CONTINUING WEAK ALONG THE NARROW WAY: THE ROLE OF SUFFERING IN JOHN BUNYAN'S PASTORAL THEOLOGY OF SANCTIFICATION AND PERSEVERANCE

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by

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CONTINUING WEAK ALONG THE NARROW WAY: THE ROLE OF SUFFERING IN JOHN BUNYAN'S PASTORAL THEOLOGY OF SANCTIFICATION AND PERSEVERANCE

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This work is dedicated to my wife, Rosalie, who has learned to serve in the midst of much unexpected suffering in our family's life; to my children, whom I love "more than the whole wide world," and who, I pray, will know that God's fatherly care is always present and that behind a frowning providence, there is always a smiling face; to my parents, who have always loved me well enough to trust that God is unimaginably kind; to Downtown Mission Church, whom I have such deep affection for as the people given to my care and who have cared so well for me and my family; and, to the God who gives and takes away, but never takes more than what is necessary to give himself to me even more. Soli Deo Gloria.

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PREFACE

Throughout my life, I have struggled to accept the reality of suffering, hardship, and loss as a normal part of life. Having grown up in a very stable and loving home with parents who made our well-being their first priority, the complexities of adulthood have always seemed foreign to me. As I have matured in Christ and the difficulties of life in a fallen world have visited my doorstep, I have been forced to understand the love of God not in the absence of pain, but in purposeful pain. My first brush with significant suffering came at the beginning of my initial seminary degree and came to a climax with an epilepsy diagnosis six years later. Throughout those six years, God graciously worked in my heart, as well as my wife's, to understand that the presence of pain was no indicator of divine displeasure. Rather, I have found it to be one of the most meaningful tools in the divine workshop for fitting me both first as a Christian and also as a pastor. I would not be the pastor I am, however flawed that may be, without the acute and chronic difficulties of the earliest years of my marriage and ministry.

To my wife, Rosalie, I know that being married to me has been an unusual experience. Knowing that we were entering into life together as a pastor's family has its own wrinkles, but beginning our life together with the very hard road of suffering was never my intent. It was God's intent, however, to sanctify us and fit us for a fruitful life. Thank you for enduring with me. I will never fully appreciate what this has meant for you, knowing that many friends and family members have lived "normal lives." My consolation, which I trust is yours as well, is that the eternally significant work done in and through our family is worth it.

To my children, you have also endured life in a pastor's family. This has not been easy for you at times and daddy wishes that some of the things you've watched

other kids be able to do over the years would have been available to you. But, just as to your mother, I would commend the significance of God's work as of being far more valuable than vacations and phones. I love you so very, very much. You have been nothing but a blessing to me throughout your lives and there are no letters that mean more to me than to be a d-a-d to you all.

To Downtown Mission Church, I could never imagine a better church to serve. You have grown with me and watched me make mistakes, always giving me the benefit of the doubt and supporting me and our family at every turn. You are my friends and my family and I look forward to an eternity with you.

To the elders in Stevens Point, thank you for your generosity in every way and for twisting my arm to receive it at times. It may not ever seem like a big deal to you, but your friendship has meant the world to me. Stan, Jonny, Kyle, and (soon to be) Kevin—you have all invested yourselves and your families into the life of our church. You are elders that would bless any local church and God has placed us all together. Thank you.

To Dr. Matthew Haste, thank you for graciously and thoughtfully overseeing this effort and guiding the process from an initial thought to a completed work.

Finally, to my parents. The longer I serve in ministry, the more I recognize that I was privileged in a way far more significant than money could buy in having you as my mom and dad. I will always be thankful and proud to be your son. A special thank you to my mom, Barb Tillman, who graciously read through this document and did the work of proofreading and editing. While the final decisions fell on me as the author to accept or modify any suggestions you made, I wouldn't know how to write anything without your example and instruction for the past four decades.

Christopher Tillman

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The popular revival of Puritan studies over the past thirty years is a notable byproduct of Reformed theology's renaissance in twenty-first century evangelicalism.[1] Many believers, who may have grown up with a less than-robust view of God's character and the nature of the Christian life, now have encountered a revolutionary God-centered perspective. This perspective on the world and the Christian experience permeated the writings of these Puritan authors, whose commitment to marrying deep exposition with heart-forming application continues to impact believers who are longing for something, someone to give their relationship with God a meaningful perspective.

Few Puritan authors are as well-known as John Bunyan (1628–1688), whose *Pilgrim's Progress* has painted a picture of Christian experience that has been treasured for more than 350 years. Nevertheless, John Bunyan himself, the pastor-theologian, writing for the good of the church, is less known than this most beloved work. Indeed, Bunyan's three-volume *Complete Works* contains greater than fifteen hundred pages of content aimed at helping the pilgrim church follow the suffering Savior.[2] When one studies Bunyan's life alongside of his much broader literary contributions, one theme emerges repeatedly: the Christian's necessary suffering while walking the narrow pilgrim

[1] Influential literary treatments of the Puritans include J. I. Packer's *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), Joel Beeke's *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), and the work of Banner of Truth Trust in keeping many Puritan works available that may have otherwise been generally inaccessible in print. While other authors like Perry Miller and his work on American Puritan thought have produced generally academic volumes, the above mentioned works have been disseminated and popularized through the Reformed resurgence movement documented by Collin Hansen in *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

[2] John Bunyan, *The Works of John Bunyan*, ed. George Offor (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1991).

path. The lessons on this theme that can be learned from are of tremendous value to believers who ask the inevitable question: Why does God order difficult paths for his dearly beloved people?

While widely acknowledged as a skilled writer, Bunyan sought to use his talent to fulfill the task to which he'd been called—pastoring the people of God. Literature authored by John Bunyan circulated throughout England, yet it was his commitment to the relatively small Baptist church known as the Bedford Meeting that garnered his affection. Indeed, it was John Bunyan's love for the people of God that inspired his prodigious work. He wrote as a pastor—a man whose responsibility was to feed and nurture Christ's church and to walk with Christians as they navigated life in a fallen world. The task that bound Bunyan is the same one to which all pastors are called: to shepherd the flock of God so that flock and shepherd alike will arrive safely in glory.

If Bunyan has helped generations of believers, he has done so because his own providentially-ordered experience, interpreted by Scripture, forced him to understand it personally and communicate it broadly as a preacher. This thesis contends that Bunyan's personal and significant relationship with suffering strengthened his walk with God and, as a result, has subsequently strengthened that divine relationship for multitudes. With that view in mind, this work endeavors to examine this theme from a distinctly pastoral perspective. What was the role of suffering in Bunyan's life? How did his biblically-informed view of suffering translate into his role as a shepherd of souls who likewise suffer? What significance can be discerned for those given to the same pastoral task today? Volumes within the Bunyan corpus, such as his own autobiographical work, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, together with *Bunyan's Prison Meditations*, and works such as *The Strait Gate*, all readily supply answers to these questions. This thesis will begin by presenting the ways in which relational, physical, and spiritual suffering marked the course of Bunyan's life. It will then trace the ways in which his own personal experience dovetailed with a biblical vision for Christian suffering, subsequently

producing a robust pastoral theology of sanctification and perseverance deeply needed by believers who seek to follow Jesus in a fallen world.

Familiarity with the Literature

Three categories of literature are integral to this study of Bunyan's relationship to suffering and its pastoral-theological implications: foundational/historical material, source material, and secondary material. Together these three categories begin a conversation that will offer insight into the relationship between Bunyan's personal suffering and his ministry. The explanation of these categories and some representative works follow.

Foundational/Historical Material

Although some facts of Bunyan's life are known to his readers, in general that knowledge is limited to how his life and immediate circumstances related to his authorship of *Pilgrim's Progress*. Of greater importance, however, is a view of Bunyan as a man of his times in order to place his experience within the broader cultural context of seventeenth century England and the Puritan movement as a whole. The second chapter of this thesis, which primarily addresses biographical content, will necessarily include an assessment of Bunyan as an historical figure and address his *sitz im leiben* before directly treating the more theological and pastoral matters in the chapters that follow. Accordingly, the following works show great promise in beginning that conversation.

Though its focus is not specifically on John Bunyan, David Hall's, *The Puritans: A Transatlantic History*, is a well-received survey of the Puritan movement as it gained its footing in Great Britain before migrating to the American colonies in the eighteenth century.[3] Bunyan never set foot in America, yet the distinctly Puritan

[3] David Hall, *The Puritans: A Transatlantic History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

convictions that fueled his theology and personal conduct would, Hall argues, set the early religious and ethical tones necessary to not only found a movement, but lay the foundation for a new nation. Hall's work helps bridge the 'bare facts' of history with a sympathetic, yet critical, perspective, situating the Puritans and their thought in a broader seventeenth century religious-historical context.

Closely related to Hall's work is the *Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, which contains several essays (particularly in Parts I and III) written to provide a contemporary analysis of English Puritan history and thought.[4] The same series also includes a volume devoted specifically to Bunyan himself, with relevant analysis of Bunyan in historical context (Part I) and as a writer to be understood and analyzed (Part II).[5] While broad, both Cambridge volumes serve the purpose of opening the discussion of relevant historical and contextual information by a multiplicity of scholars, especially those acknowledged for their Puritan and Bunyan scholarship. Further, *The Oxford Handbook of John Bunyan* provides an extensive collection of academic essays on Bunyan, which will dovetail with the Cambridge works as serious contemporary, academic assessments of the man.[6]

Rounding out the survey of foundational and historical material is the work of Richard Greaves. Greaves has produced significant scholarly writings in the field of Bunyan studies for several decades. This thesis will explore two prominent works that concentrate on Bunyan as a seventeenth century figure resisting by strength of personal

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[4] John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[5] Anne Dunan-Page, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to John Bunyan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[6] Michael Davies and W. R. Owens, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of John Bunyan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

conviction and the consequential calls to conform to the state religion.[7]

Other biographical material, less academic in nature, will be consulted in order to fill in the gaps of Bunyan's life and times. Finally, Bunyan's own spiritual autobiography will be consulted, both in terms of general personal reflections and his autobiographical work, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*.[8]

Beyond direct interaction with Bunyan's content, considerable time will be spent on examining the literature produced by his contemporaries in seventeenth century Britain pertaining to the same subject matter addressed in the chapters on theologies of sanctification and perseverance. As unique as his contributions were in their pastoral tone and broad distribution, Bunyan's fellow Puritan ministers and scholars also produced material that is important in understanding the theological context of his writing and the ecclesiological milieu in which he operated.

