who occasions such sufferings to the children of the most high God!

In this edition, the greatest care has been taken to preserve the exact words of the author, as he first published them; where he altered or added to the text in subsequent editions, it is marked with an inverted comma, or inserted in the notes. Obsolete words and customs are explained; the numbering of his sections is continued, in addition to which, it is divided into chapters for family reading, upon the plan of the late Rev. J. Ivimey; double inverted commas denote quotations of Scripture.

The reader is strongly pressed to keep in his recollection the peculiar use made of the word should, by the author in this narrative. It is from the Saxon scealan, to be obliged. Thus, in the Saxon gospels (Matt 27:15), "the governor should release unto the people a prisoner"; in our version it is, "was wont to release," meaning that custom compelled him so to do. In Bunyan's phraseology, the word should is used in the same sense, that is, to show that, under peculiar circumstances, his feelings or position involuntarily produced a certain result. Thus, in No. 6, Troubled with the thoughts of judgment and condemnation I should tremble; and in No. 15, The father of his wife having left her two books, in these I should sometimes read; probably the only books he then had. It is remarkable, that although the Saxon language had not been spoken in Bedfordshire for many centuries, still many valuable words remained in use.

The order in which this thrilling narrative of Bunyan's religious feelings and experience is now for the first time published, is, I. Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners—his call to the ministry, and his imprisonment for refusing to attend the Church of England service. II. His Relation of the Circumstances attending his incarceration in Bedford Jail. III. The continuation of his Life to his decease, written by one of his friends, and always printed with Grace Abounding. IV. His Dying Thoughts. V. His Prison Meditations—verses which were probably sold on a broadside or sheet of paper by his children, to procure necessities for his family.

The length of the notes may need some apology; the only one the editor can make is his veneration for John Bunyan, and his earnest desire to render this inestimable book more deeply interesting, by explaining manners, customs, and words not now in use; the note on No. 232, occupied the time of one whole day.

The errors, omissions, and additions, which existed to a most extraordinary extent through the book, have been corrected, and the text restored to its primitive beauty; among many hundred of these errors, one may suffice as a specimen; it is in Bunyan's preface, 'God did not play in convincing of me, the devil did not play in tempting of me,' this is altered in many editions to 'God did not play in tempting of me.'

Most earnestly do I hope that this republication, now for the first time, for nearly two hundred years, given in its native excellence and purity, may be attended with the Divine blessing, to the comfort of many despairing Jerusalem sinners; to the building up of the church of Christ on earth; to the extension of pure, heart-felt, genuine Christianity; and to the confusion of the persecutors. They intended, by shutting the pious pilgrim up in a dungeon, to prevent his voice from being heard to the comfort of his poor neighbours, and by which violence, his persecutors have caused his voice to burst the prison doors and walls, and to be heard over the whole world. His 'Pilgrim's Progress,' which was written in prison, has been, and now is, a guide to Christian pilgrims of all nations, kindreds, tribes, and people, teaching them not to rest content in any national religion, but personally to search the Scriptures, with earnest supplications to the God of mercy and truth, that they may be guided to Christ, as the Alpha and Omega of their salvation.

GEORGE OFFOR.