Source Material

If the foundational material provides a biographical picture of Bunyan and the theology of his Puritan contemporaries, the source material will provide an opportunity to interact directly with Bunyan as he preaches and writes on the matters of suffering, sanctification, and perseverance. While several of his writings address the matter of suffering, the following will be particularly helpful in drawing out his pastoral theology of suffering:

1. *Prison Meditations*: Bunyan's poetic and personal reflections on the pattern of suffering experienced by believers, even while personally imprisoned for religious

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[7] Richard Greaves, *John Bunyan and English Nonconformity* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1992); and, Richard Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory: John Bunyan and English Dissent* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

[8] John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners,* vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006).

dissent;[9]

2. *The Strait Gate*: Bunyan's focus on the strenuous nature of the Christian life and how sufferings believers experience are testing grounds for the genuineness and longevity of true followers of Christ;[10]
3. *Seasonable Counsel*: Bunyan's direct addresses to the hearts of Christian people enduring suffering and hardship;[11]
4. *The Heavenly Footman*: Bunyan's use of the allegory of a footman running a race to urge believers to persevere.[12]

By engaging directly with these works, we will see how Bunyan personally viewed and subsequently taught on the issue of suffering, while interjecting his own personal experience and basing his pastoral counsel on the biblical pattern established for all believers were to heed.

Synthetic Material

The third content category deals with the implications of Bunyan's life experiences on his theology, both as it was received in the seventeenth century and how it may be received in the twenty-first century. In *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*, J. I. Packer communicates theological priorities and principles that Bunyan and other Puritans cherished as they sought to live the pilgrim lifestyle.[13] The fourth chapter of Packer's work focuses on the practical writings of the Puritans and their stated and hopeful intent of Puritan authors that their preaching/writing would be

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[9] John Bunyan, *Bunyan's Prison Meditations*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006).

[10] John Bunyan, *The Strait Gate*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006).

[11] John Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006).

[12] John Bunyan, *The Heavenly Footman*, vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006).

[13] J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990).

received in earnest. In *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics*, editors Kelly Kapic and Randall Gleason help the reader the consequences of embracing the type of worldview espoused by Bunyan as he both suffered and sought to help other sufferers.[14] In *Worldly Saints*, Leland Ryken provides a sympathetic treatment of the Puritans, among whom Bunyan is clearly included, and how seeing the Puritans in context furthers an appreciation for their contributions to church history.[15] All three of these works help the reader understand exactly *who* these characters were and why a study of individuals like Bunyan holds benefit for twenty-first century readers.

This thesis also will engage similar works in order to advance the contention that drawing on Bunyan's pastoral and theological insights holds great potential for those involved in the care of souls.

Void in the Literature

In a review of the academic and literary biographical treatments of Bunyan, there is a surprisingly limited amount of work on John Bunyan as a pastor. Although *The Pilgrim's Progress* has been thoroughly and repeatedly referenced, analyzed, and reviewed, relatively little appears to be written about his ministerial life and writings. To be sure, John Bunyan as an author and historical figure find sustained treatment, though John Bunyan as pastor—the role he relished and from which standpoint his literary contributions were penned—warrants consideration that is presently lacking. As such, a work such as this meets a demand for research that more fully develops thought on a significant aspect of Bunyan's identity.

To be sure, numerous works that exegete the Puritans as a whole—analyzing their origins, discussing the impact they had on their (and the present) political and

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[14] Kelly Kapic and Randall Gleason, eds., *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004).

[15] Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986).

cultural landscapes, even systematizing their theology. These are works designed to cover at one thousand feet what actually merits closeup, detailed attention to individual theologians and their unique biographical and theological flavors. John Bunyan's literary contribution reflected a personal spirituality and pastoral sensibility that demands to be understood from the ground up. Neglecting this undertaking would not be as significant if he were first and only an author of spiritual fiction, but Bunyan wrote, as a Christian and as a pastor, to other Christians who were in need of pastoral care. His contributions demands to be understood in this light.

Bunyan's writing clearly displays a concern for believers to walk a persevering pathway and understand the nature of that path. Neglecting meaningful research into his biographical and theological background robs Christians today from benefiting from the messages John Bunyan shared with believers in the seventeenth century. It is vital that Bunyan must be studied and read as a Christian who suffered greatly throughout the whole of his earthly pilgrimage, which factored significantly into his pastoral care and treatment of souls. It is this void in the current conversation that provides an opportunity to now address what should never be neglected in any serious study of Bunyan and his significant contributions to the history of Christian theology and praxis.

Thesis Statement

While *The Pilgrim's Progress* remains one of the most significant works in the English language (and the literary history of the church), sustained analyses of Bunyan's theological and pastoral contributions tend to pale in comparison to the treatments afforded his allegorical works. A cursory review of his life, times, and work suggests that the theme of Christian suffering was an essential part of John Bunyan's personal and pastoral theology, no less than the theme as represented in his allegories. As such, a focused treatment of the topic in relationship to his work is not only warranted, but holds a great promise of benefit for those who would learn at the feet of one of the most

beloved Puritans. This thesis will begin by presenting the ways in which relational, physical, and spiritual suffering marked the course of Bunyan's life as a man committed to following Christ in the context of a politically and spiritually turbulent seventeenth century England. From this biographic and historic review, the work will trace the ways in which his own personal experience dovetailed with a biblical vision for Christian suffering and subsequently produced a robust pastoral theology of sanctification and perseverance deeply needed by believers who seek to follow Jesus in a fallen world. The work will then conclude with points of relevant application for pastors called to encourage each Christian to walk whatever difficulties marked out for them on the road that leads to the true Celestial City.

Outline of Chapters

The chapters here outlined will seek to substantiate the thesis by surveying Bunyan's personal experience of suffering, both individually and as a nonconforming preacher in seventeenth century England. They will draw out the notable place that Christian suffering occupied in shaping his understanding of sanctification and perseverance and will demonstrate the theological and pastoral relevance for those called to help other believers navigate the difficulties and complexities of life in a fallen world.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The first chapter will demonstrate an awareness of literature relevant to Bunyan and his ministry context, establish a case for the thesis' place in the academic literature, and set forth the general argument that the work holds significant relevance for contemporary pastoral theology.

Chapter 2: Bunyan, the Suffering Pilgrim

The second chapter will survey autobiographical and biographical work on Bunyan's life, drawing particular attention to his inner spiritual and family experience,

while placing it in the context of seventeenth century England. A broad overview of his ministry context, specifically as a nonconforming pastor during a time of significant political and religious turmoil, will highlight that Bunyan ministered in an inescapably difficult setting that necessitated a robust and mature theology of Christian suffering.

Chapter 3: The Role of Suffering in Sanctification

The third chapter will establish the prominent role that Bunyan ascribed to suffering as a means of divinely initiated discipline, intended to produce deep and genuine growth in personal godliness. It will begin by reviewing the Puritan ethos of Bunyan's day and the movement's prioritization of sanctification as a mark of genuine Christian life. It will then proceed to examine Bunyan's writing on suffering and sanctification and identify his counsel to those readers who sought to understand why God ordains suffering in relationship to godliness and how it serves as a necessary means of developing Christian character reflective of Christ in a fallen and hostile world.

Chapter 4: The Role of Suffering in Perseverance

The fourth chapter will move to analyze the Puritan perspective on the saints' perseverance and move to reviewing Bunyan's perception of suffering as a divinely ordained safeguard that evidences the genuineness of faith. Bunyan's assertion that suffering strengthens Christians for the path of perseverance will also be considered.

Chapter 5: Counsel to Suffering Pilgrims Today

The final chapter opens up Bunyan's experimental and biblical theology of suffering to derive contemporary application, particularly among and for pastors who may experience similar personal circumstances and be called to counsel suffering saints. Relevant biblical texts will be dovetailed with Bunyan's pastoral counsel to provide

Scripturally-driven, historically-proven content that may provide helpful categories for pastors who minister to hurting and wearied saints.

CHAPTER 2

BUNYAN, THE SUFFERING PILGRIM

The study of John Bunyan as an historical figure alongside his work exists in a particularly contentious academic environment. While no one would argue that Bunyan's life or work did not exert a profound influence on the spiritual and cultural landscape of the English-speaking world for many decades, the autobiographical information he supplied in his work—namely, as represented in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*—is looked at with a peculiar type of suspicion by some scholars. While any autobiographical work is liable to containing exaggerations and outright falsehoods, the sort of material flowing from Bunyan's pen in *Grace Abounding* faces scrutiny because it is written from the perspective of one who had learned "to live upon God that is invisible,"[1] which is either accepted as fact or dismissed as a sort of spiritual flourish to explain naturalistic circumstances. If Bunyan is only considered as a literary figure, this critical aspect of a genuine spirituality, grounded in truth, may be lost. In considering Bunyan's own autobiographical material in *Grace Abounding*, Michael Mullett reflects what seems to be a fairly common interpretation of the author's life as conveyed to subsequent generations:

> As an autobiographical essay, Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* must be a key source in our exploration of Bunyan's life, recounting as it does the formation of the minister, preacher, and, above all, author that we know. However, it will not function as a complete or rounded or even entirely factual account of a life lived, but as 'A Brief

[1] John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, vol. 1 of *The Works of John Bunyan*, ed. George Offor (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1991), 48.

> Relation of the exceeding mercy of God in Christ, to his poor Servant *John Bunyan*'.[2]

Views similar to Mullett's seem to populate other contemporary assessments of Bunyan as a relater of his own story. Michael Davies advances a perspective like Mullett's in this way: "Like many seventeenth-century spiritual autobiographies, Grace Abounding also follows the ups-and-downs of what has been termed a 'morphology of conversion': a Calvinist *ordo salutis* or order of salvation . . . ."[3] The skepticism regarding Bunyan's veracity seems to be tied to the idea that Bunyan, writing as a seventeenth century Calvinist, faced a degree of pressure to fit the details of his life into a boilerplate work that would dovetail with the orthodoxy of his contemporaries. When Davies concludes that, "So detailed and precise is Bunyan's spiritual autobiography as a doctrinal acting-out of the Calvinist ordo salutis that, not surprisingly, it can be compared directly to Bunyan's other, more famous guidebooks for coming believers,"[4] students of Bunyan's life appear to be encouraged to view his autobiographical material as pressed into a doctrinal mold. Whether this is a result of a matured author, who is better able to articulate the course of his life through a theological lens, or a pressured author, who wants his own story to make sense in his theological circles, is a matter of debate among scholars. While there may not be a consensus on the accuracy of the events related, there is, at the least, skepticism expressed by some interpreters of his work.

While Bunyan did not hold an infallible pen and was certainly capable of embellishment, I would suggest that the atmosphere surrounding much of contemporary Bunyan scholarship approaches its subject from a fundamentally unhelpful perspective in two ways. First, while he was a prolific author, Bunyan never intended to be read as an

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[2] Michael A. Mullett, "Bunyan's Life, Bunyan's Lives," in *The Oxford Handbook of John Bunyan*, ed. Michael Davies and W. R. Owens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 24.

[3] Michael Davies, "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners," in *The Cambridge Companion to Bunyan*, ed. Anne Dunan-Page (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 73.

[4] Davies, "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners," 74.

author, at least in the way that one might approach Melville or Twain. Whatever one may think of the beliefs that drove Bunyan, they were not, at the very least, held for the sake of literary cohesiveness or adherence to a school of thought. It is true that Bunyan stands in the stream of Calvinistic pastor-theologians, who wrote with a strong commitment to a collectively submitted-to orthodoxy. Yet Bunyan's writing does not exhibit the signs of aping that a devotee of another author. In fact, Bunyan suffered regularly as one who would not conform, save to a standard of perceived biblical fidelity. As an author, Bunyan wrote as one convicted that what he said was a genuine representation of the facts surrounding his life and experience. Mullett, Davies, and their colleagues may take some issue with Bunyan's material, but it is far from fair to suggest that he pressed the details of his life into a consciously/sub-consciously established mold. It is true that Bunyan wrote in a time, at a place, to a people, and that *Grace Abounding* reflects contemporary conversion narratives. Even granting a formulaic expression to his work, the value of Bunyan to the church's life and piety for more than 350 years has been found in his biblical fidelity, which the Puritan was, above all things, concerned to pursue. His theological presentation of the facts of his conversion was invested with this concern, even if it reflected—and was not creatively massaged by—a literary pattern.

Next, and exceedingly relevant to the specific purposes of this work, is the distinct possibility that what Bunyan wrote was, in fact, true. No doubt, Bunyan's spirituality informed his interpretation of his autobiographical material, but to discount that interpretation as inherently distortive of the facts is itself an interpretation as arbitrary as the spiritualization Bunyan is accused of. The formatting of *Grace Abounding* does indeed follow a pattern of distinctly Christian autobiography, evident in

works by Martin Luther[5] and Saint Augustine.[6] What must be determined when considering these other works is whether or not the authors have presented suitable evidence that, for whatever self-assessing commentary may be found, the relating of personal history does not run afoul of corroborative facts.

This discussion of the veracity of Bunyan's autobiographical material, most famously found in *Grace Abounding*, but also present in smaller doses throughout his works, precedes the biographical and historical contextualization of this chapter because I take the position that what he says is to be taken as true, unless demonstrably false. First-hand accounts are typically to be preferred, in any case, using due diligence to establish the facts of history and then letting the subject speak for himself. As will become evident later in this work, it is the pattern of suffering and humiliation, personal and circumstantial, experienced by Bunyan throughout his life that places him in a position to fulfill a thematic norm attached to the lives of men called in pastoral service of the church. *Grace Abounding* and its complementary material is of deep significance in establishing Bunyan in this capacity because he self-consciously understands himself to have been dealt with by God in a way consistent with his calling as a pastor and Christian walking a hard and narrow path promised by Jesus to all who would follow him. In his *Dying Sayings*, the heart of the man as one being dealt with by God's deliberate design is plainly evident: "If thou canst bear the rod of affliction which God shall lay upon thee, remember this lesson—thou art beaten that thou mayest be better."[7] Again, Bunyan interprets even his hardest moments as designed by God as instruction for the "school of the cross": "The school of the cross is the school of light; it discovers the world's vanity,

[5] For a condensed version of Luther's own account of his conversion, see Martin Luther, "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings," *Luther's Works*, ed. Lewis W. Spitz, trans. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 34:336-37.

[6] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961). In this extended and poetic format, Augustine recounts his journey from pagan son of a Christian woman to a converted follower of Christ.

[7] Bunyan, *Mr. John Bunyan's Dying Sayings*, vol. 1 of *The Works of John Bunyan*, 65.

baseness, and wickedness, and lets us see more of God's mind. Out of dark affliction comes a spiritual light."[8] The agenda in Bunyan's work, including his autobiographical reflections, is simply an establishment of a theologically understood life. I find this understanding to be compelling and, as such, will generally take Bunyan's self-report at face value, with any verifiable inaccuracies noted. With this perspective being stated, we can now proceed with examining Bunyan in his personal historical context.

Bunyan's Early Life and Conversion

John Bunyan was born in 1628 to Thomas and Margaret Bunyan of Elstow, Bedfordshire. Concerning the family's socioeconomic position, Bunyan states: "For my descent then, it was, as is well known by many, of a low and inconsiderable generation; my father's house being of that rank that is meanest and most despised of all the families in the land."[9] In a somewhat defiant manner, Mullett asserts that "Bunyan's parents were *not* of the 'meanest, and most despised of all the families in the Land.' That distinction would have to be applied to the recipients of relief, the paupers, vagabonds and criminals who abounded in the desperate 1620s, the decade of Bunyan's birth."[10] As one writing to those who knew his family's reputation, it would be odd for Bunyan to state that it "is well known by many," while overselling the station his family occupied. Even noted Bunyan scholar Richard Greaves in introducing the man states without reservation that his parents "were relatively poor residents of Elstow."[11]

Mullett is partially correct when suggesting that the "recipients of relief, the paupers, vagabonds and criminals" occupied the lowest position in seventeenth century

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[8] Bunyan, *Mr. John Bunyan's Dying Sayings*, 65.

[9] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 6.

[10] Michael A. Mullett, *John Bunyan in Context* (Keele, UK: Keele University Press, 1996), 10.

[11] Richard Greaves, *John Bunyan*, Courtenay Studies in Reformation Theology 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 15.

English society, if viewed from a purely statistical perspective. That being said, to characterize Bunyan's words as a misrepresentation for the sake of framing his story is unfair. The use of hyperbole is not grounds for disqualification when evaluating the truthfulness of a personal account, particularly when it has to do with deeply personal matters and social impressions. If someone should introduce an individual as 'a good man' to an acquaintance, it would be entirely unexpected for the acquaintance to question whether or not he was actually the *best* man. In Bunyan's case, his family's station was not the *absolute* worst but, insofar as people regarded non-criminals and paupers within the social structure, the Bunyans placed near the bottom of the ladder.

Thomas Bunyan was a tinker, a trade into which John was apprenticed as a boy and one that would later provide a source of income in his adult years. Growing up, Bunyan found himself peculiarly enamored with outward and direct rebellion against God: "Being filled with all unrighteousness: the which did also so strongly work and put forth itself, both in my heart and life, and that from a child, that I had but few equals, especially considering my years, which were tender, being few, both for cursing, swearing, lying, and blaspheming the holy name of God."[12] As he entered adolescence, his distaste for religious matters seemed to crystalize: "In these days, the thoughts of religion were very grievous to me; I could neither endure it myself, nor that any other should; so that, when I have seen some read in those books that concerned Christian piety, it would be as it were a prison to me."[13] In 1644, at age fifteen, he lost both his mother and sister in the space of one month, Thomas remarrying only one month after the death of Margaret.

At age sixteen, Bunyan was drafted into the Parliamentary Army, where the young tinker-soldier had multiple frightening and sobering experiences. While still in the

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[12] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 6.

[13] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 7.

throes of irreligiosity, he suffered several near-death encounters, including near-drowning and a venomous snake bite. Most dramatically, he found himself spared seemingly at the expense of another man's life:

> This also have I taken notice of with thanksgiving; when I was a soldier, I, with others, were drawn out to go to such a place to besiege it; but when I was just ready to go, one of the company desired to go in my room; to which, when I had consented, he took my place; and coming to the siege, as he stood sentinel, he was shot into the head with a musket ball, and died. Here, as I said, were judgments and mercy, but neither of them did awaken my soul to righteousness; wherefore I sinned still, and grew more and more rebellious against God, and careless of mine own salvation.[14]

Within two years of leaving military service in 1647, Bunyan married a woman whose name is unreported and unknown, but whose spiritual impact made the first of several dents on the hardened heart of the now veteran Bunyan. His new wife's deceased father was apparently a man of considerable Christian character. The inheritance he left his daughter was not in material wealth, but, rather, Christ-centered literature that would grace the Bunyan home:

> Presently after this, I changed my condition into a married state, and my mercy was to light upon a wife whose father was counted godly. This woman and I, though we came together as poor as poor might be, not having so much household stuff as a dish or spoon betwixt us both, yet this she had for her part, *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven*, and *The Practice of Piety*, which her father had left her when he died. In these two books I should sometimes read with her, wherein I also found some things that were somewhat pleasing to me; but all this while I met with no conviction . . . though they did not reach my heart, to awaken it about my sad and sinful state, yet they did beget within me some desires to religion . . .[15]

The early portion of the 1650's proved to be the turning point for Bunyan spiritually, as he experienced a painful and profound conversion to Christ. Informing this radical repentance were several events, though two encounters are worth mentioning before considering the content and outcome of his evangelical obedience: the preaching

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[14] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 7.

[15] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 7.

of a Rev. Christopher Hall in Elstow and the conversation of a group of nonconformist women in Bedford.

As an adolescent and young adult, Bunyan appears to have given himself a license to act as he pleased, particularly when it came to the strict observance of the Lord's Day that was common among his Puritan neighbors. In stark contrast to the setting aside of a day for worship and rest, he regularly indulged himself in food and games. This may seem a small, even harmless diversion by contemporary evangelical standards, but in Bunyan's time this pursuit was a direct act of defiance and rebellion against God. Yet God worked through Mrs. Bunyan to direct her husband toward Christ, and John began to attend public worship and fell under the preaching influence of a Rev. Christopher Hall, vicar of the Elstow parish church.

The ministry of Christopher Hall was unique, inasmuch as it appears that the vicar's theological convictions likely ran contrary to what Bunyan would ultimately suffer years of conscientious imprisonment on behalf of. While Christopher Hill suggests that Hall was clearly not a "convinced Puritan," due to his continued employment of traditional vestments past the advent of the Puritan-friendly Long Parliament in 1640,[16] Hill misses a key detail—provided by Bunyan biographer Faith Cook—regarding his ministry at Elstow: Hall had been installed as vicar of Elstow by none other than Archbishop William Laud.[17] The Laudian influence on the Elstow church's flavor is evident as Cook helpfully directs attention to Bunyan's own recollection of these early years of pietism in *Grace Abounding*. Regarding this early period, Bunyan recounts that he was "so overrun with a spirit of superstition," that he "adored, and that with great devotion, even all things, both the high place, priest, clerk, vestment, service, and what

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[16] Christopher Hill, *A Tinker and a Poor Man: John Bunyan and His Church, 1628–1688* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 42.

[17] Faith Cook, *Fearless Pilgrim: The Life and Times of John Bunyan* (Welwyn Garden City, UK: Evangelical Press, 2008), 67.

else belonging to the church . . . ."[18] The high church worship of Archbishop Laud coursed through Bunyan's veins during this period to the degree that he felt that the mere sight of a priest, no matter how "sordid and debauched in his life," would cause his spirit to "fall under him, reverence him, and knit unto him," so that he "could have lain down at their feet, and have been trampled upon by them"—in summary, "their name, their garb, and work, did so intoxicate and bewitch"[19] the young Bunyan. Whatever theological and ecclesiastical convictions would later drive Bunyan, most likely were not systematically taught by the Elstow vicar.

As Bunyan continued in a pattern of rebellious play, he became deeply convicted regarding the character of sin he found present in his heart. What follows is his account of the significance of the particular day in which he found this conviction visiting his soul:

> But one day, amongst all the sermons our parson made, his subject was, to treat of the Sabbath-day, and of the evil of breaking that, either with labour, sports, or otherwise. Now I was, notwithstanding my religion, one that took much delight in all manner of vice, and especially that was the day that I did solace myself therewith, wherefore I fell in my conscience under his sermon, thinking and believing that he made that sermon on purpose to show me my evil doing; and at that time I felt what guilt was, though never before, that I can remember . . . This, for that instant, did 'benumb' the sinews of my 'best' delights, and did imbitter my former pleasures to me; but behold, it lasted not . . . But the same day, as I was in the midst of a game at cat, and having struck it one blow from the hole, just as I was about to strike it the second time, a voice did suddenly dart from heaven into my soul, which said, Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to heaven, or have thy sins and go to hell?[20]

The most notable thing about this account is Bunyan's recollection of a sense never previously felt: a genuine conviction of sin. Central to a Puritan understanding of conversion is an evangelical awareness of sin. While many of his contemporaries may have contented themselves with the inherited social religion of Anglicanism, what

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[18] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 7.

[19] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 7-8.

[20] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 8.

Bunyan was coming to understand was the deep humiliation over sin that precedes the gospel comforts offered by Christ to the penitent soul. This theme would permeate Bunyan's ministry, including his most popular work, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in which the main character is attended by a burden only removed by that which figures the cross of Christ. For the first time, evangelical conviction of sin was present in Bunyan's life. His interests moved, for the first time, into the interior of his heart, where great conflict would begin to take place.

Although it is tempting to bookmark the beginning of Bunyan's Christian life at this moment, there appears to be more conviction than comfort in Christ in his life at this point, with the inward conflicts finding an intermediate resolution in outward performances, rather than the renovation of his own heart. Mullett suggests that his pursuit of external reforms was not unlike the Roman Catholic approach toward penance: "Bunyan became convinced that his pastimes were sins. However, it is possible that he renounced them not only as perceived faults but, unconsciously, as pleasures to be offered up to God in expiation . . . If this were so, Bunyan would have been endeavoring a self-help route to salvation reminiscent of medieval Catholic penitential practice."[21] In Bunyan's own words, "Thus I continued about a year; all which time our neighbours . . . did marvel much to see such a great and famous alteration in my life and manners; and, indeed, so it was, though yet I knew not Christ, nor grace, nor faith, nor hope; and, truly, as I have well seen since, had I then died, my state had been most fearful . . . ."[22]

The second encounter, which is more popularly known, was with a group of women who belonged to a congregation of Baptists in Bedford, simply named the Bedford Meeting, a fellowship which Bunyan would ultimately become responsible for as pastor and preacher. Here is Bunyan's account of hearing this small group of women

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[21] Mullett, *John Bunyan in Context*, 28.

[22] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 9.

relating the things of Christ to one another in such a way that so impressed the man whose conviction had not yet translated to a settled trust in Christ:

> But upon a day, the good providence of God did cast me to Bedford, to work on my calling; and in one of the streets of that town, I came where there were three or four poor women sitting at a door in the sun, and talking about the things of God; and being now willing to hear them discourse, I drew near to hear what they said, for I was now a brisk talker also myself in the matters of religion, but now I may say, I heard, but I understood not; for they were far above, out of my reach; for their talk was about a new birth, the work of God on their hearts, also how they were convinced of their miserable state by nature; they talked how God had visited their souls with his love in the Lord Jesus, and with what words and promises they had been refreshed, comforted, and supported against the temptations of the devil.

This moment in Bunyan's spiritual course is distinguished from the earlier mentioned "conviction of sin" that Bunyan felt deeply, but did not himself regard as genuinely converting. For Bunyan, what distinguishes this episode is the actual movement of his heart toward Christ himself in eagerness, joy, and trust. Like Augustine's response to the voice of a child crying, "Pick up and read!", Bunyan found the words of these "poor women" to be a moment pregnant with eternal significance. Moving to personal reflection on what he overheard, we find a changing man: "And methought they spake as if joy did make them speak; they spake with such pleasantness of Scripture language, and with such appearance of grace in all they said, that they were to me, as if they had found a new world, as if they were people that dwelt alone, and were not to be reckoned among their neighbours."[23] So momentous was this occasion, that he then suggests that it was at this point he found himself shaken in his heart, with a razing of his own religious confidences borne merely out of conviction and fearful obedience, and the reconstruction of a new desire. Of this new desire, Bunyan states: " . . . my heart would tarry with them, for I was greatly affected with their words, both because by them

[23] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 10.

I was convinced that I wanted the true tokens of a truly godly man, and also because by them I was convinced of the happy and blessed condition of him that was such a one."[24]

This event marked the beginning of a relationship with the church at Bedford that would continue for the rest of his life, as he became admitted to regular fellowship in the dawn of the 1650s and was ministered to greatly in his early years as a believer by the fellowship's pastor, John Gifford, himself a veteran. Strangely, it did not mark an end to Bunyan's internal spiritual conflict, but instead focused his attention on the battlefield of his own heart, with his only remedies coming from Christ himself, communicated through the Scriptures preached to and read by him. One may reasonably mark his conversion by this new evangelical course and, what follows in a period of tortuous lack of assurance the working out of matters necessary for Bunyan's future confidence. This period of intense spiritual suffering is of such critical importance in understanding Bunyan's life that it warrants a sustained examination before considering his imprisonment and circumstantial suffering as a minister of the gospel.

It is important to note that while the Bedford Meeting was free to meet during the 1650s, its operation outside of the order and leadership of the Anglican church placed them in a position that would ultimately be outlawed in the early years of the Stuart monarchy's restoration and the dissolution of the Cromwellian Protectorate in 1660. The small church would ultimately not pass muster because of its congregational charter and Baptist convictions and be labeled 'nonconforming' in its unwillingness to bend their consciences, form of worship, and theology to that demanded by the Act of Uniformity of 1662. While the church's freedom of conscience and theological convictions were acceptable during Cromwell's sympathetic rule as Lord Protector, they were completely unacceptable to the restored gentry and high church that regained its influence and authority when Charles II ascended to the throne. The fact that Bunyan was effectively

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[24] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 10.

converted under the ministry of a church who would themselves know the sting of suffering as an outlawed assembly should not be lost on anyone assessing the role that suffering played in Bunyan's pastoral theology. Many individual Christians have suffered over the millennia, yet Bunyan's new and lifelong bond to a local church whom he would see through the turmoil of seventeenth century British religious politics ensured that what he suffered would be translated into care for his church and the needs of the suffering church would be felt deeply by her pastor. He would effectively know no other church and, for several decades, the church would know Bunyan as her shepherd.

Bunyan's Struggle for Assurance

It is difficult to read without sympathy about the struggle for assurance that would continue for some several months of Bunyan's life, the torture about his spiritual condition so evident in his words. In his biography of Bunyan, Christopher Hill concedes that though there are "moments of tedium in the repetitiveness of Bunyan's temptations," there are also "moments when the intense emotional power of his elation or despair carry us with him."[25] His lack of assurance was variously tried and, in each trial, his own creative solutions did not lastingly satisfy his concerns. One such 'solution' came in the form of Bunyan's belief that if he were able to exercise a miraculous power, then he should know assurance of peace with God. He recalls that "the tempter came in with his delusion, That there was no way for me to know I had faith, but by trying to work some miracle; urging those Scriptures that seem to look that way, for the enforcing and strengthening his temptation."[26] He succumbed to the temptation by attempting to dry up the water in the prints left by horse hooves by verbal command, which, when the effort failed, left him despondent. This pattern frequently attended Bunyan, as he desperately sought for assurance in some type of personal performance or solidified state of mind or

[25] Hill, *A Tinker and a Poor Man*, 74.

[26] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 12.

emotion, only to be turned back upon him with a doubled dose of spiritual anxiety. Commenting on the failed attempt to miraculously dry the puddles, he remarks, "But when I had concluded to pray, this came hot upon me, That if I prayed, and came again and tried to do it, and yet did nothing notwithstanding, then be sure I had no faith, but was a cast-away and lost."[27]

Another component of Bunyan's spiritual turmoil during this time is evident in his concern over being among the elect, while his sapling-like faith is being bent by the assaults of unbelief. Regarding the first encroachment of doubt regarding his election, Bunyan recalls: "Neither as yet could I attain to any comfortable persuasion that I had faith in Christ; but instead of having satisfaction, here I began to find my soul to be assaulted with fresh doubts about my future happiness; especially with such as these, Whether I was elected? But how, if the day of grace should now be past and gone?"[28] If he had despised the grace of God like Esau, Bunyan reasoned, then how could he know his election to be sure? When confronted with a passage that may otherwise comfort a restless soul, Bunyan was further provoked by reading Romans 9:16 concerning the absolute necessity of divine mercy to undergird the election of believers. He expresses his conflict: "With this scripture I could not tell what to do; for I evidently saw, that unless the great God, of his infinite grace and bounty, had voluntarily chosen me to be a vessel of mercy, though I should desire, and long and labour until my heart did break, no good could come of it."[29]

True, no good *could* come of striving against God, yet the Pauline message of mercy and grace abounding to those who recognized their need for it was obscured and Bunyan forced to do battle against the dragons of unbelief—both through external

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[27] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 12.

[28] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 13.

[29] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 13.

temptation and his own propensity to figure things out on his own. Curiously, a certain level of self-awareness regarding self-reliance and its need to be put to death for the Christian is evident in remarks that follow his presentation of this concern for his election. Bunyan writes: "By these things I was driven to my wits' end, not knowing what to say, or how to answer these temptations. Indeed, I little thought that Satan had thus assaulted me, but that rather it was my own prudence, thus to start the question . . . ."[30] By reflecting a naively arrogant confidence in his own prudence to "start the question," a humbled Bunyan is tipping his hand that in the midst of these conflicts, the only satisfactory answers and questions are those that find justification in the Scriptures themselves. Human ingenuity did not serve the purpose of asking the right questions for Bunyan, just as it did not serve the purpose of providing satisfactory answers. As a man whose life would become so thoroughly saturated with the Bible, these wrestlings with God are glimpses at developing convictions that would later deeply inform how Bunyan dealt with his and his peoples' experience with hardship, whether internal or external in nature. There was no refuge for him in his own abilities, resolutions, or personal constitution, but only in the unerring words of God recorded in sacred Scripture.

Several other incidents populate *Grace Abounding*, each of which demonstrated a man whose soul was frequently troubled by series of doubts. The pattern is the same: a temptation to find satisfaction through personal performance or a desired emotional frame, failure, and ultimate satisfaction as Bunyan learns that the character of God and his Word are the only rightful place in which to place his confidence. However, one more incident is worth mentioning at this point, as it provides a clear picture of what ultimately provided a sense of resolution for Bunyan, to the extent that it ushered him out of the tortures of varied unbelief and into a confidence that Christ was his and he was

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[30] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 13.

Christ's. The incident is recounted by Bunyan as follows, which followed on the heels of another tempest of spiritual terror that threatened his sense of Christian assurance:

> But one day, as I was passing in the field, and that too with some dashes on my conscience, fearing lest yet all was not right, suddenly this sentence fell upon my soul, Thy righteousness is in heaven; and methought withal, I saw, with the eyes of my soul, Jesus Christ at God's right hand; there, I say, as my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was adoing, God could not say of me, He wants my righteousness, for that was just before him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse; for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, the same yesterday, and to-day, and forever.[31]

The 'field incident' shows itself to be decisive in drawing Bunyan out of the frequent troublings of his soul, not because future troublings would not occur—whether spiritual or psychological in nature, Bunyan is clearly prone to experience heavy internal conflict—but because here, in this taking hold of Christ, Bunyan was released from patterns of performance that ebbed and flowed. No longer did he find himself beholden to the whims of his personal frame, but instead found what the Bible holds out as the only confidence for any Christian: the person and finished work of Christ.

If Bunyan's conversion did not occur around his encounter with the "poor women of Bedford," this moment most assuredly would settle the matter of whether or not Bunyan had moved from careless rebel to self-righteous moral performer to humbled follower of Christ. So meaningful was this episode that Bunyan spoke thus: "Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed, I was loosed from my affliction and irons, my temptations also fled away; so that, from that time, those dreadful scriptures of God left off to trouble me; now went I also home rejoicing, for the grace and love of God."[32] So magnificent was the view of Christ gained here by Bunyan, that he would conclude his recounting of the incident by saying:

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[31] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 35-36.

[32] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 36.

> It was glorious to me to see his exaltation, and the worth and prevalency of all his benefits, and that because of this: now I could look from myself to him, and should reckon that all those graces of God that now were green in me, were yet but like those cracked groats and fourpence-halfpennies that rich men carry in their purses, when their gold is in their trunks at home! Oh, I saw my gold was in my trunk at home! In Christ, my Lord and Saviour! Now Christ was all; all my wisdom, all my righteousness, all my sanctification, and all my redemption.[33]

The misery John Bunyan experienced during this prolonged season has met with varied scholarly interpretations including those that contend that Bunyan's suffering stemmed more from mental health issues rather than actual spiritual conflict. There do appear to be patterns of behavior characteristic of those with obsessive compulsive tendencies, with phases of crisis and satisfaction that give way to successive phases without an ultimate resolution to the obsessive conflicts themselves. Richard Greaves observes that throughout these crises, "a pattern is discernible. Repeatedly he turned to external sources—other people, the Bible, other books—to seek reassurance that God cared for him and that he himself was as vile a sinner as he thought."[34] As Bunyan suffered these cycles of inner conflict—particularly during this pronounced period of spiritual uncertainty—Greaves observes that "the reassurance he found was only temporary, and the doubt that ensued became progressively more intense, impelling him to continue seeking yet more reassurance."[35] Though he perhaps overestimates the length of time this period of intense, cyclical spiritual conflict lasted, Mullett, who includes the period of 'self-help' religion engaged in before the Bedford incident, detects a pattern in Bunyan's spiritual crisis: "These crisis phases, which contained within them less pronounced oscillations from depression to elation, were separated from one another by phases of tranquility, the last of which brought the whole cycle to an end."[36]

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[33] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 36.

[34] Richard L. Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory: John Bunyan and English Dissent* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 74.

[35] Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory*, 74.

[36] Mullett, *John Bunyan in Context*, 30.

While it is obvious that obsessive patterns of rumination existed in Bunyan's life, in ways that are not typical of all Christians, their presence does not necessitate a jump to the primary explanation of mental illness some scholars seem to take. Davies, in considering the variously poignant experiences of Bunyan during this pointed time of spiritual suffering, sees them as potentially "indicative of mental disorder, depression or obsessive-compulsive behavior."[37] To Davies, the resolution of whether or not *Grace Abounding* presents a man suffering from acute mental illness is found in Bunyan's context, as he says that we might be "less inclined to diagnose Bunyan as psychologically ill . . . if we consider other seventeenth-century spiritual autobiographies, and the conventions that they adopt when relating experiences of conversion."[38]

Davies' analysis helps to put the work in perspective, but it cannot be taken to account primarily for what was actually happening in Bunyan's life. Our concern is not to understand the literary styles or even the historical literary milieu of the seventeenth century, helpful as it may be to evaluating Bunyan's literary output. Much good can be derived from evaluating Bunyan as an author, but if that is the primary or sole evaluative framework, the heart of his work will be missed. Therefore, it is best to understand Bunyan as a pastor who writes, not as a writer who pastors. The biographical task of those seeking to most helpfully represent John Bunyan is to understand him as a Christian man and pastor, because this is the base from which he wrote and how he knew himself to be. It is, in a word, how he intended to be understood. What we find in *Grace Abounding* is not, ultimately, a basic adaptation of contemporary conventions that may or may not betray the factuality of the content. Contemporary conventions of literary framing can help the reader contextualize and place Bunyan's writing, but scholarly

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[37] Davies, "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners," in *The Cambridge Companion to Bunyan*, 72.

[38] Davies, "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners," in *The Cambridge Companion to Bunyan*, 72.

efforts cannot function as a primary grid for evaluating the content itself by placing it in a sort of perceived heap of like-minded authors and similarly-themed works.

Regarding the perceptions of mental illness, something might be said by way of diagnosing particular tendencies demonstrated by Bunyan. It is clear that he ruminated obsessively and showed classic symptoms of what is now termed obsessive compulsive disorder. Previous generations granted personal dispositions toward anxiety, depression, and mania, so it would not be even contemporarily strange for Bunyan to have his personality 'located' in a particular category for disorder. While the discipline of psychology has evolved considerably over the past 150 years, there is a high degree of 'presentism' expressed in the concern that Bunyan's spiritual records are largely the result of mental illness and psychological unwinding. That being said, even if John Bunyan suffered from something that may be looked at as exclusively mental illness in the twenty-first century, it does not change the content of Bunyan's experience. An obsessive terror of being among the reprobate is still a valid concern, however affective it may be toward any individual. A disposition to process thoughts in a particular way is not, on its own, a disqualifying factor attached to the truthfulness of the severe spiritual anguish he experienced for several years. If he had suffered from the weakness of a mental illness, it was that weakness that was seized upon by the enemy of God's people to terrorize him. It would also be used by God to create a meticulous man whose concern was to be, above all things, faithful to and consistent with the Word of God.

Since the bulk of this work will be devoted to exploring how Bunyan addressed the issue of suffering among believers, it is important to note here that this season of protracted spiritual crisis was formative for Bunyan's later ministry. The foundations of any building are established to support the weight and overall blueprint of whatever is to be built upon it. Bunyan certainly experienced suffering firsthand. He was in the bottom tier of English socioeconomic circles. During his formative years he lost both mother and sibling and likely incurred some degree of trauma from whatever

wartime experiences he may have had, even if he had never seen. His oldest child, a daughter named Mary, was born blind. His first wife passed away. These experiences could have been sufficient to provide him with a higher degree of sympathy toward those he ministered to in later years. Nevertheless, I would argue that the contours of Bunyan's ministry—namely, prolonged imprisonment for the sake of Christ, that could have been easily avoided by the betrayal of his own conscience and theological convictions—necessitated the type of acute *spiritual* suffering experienced during the formative years of his Christian experience.

A review of the thoughts Bunyan recorded, whether it was basic doubt regarding the Scriptures or the paralyzing fear of having committed the unpardonable sin, show a breadth of experience that prepared the tinker-preacher up to minister with a sort of genuine depth to a vast swath of Christian people needing pastoral assurance. The kind of assurance Bunyan derived from the Lord in this season of tremendous difficulty would, in the final analysis, be relayed to countless people through pastoral and allegorical works. John Bunyan *knew* what it was to fight Giant Despair and be caught in the Slough of Despond. When he gave advice to sufferers, he gave it as one who had suffered as a Christian, with Christian silhouettes observable in the varied perplexities he faced. His ministry was no ivory tower pronouncement, but as earthy, genuine, and personal as it was orthodox.

Whatever similarities scholars may have noted between Bunyan and other contemporary spiritual autobiography, the genuineness of Bunyan is inescapable. Even Greaves, who is quick to read psychiatric explanations into Bunyan's season of spiritual suffering and ascribe literary convention to his autobiographical remarks, concedes that what is found in *Grace Abounding* has a very unique quality to it: "Although it belongs to the genre of spiritual autobiography, it is unique for its candor . . . If we read *Grace Abounding* merely as a work of conventional, imitative, stereotypical piety, we miss the

significant insight it provides into Bunyan's psychological and spiritual struggles."[39] If Bunyan's theological interpretation of his life is accurate—and I believe it generally is—then what we find in *Grace Abounding* is the record of a man who had been tried repeatedly, not for his multitude of failures or God inflicting purgatorial fire, but in order to afford necessary pastoral care to many countless individuals who would all suffer bits and pieces of what he himself did.

The biblical tradition of servants of the church suffering for the church's future comfort is robust. Paul begins 2 Corinthians with a personal reflection on this type of suffering and offers a peak behind the divine curtain, where faithful ministers may wonder why peculiar difficulties attend them. The answer is nothing short of a divine design to have such servants dosed with a kind of preparational suffering that will qualify them to extend necessary care to those given to their care. Says the apostle,

> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. (2 Cor 1:3–6)

Though Bunyan never attended a formal course of theological education, his forced acquaintance with the comfort afforded by the Scriptures and necessary, personal dealings with God formed a kind of seminary education of an even more profound nature than could be obtained at Oxford or Cambridge. Any student may be given to learning the facts of theology, but those students who attend Bunyan's school—a seminary of suffering, it might be said—matriculate not on the basis of endowment or academic promise, but by divine admission. To imagine that a working-class tinker, without money or reputation, would be found ministering to the church so prolifically, even centuries after his course on this earth was over, should virtually eliminate an interpretation of his

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[39] Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory*, 60.

experience in naturalistic terms. Bunyan's spiritual suffering was administered by God for the future well-being of his people, while sustaining the man and not abandoning him to the despair he frequently felt and feared. *Grace Abounding* is captivating not ultimately because of its author, but because of the intent of the divine Author, whose work is on display even in these hardest moments of Bunyan's spiritual experience.

A Hard and Faithful Course

Bunyan's incredible internal spiritual conflict of the early 1650's gave way to rounds of circumstantial suffering in the decades that followed.[40] In 1650, Bunyan's wife gave birth to their first of four children, a daughter, who was, so far as anyone could tell, without sight from infancy. In 1655, Bunyan was admitted to full membership of the Bedford fellowship and begins the ministry of preaching at the behest of the congregation. The family would suffer a terrible loss in 1658, as Bunyan's young wife of a decade died. For a man of burgeoning faith to suffer this tragic loss had the potential to significantly derail the trust in God that had developed over the years of internal conflict just recently endured, yet it was the development of Bunyan's trust in the goodness and trustworthiness of God that led his endurance through this and subsequent losses. It is regrettable that Bunyan provides so little information regarding his first wife, though much more is available concerning his second wife, Elizabeth. At the age of 31, one year after losing his wife, the widowed Bunyan took a wife 12 years his junior. The young woman would become a staunch advocate for her husband in the years to follow, while being a 19 year old mother of four inherited children, one of whom was disabled through blindness.[41]

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[40] For a helpful list of significant dates in Bunyan's life and ministry, referred to throughout this work, see "Bunyan's Life: Some Significant Dates," in *The Oxford Handbook of John Bunyan*, ed. Michael Davies and W. R. Owens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), xxv-xxviii.

[41] The character of then 20 year old Elizabeth Bunyan is plainly evident in Bunyan's description of his initial trial for nonconformity. See John Bunyan, *The Relation of the Imprisonment of Mr.*

In 1660, one year after his second marriage began, Great Britain underwent the restoration of the Stuart monarchy. The Commonwealth established in 1649, which had championed the cause of parliamentary government and afforded significant freedoms to nonconforming Christians functioning outside the boundaries of the Church of England, had lasted a decade, before Richard Cromwell ceded the defeat of his father's cause. Oliver Cromwell had not only championed religious liberty for non-Anglican evangelicals, but was himself strongly influenced by Puritan theology and ethics and lived as an 'independent' Christian, worshiping outside the confines of Church of England that the temporarily defunct monarchy had previous custody of. W.H. Wrighton poetically remarks that "Cromwell lived and moved in the sacred atmosphere of the Scriptures."[42] The breathing room of the previous decade was about to be removed all but completely with the regency of Charles II.

The Stuart restoration was not, at least on paper, intended to radically upset the religious and social order when it was initiated in 1660. A public concession was offered by Charles II in the Declaration of Breda that seemed to suggest a cessation of previous sectarian hostilities, yet the suspicions of the restored gentry became too powerful to not pursue the use of whatever means were necessary to re-establish the royal social order, in which religious leadership was tied to the crown and its politics. Barrie White traces the early development of persecution that would ultimately land Bunyan in prison for twelve years, beginning—for Bunyan, particularly—with the enforcement of an older law, at Bunyan's expense, that would precede the much broader and more well-known Act of Uniformity:

> At first the only instrument which came readily to the hands of the local authorities was the Act of 35 Elizabeth against 'the wicked and dangerous practices of seditious

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John Bunyan, vol. 1 of *The Works of John Bunyan*, ed. George Offor (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1991), 50-62.

[42] William Hazer Wrighton, *In the Land of Cromwell and Bunyan* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1939), 62.

> sectaries and disloyal person.' This itself could lead beyond mere imprisonment to exile or even to the death penalty. As a result, in spite of the King's declaration at Breda which was read to both Houses of Parliament on 1 May 1660 promising indulgence to all tender consciences—providing they kept the peace—Bunyan was arrested on 12 November 1660 at a meeting for worship held at Samsell, near Harlington, in Bedfordshire.[43]

Curiously, there is some dispute as to whether or not it was the content of Bunyan's preaching or the mere fact that he preached that witnessed his continued imprisonment. White draws attention to this question by stating, "It is noteworthy that the magistrates' recurring concern when questioning him was, 'why I did not content myself with following my calling.' As one of the officials said, Bunyan should keep to his tinkering and leave the ministry to the professional ministers."[44]

If the Stuart Restoration began with an irenic posture, it quickly engendered a renewed wave of persecution targeting men like Bunyan. John Coffey, commenting on the early intentions of the Restoration, says, "When the king returned, 'the mass of men' were probably more inclined to support the reimposition of uniformity than the maintenance and extension of toleration. If Restoration England did not see a return to the burning of heretics, it did witness persecution on a grand scale."[45] The escalation of religious persecution seems to have been fanned on a popular level among the gentry and not centrally by the new king. Says Coffey, "The young king was no bigot, and he recognized the need to attract a broad range of support. He was restored in May, and over the next twelve months he did 'all that he could to bring about a compromise settlement of the church'."[46] Despite the instinct of Charles II to accommodate religious differences, "A popular backlash against Puritans had been building up for years, and it was now

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[43] Barrie White, "John Bunyan and the Context of Persecution, 1660-88", in *John Bunyan and His England, 1628-88*, ed. Anne Laurence, W. R. Owens, and Stuart Sim (London: Hambledon Press, 1990), 58-59.

[44] White, "John Bunyan and the Context of Persecution, 1660–88", 59.

[45] John Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558–1689* (Harlow, England: Longman, 2000), 166.

[46] Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558–1689*, 166.

unleashed . . . In May 1661, when the Cavalier Parliament assembled, hardline Anglicans were in the ascendancy, and during the months that followed, these conservatives set about 'framing their measures to extirpate Puritanism'."[47] Bunyan, indistinguishable from others self-identified or popularly regarded as Puritans, would now suffer personally the popular disdain that had fomented among the English people, whether common or genteel.

While the first two years of Bunyan's imprisonment may have lacked a legal 'nexus' universally appealed to and applied among the churches, 1662 witnessed one of the most depressing moments in English Protestant history and would be used for several years to keep men like Bunyan from coming close to a pulpit. Puritan ministers with the proper credentials continued to minister in state-approved churches between 1660–1662, but the Act of Uniformity, passed by Parliament in the spring of 1662, sought to establish a national religious identity under the theological and ecclesiastical leadership of the Crown and the Church of England. There was simply no room in Restoration politics for a reminder of the religious toleration of Cromwell or a Britain that lacked a royally inured and governed church, whose theology was eclipsed by the interests of an aristocracy freshly reinstated with the new Parliament. The unquestionable severity of the Act and its impact on the Puritan movement to which Bunyan belonged cannot be overstated, for, as Michael Winship articulates, "It presented them with a stark choice: abandon your puritan principles or abandon your pulpit."[48] Coffey details the mechanics of the Act and the impossibility of Puritan subscription to the newly established religious tests:

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[47] Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558–1689*, 167.

[48] Michael P. Winship, *Hot Protestants: A History of Puritanism in England and America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 205. Like Coffey, Winship notes Charles II's distaste for religious intolerance: "The act was passed over the objections of Charles II, who went on encouraging religious toleration in the steadily increasing number of American colonies, where Parliament could not interfere." Winship, *Hot Protestants*, 205-206.

> Deploring the growth of 'schisms' during 'the late unhappy troubles', it required all clergy, lecturers, and schoolmasters to renounce the Covenant, subscribe to all of the Thirty-Nine Articles, acquire episcopal ordination, and declare 'unfeigned assent and consent to all and everything contained and prescribed' by the newly revised Book of Common Prayer. Those who failed to comply would 'ipso facto be deprived' of their benefices.[49]

What followed the passage of the Act of Uniformity would become known as the Great Ejection, in which remaining ministers with Puritan commitments would be purged from their churches in order to ensure the installation of clergy sympathetic to the royalist Parliament. In the space of a day, England witnessed the wholesale exclusion of men whose consciences, like Bunyan, were bound to biblical fidelity, rather than national identity or ecclesiastical approval. Coffey notes that, "In all, around 2,000 Puritan clergy were ejected, almost a fifth of the total ministry. Their farewell sermons often contained bitter (if coded) attacks on their persecutors, oppositional gestures relayed in popular printed editions calculated to inflame a sense of injustice."[50]

The decidedly harsh consequences of the Act of Uniformity toward nonconformist pastors like Bunyan would seem to suggest that the whole country had gone from toleration in the 1650's to virulent condemnation of religious freedom just a few years later. Time, however, provides the opportunity to evaluate with nuance the circumstances attending such a significant political and legal shift. As noted above, there was no lack of encouragement from judges for Bunyan to simply restrict his ministry to private counsel and forego public meetings. It is difficult to not detect some level of sympathy, especially in recognizing that the legal system did not necessarily afford any latitude on the part of local magistrates. It was the court's job to enforce the crown's interests at law, which meant that any sympathy that may have been entertained by local judges had no place to go except into such encouragements for the tinker-pastor, father,

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[49] John Coffey, "Bunyan's England: Trials and Triumphs of Restoration Dissent," in *The Oxford Handbook of John Bunyan*, ed. Michael Davies and W. R. Owens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 38-39.

[50] Coffey, "Bunyan's England: Trials and Triumphs of Restoration Dissent," 39.

and husband to leave off his convictions and preach 'in private.' A particularly revealing look at the legal environment surrounding Bunyan's case is found in his *Relation of Bunyan's Imprisonment*,[51] in which he details personal appeals made by him and his young wife. The contrast in sympathies is evident, particularly, in the exchange recorded between Bunyan's wife and Judges Hale, Twisdon, and Chester. Justice Twisdon's own disdain for Bunyan is obvious, as he responds to Elizabeth's assertion of her husband's godly calling and character by stating that "his doctrine is the doctrine of the devil."[52] Nevertheless, marked sympathy can be detected in Justice Hale's interactions with Bunyan's wife. Upon Mrs. Bunyan's indicating that she feared no justice was possible for her husband because he was vocationally known as a tinker and was not materially well-off, Bunyan records: "Then Judge Hale answered, very mildly, saying, 'I tell thee, woman, seeing it is so, that they have taken what thy husband spake for a conviction; thou must either apply thyself to the King, or sue out his pardon, or get a writ of error."[53] After further discourse, Hale compassionately reminds her of these options and then suggests to her that "a writ of error will be cheapest."[54]

Clearly, even within a tribunal, sympathies varied, while the ability to act upon them was restrained. Any search for legal repair would only end up at the feet of the king himself, thus ensuring that the only way for him to escape a lengthy prison sentence was to violate his call and conscience by either forsaking the public ministry of the Word or seek an unwanted and likely impossible ordination as an Anglican, with adherence to the Book of Common Prayer and the ecclesiology and theology of the Church of England. There is no hint in his writings that he at all considered leaving off the task of preaching.

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[51] Bunyan, *A Relation of the Imprisonment of Mr. John Bunyan*, 50-62.

[52] Bunyan, *A Relation of the Imprisonment of Mr. John Bunyan*, 61.

[53] Bunyan, *A Relation of the Imprisonment of Mr. John Bunyan*, 61.

[54] Bunyan, *A Relation of the Imprisonment of Mr. John Bunyan*, 61.

As an 'uneducated' preacher, the prospect of conforming to the Act of Uniformity was virtually impossible. Accordingly, with neither option to avoid being jailed a real option for him at all, both the courts and Bunyan had no choice but to ultimately settle the matter through conscientious objection and its attending prison sentence.

The atmosphere of the 1660's was decidedly against the theological convictions of John Bunyan. Even if he had been formally recognized as a preacher through education and ordination, Bunyan's convictions as an evangelical, Puritan, and Baptist, would have excluded him from continuing conscientiously in the ministry under the Act passed two years into his imprisonment, just as his contemporaries who had lost their pulpits in the Great Ejection. Any basic acquaintance with his internal spiritual conflict in the early 1650's yields an overwhelming assurance that to violate his conscience, particularly in matters of religion, was literally anathema to Bunyan. In his *A Confession of My Faith*, Bunyan boldly declares: "But if nothing will do, unless I make of my conscience a continual butchery, and slaughter-shop . . . I have determined, the Almighty God being my help and shield, yet to suffer, if frail life might continue so long, even till the moss shall grow on mine eye-brows, rather than thus to violate my faith and principles."[55]

Resolved to never violate his commitment to Christ, Bunyan accepted an indefinite term of imprisonment. The Act of Uniformity afforded him no hope of favorable adjudication, which may have otherwise been found in a more lenient reading of the 35 Elizabeth article that he was initially imprisoned under. Although these prison years would witness the authoring of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which, for hundreds of years remained the most distributed book in the world, save for the Bible itself, the agony experienced by Bunyan at the prospect of his own family suffering was abysmal. While

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[55] John Bunyan, *A Confession of My Faith, and a Reason of My Practice*, vol. 2 of *The Works of John Bunyan*, ed. George Offor (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1991), 594.

imprisonment did not meet total isolation from his family, it was still imprisonment. His wife suffered a miscarriage in the early days of his arrest, while a daughter would be born to Elizabeth during his confinement.[56] In typical Bunyan fashion, his language captures the miserable reality of living apart from his young wife and children, even knowing the consolation of Christ, which was learned in earlier seasons of spiritual trial:

> But notwithstanding these helps, I found myself a man, and compassed with infirmities; the parting with my wife and poor children hath oft been to me in this place as the pulling the flesh from my bones, and that not only because I am somewhat too too [*sic*] fond of those great mercies, but also because I should have often brought to my mind the many hardships, miseries and wants that 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; O the thoughts of the hardship I thought my blind one might go under, would break my heart to pieces.[57]

The difficulties that would attend to this indefinite sentence are hard to overstate in light of the conditions such a conviction entailed. It is true that Bunyan was free to receive visitors, so the idea of being solitarily confined to a 100 square foot room can be dismissed. Nevertheless, a prison term during the persecution of dissenters and Nonconformists meant more than serving time. John Coffey remarks that besides the psychological consequences of imprisonment, it was quite probable that poor environmental conditions would take a physical toll: "While some prisons were very tolerable, others were appalling."[58] In Coffey's description of these prisons populated by dissenters, it would not have been uncommon for men like Bunyan to face intense overcrowding, like that during 1661 at Newgate prison, in which "100 people were packed into one room with no space to lie down."[59] The overpopulated prisons did not frequently have fireplaces, let alone any kind of centralized heating system, which,

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[56] Bunyan would also welcome a son with Elizabeth after freed from his twelve year confinement.

[57] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 48.

[58] Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England: 1558–1689*, 176.

[59] Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England: 1558–1689*, 176.

coupled with the dampness of British weather, ensured ill health among the prisoners. To round out the picture, Coffey states: "Vermin were a perpetual nuisance and danger, and the convicted felons in the prison could be equally obnoxious."[60]

Adjacent to the immediate suffering of Bunyan as a prisoner was the price paid by those associated with him, even beyond his own wife and children. The nonconforming church of Bedford was now associated with a convict for a pastor. Among those believers now guilty by association was a young woman named Agnes Beaumont. The impact of her relationship with the imprisoned pastor of her nonconforming church is recounted by Coffey:

> In Bedfordshire, the young Agnes Beaumont paid the price for attending John Bunyan's church. Rumours were spread suggesting that she had an improper relationship with the preacher, and her father shut her out of the house for attending his services. After sleeping all night in a cold barn, she was only readmitted to the house when she promised to stop going to the meetings. When her father died she was accused of poisoning him. Although a sympathetic coroner and jury cleared her name, her case illustrates the popular intolerance of Dissenters.[61]

If comfort was the goal of Bunyan's Christian convictions, he was woefully short of meeting it. He would ultimately serve three terms of imprisonment, the first and second terms being six years each, with the third being six months. For a man who would live to age 60, this meant that one fifth of his life would be spent incarcerated simply for the fact that he desired, above all things, to remain faithful to Christ and the calling of Christ on his life. Few experiences could be imagined that would not rattle a man with so much to live for by way of church and family, yet Bunyan persisted and was ultimately a better husband, father, and pastor because of it, as those closest to him saw how deep his conviction that holding one's conscience captive by the Word of God informed godly living. As will be expanded upon in much greater detail later, Bunyan would really not have been who he has come to be known as without the lessons taught him through the

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[60] Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England: 1558–1689*, 176.

[61] Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England: 1558–1689*, 177.

suffering of imprisonment. Austen Kennedy de Blois provides the following helpful insight: "He has learned two lessons of supreme importance which his life of freedom never taught him. He has learned how to meet death when it shall come; and he has learned to 'live upon God' in all things. Surely it was worth a good many years of bodily imprisonment to learn thoroughly and well those two lessons[.]"[62]

A Seasoned Pilgrim Finishes Well

The lessons de Blois mentions would be absorbed and learned well by Bunyan, yet it was not just a matter of learning them, but teaching them, that he would become a hallmark of his life and ministry. During the course of Bunyan's imprisonment, his ministry expanded more significantly through literature than if his pastoring had remained localized to Bedford. While previously published, his time in prison afforded opportunity for a voluminous output of material intended to strengthen the church in the face of the same trials he was then suffering. N. H. Keeble notes, "By 1660 Bunyan had four published titles to his name, but with his arrest in November 1660 and subsequent twelve-year imprisonment his output greatly increased and his literary persona gained sharper definition. Incarceration provided him with additional incentives to write."[63] Altogether, the prison cell afforded a circumstantially deplorable, yet uniquely opportune season for the tinker-preacher to produce over a dozen significant works, including *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, *The Holy War*, and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Since its initial publication in 1678, *The Pilgrim's Progress* alone has sold over 250 million copies, making it the second most printed book in the English language, save only the Bible itself.

If Bunyan was productive as an author during this time of incarceration, it was

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[62] Austen Kennedy de Blois*, John Bunyan the Man* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1928), 139.

[63] N. H. Keeble, "John Bunyan's Literary Life," in *The Cambridge Companion to Bunyan*, ed. Anne Dunan-Page (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 21.

not for a lack of continued pastoral care for the people of Bedford. Though not incarcerated as their preacher, the Bedford Meeting existed with a high degree of tenuousness attached to regular worship. Hill notes that, like the inconsistent local enforcement of nonconformity laws, "Meetings of the congregation were correspondingly erratic. There are no entries in the church book for early 1661, late 1662, and almost all of 1663, and none at all between 1664 and late 1668, when the Conventicle Act expired and nonconformists won some relief."[64] Because Bunyan had shown himself to be a model prisoner, the people of Bedford retained a certain level of access to seek counsel from him, just as he would publish treatises intended for the care of the church. Though he was quite literally in chains, the imprisoned pilgrim knew a freedom that extended far beyond his own limited mobility. Like the apostle Paul, who implored Timothy to "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal," (2 Tim 2:8–9a) John Bunyan rejoiced that "the word of God is not bound" (2 Tim 2:9b). The aim of any faithful pastor is to pursue the well-being of God's people, yet few have suffered so regularly and with such a relatively 'easy' remedy of simply keeping silent as John Bunyan did. To think that over a decade of his life was spent in a jail cell, away from regular fellowship with his church and daily time with his young family, would be enough to pity a man in the prime of his life. Yet the personal reflections afforded contemporaries and posterity through his writing and lifestyle would seem to suggest that the only pitiable man is the one who wastes the opportunities given him to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ. Fittingly, the closing words of Bunyan's preface to his own *Works* simply read the following: "My dear children, the milk and honey is beyond this wilderness. God be merciful to you, and grant that you be not slothful to go in to possess

[64] Hill, *A Tinker and a Poor Man*, 146.

the land."[65] Bunyan endured hardship after hardship knowing that the best land of the Christian was worth waiting and, if necessary, suffering for on the path to the great Celestial City.

Bunyan was released from prison in 1672 pursuant to the Declaration of Indulgence that permitted nonconforming preachers to renew their ministries with an application for licensure outside of the Church of England. Three years later, in the face of political pressure, Charles II canceled the licenses granted, which meant that Bunyan was, again, facing jail time for continuing in public ministry. Somewhat ironically, it was this final and relatively shorter term of incarceration that began in 1676 in which *The Pilgrim's Progress* took full shape and found its way from mind to pen to print. Bunyan's final jail sentence was lifted in 1677, when, most likely at the behest of John Owen, an order to release Bunyan was issued. The man whose freedom to minister had never been truly taken away was now liberated to return fully to his family and Bedford congregation, who had both waited for their beloved husband, father, and pastor to come home. For the next decade, Bunyan would continue on in those roles, no longer confined to a jail cell. During these years, works that had begun in prison were put to press, including his two most famous allegorical works, *The Holy War* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In 1688, while traveling to London, the 60 year old Bunyan came down with a feverish illness that would then claim his earthly life. Having endured so much and so well, the pilgrim had finished his course faithfully and had himself arrived at the shores of the Celestial City, where he had longed for so long to be welcomed by the Lord of the place.

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[65] Bunyan, Preface to vol. 1 of *The Works of John Bunyan*, ed. George Offor (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1991), 5.

CHAPTER 3

THE ROLE OF SUFFERING IN SANCTIFICATION

While Bunyan's life was marked with peculiar episodes of suffering, his theology would become equally seasoned with a flavor that would echo both the regular, biblical witness to suffering in the believer's life and the contemporary pain experienced by a significant number of his countrymen in seventeenth century Britain. The first of two theological categories to be examined in this thesis is that of sanctification. What was the Puritan understanding of sanctification? How did John Bunyan's contemporaries address the significance of suffering in shaping the contours of the regular Christian life? How did Bunyan himself understanding suffering as an agent for holiness? How often does sanctification—that necessary holiness "without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb 12:14)—intersect with the experience of pain in a fallen world? How involved is God in the providential administration of suffering for the purposes of growing and maturing his people? This chapter will address these questions to identify how Bunyan's personal experience and reading of Scripture shaped his perspective on suffering as a key element of growing in conformity to the image of Christ.

Puritanism in Context

While the ideals of the Puritan movement were not exclusive to sixteenth and seventeenth century Britain, the unique socio-political dynamics of the time period both called for and permitted the rise of a nationally significant ecclesiastical effort that extended throughout the kingdom and across what we would now identify as denominational boundaries. The climate for dissent and divergence from established patterns of church life and Christian living was not only seeded by men such as Wycliffe

and Tyndale, but in the monarchical rebellion against the papal control of European Christianity. In a strange providential twist, Henry VIII's pursuit of marital annulment in 1527 set into motion a movement that would, in the following decade, become a politically catalyzing factor for those with reforming convictions. Now was the time for them to take the reins in shaping the newly separated national church. Those who had embraced Reformed doctrine and subscribed to a worldview that saw Christian people as necessarily different than what is called for in Roman Catholic, and then Anglican, nominalism. Their concern for the state of Great Britain was profound: "In an age-old vein of Christian exhortation, they rebuked cursing, drunkenness, and other common misbehaviors; yet with notable frequency their castigations became extreme. English sinning, so it appeared, had soared beyond familiar bounds."[1]

The political allowance for spiritual reformation afforded by Henry VIII's break from Rome should not be underestimated. Though religious toleration would ebb and flow for decades to come, what was most immediately impactful to the cause of biblical spirituality was the absence of a monolithic papal authority structure that was entrenched with unchecked political power and largely resistant to reform. Thus, when the English reformers opened the doors to Reformation principles, they paved the way for churchmen to function less as agents of the state and more as ministers. Francis Bremer observes this differentiation, writing that Henry "would have been well content to have a new church with the intellectual and ceremonial furnishings of the old. But the men willing to run his church believed in many of the new ideas of the Reformation . . . In Henry's reign a debate began over the nature of the new church that would continue for

[1] Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill, NC: Omohundro Institute of Early American History & Culture, 2004), 45.

over a century."[2] The ministerial concern, therefore, began to outweigh any of the previous pontifical interests and make room for a spiritual vision of protestant England.

As noted above, the spiritual state of sixteenth century England was less than ideal, at least by Reformation standards. This burgeoning class of Christian Englishmen perceived their responsibility to be found in seeking the welfare of their nation not primarily through use of force and military conquest, but by the proliferation of Reformed convictions among their countrymen. Theirs was a deep concern that, should the nation not benefit from a spiritual renewal guided by biblical convictions, real reformation would not only have been missed, but the nation itself would be in a perilous condition before God himself. Again, Bozeman notes that a "sense of danger rang clearly enough through warnings that only a recovery of apostolic doctrine could 'appeas[e] the fierce wrath of God.' Calls for better discipline gained force from the conviction that the nation had reached a point of intolerable danger and climax,"[3] a conviction that weighed heavily on the proto-Puritans as they regarded their nation.

The early Puritans, then, were afforded a political climate that gave a certain degree of theretofore unexperienced 'wiggle room' in shaping the life of the British church, which was accelerated by a sense that unrealized reformation would spell disaster for their nation. Freedom to pursue holiness by biblical standards—both ecclesiastically and personally—became a new and precious commodity that would be leveraged for the coming decades as the Puritan concern for godliness peppered the national religious landscape. Puritan convictions, while not unique to the movement, were now afforded certain degrees of liberty and distribution among laymen that a national greenhouse for these convictions had been effectively nurtured. Indeed, Randall Pederson suggests that the "major feats of early English reform were greater than turning the English tides away

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[2] Francis J. Bremer, *Puritanism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 22.

[3] Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain*, 46.

from Rome and towards Zurich or Geneva. They were in establishing a system of networking and communication with the reformers on the continent and in making great strides in pastoring the English toward more 'Protestant' virtues."[4]

What type of life did the Puritans seek for themselves and their neighbors? The term itself—Puritan—was (and is to this day) a pejorative term that suggests excessive concern for matters of personal godliness and church life. To be a Puritan in the contemporary Western imagination may conjure, at best, the image of a Mayflower pilgrim, feasting with American Indians at the first Thanksgiving. Yet in its primary employment, to be a 'Puritan' is to be a joyless prude, bent on making miserable the lives of any who dare to smile and express or experienced joy. To be puritanical is to rule with a moral iron fist, exerting religious views on the uninitiated in order to impose an order unwanted by many but zealously fought for by the few. J. I. Packer summarizes the history of the term in this way:

> 'Puritan' as a name was, in fact mud from the start. Coined in the early 1560s, it was always a satirical smear word implying peevishness, censoriousness, conceit, and a measure of hypocrisy, over and above its basic implication of religiously motivated discontent with what was seen as Elizabeth's Laodicean and compromising Church of England. Later, the word gained the further, political connotation of being against the Stuart monarchy and for some sort of republicanism; its primary reference, however, was still to what was seen as an odd, furious, and ugly form of Protestant religion.[5]

That the term has carried this loaded meaning for four hundred years is evidenced of its importance in defining those to whom it's applied. Michael Winship suggests that its broad denotation and connotations beg for definition in context while it is studied, which is a more than reasonable suggestion given its range of use. While agreeing that the term is a helpful sort of shorthand, he goes on to say: "What is the term

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[4] Randall J. Pederson, *Unity in Diversity: English Puritans and the Puritan Reformation, 1603–1689* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 45-46.

[5] J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 21.

shorthand for?...If it is taken to mean specific inherited religious practices, agendas, and sensibilities, it should be applied cautiously if these traits were widely dispersed in the Church of England or in Reformed Christianity in general."[6] Winship's cautious application of the term to the religious environment of Bunyan's day is a helpful general application.[7] For the purposes of this study and further inquiry into the Puritan vision for sanctification, which is borne from the very heart of the movement itself, as evidenced by the term's penchant for purification, perhaps Packer provides the most helpful narrowing of the term: "Puritanism was essentially a movement for church reform, pastoral renewal and evangelism, and spiritual revival; and in addition—indeed, as a direct expression of its zeal for God's honour—it was a world-view, a total Christian philosophy . . . ."[8] Dispensing with any misapprehensions, Packer's working definition establishes an effective and accurate way to evaluate who these people were and what they regarded as the heart of the Christian's post-conversion experience.

The Puritan Vision of Sanctification

To survey the Puritan landscape in search of a focused definition of sanctification is, strangely, both an exercise in observing the obvious and being overwhelmed by the immensity of content to survey. The Puritan vision of Christian spirituality emphasized the believer as one acted upon by God to produce a life that is virtually impossible apart from the supernatural grace of God and genuine belief in the gospel. If one is not exhibiting the fruits of sanctification, he or she cannot claim to be a Christian at all, no matter the outward or formal engagements in religious exercises,

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[6] Michael P. Winship, "Were There Any Puritans in New England?," *New England Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (2001): 138.

[7] Winship suggests that a study of the Puritan era should follow the movement "beginning in England in the 1540s and ending on both sides of the Atlantic around 1690." Michael P. Winship, *Hot Protestants*, 1.

[8] Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 28.

church membership, inheritance, or mystical experience. In their comprehensive survey of Puritan theology, Joel Beeke and Mark Jones assert this perspective on sanctification being the stock and trade of Puritan life: "The Puritans viewed sanctification as comprehensive, or *universal*. They said that all things are meant to be sanctified (cf. 1 Tim. 4:4–5). Holiness should be evident in our lives alone with God, the confidentiality of our homes, the competitiveness of our work, the pleasures of social friendship, and the diligence of our Lord's Day worship."[9] The prominent Puritan divine, John Owen, reflects the *sine qua non* nature of sanctification in this way: "There is no imagination wherewith mankind is besotted more foolish, none so pernicious, as this, that persons not purified, not sanctified, not made holy, in this life, should afterward be taken into that state of blessedness which consists in the enjoyment of God."[10] To the Puritans, sanctification was not simply an aspect of the Christian life—it *is* the Christian life.

To read the Puritans on sanctification is, then, an overwhelming task, simply because they saw *everything* as set apart for the believer's sanctified use or sanctified to the believer for God's purpose of making holy. The issue of suffering, examined in the next section, was very obviously seen by the Puritans as a tool employed by God to effect personal holiness and guard against wanton sin. Concerning the pervasiveness of sanctification and the Christian's own self-conception, it will suffice to survey a handful of Bunyan's contemporaries to establish the fact that this was the top priority in Puritan practical theology.

Arguably the most thorough among practical Puritan theologians was Richard Baxter (1615–1691). Slightly more than a decade older than Bunyan, Baxter is famous for his exhaustive treatments of practical theology, giving counsel, consolation, reproof,

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[9] Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), chap. 33, "The Puritans on Living in Christ," sec. 2, "The Puritan Idea of Sanctification," subsec. 3, "Sanctification is Comprehensive and Moral," para. 1, Kindle.

[10] John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1862), 574.

warning, and all manner of other pastoral care through the written medium. In his work on sound conversion, here is how Baxter represents the type of life truly worthy of being considered converted in his seventh "direction":

> My next Direction is this: 'If you would be truly converted, be sure that you make an absolute resignation of yourselves, and all that you have to God.' This is the very form and life of sanctification. To be sanctified, is to be separated in heart, life, and profession, from all other masters and ends, to God. When the heart that was set upon the world and flesh, is separated from them, and inclined to God by the power of love, and devoted to him, to serve and please him; this is indeed a sanctified heart. And when the life that before was spent in the service of Satan, the world, and the flesh, is now taken off them, and spent, as to the drift and course of it, in the service of God, for the pleasing and glorifying of him, from the impulse of love, this is indeed a holy life.[11]

Even before conversion, the Puritans were deeply concerned that the prospective Christian was willing to count the cost in terms of sanctification. As will be addressed in the next chapter, the Puritan vision of a sound conversion involved endurance through hardships, consistently evidencing sanctification, which would be a token of grace undergirding their assurance of salvation, as the endurance functioned as a sanctifying pursuit and grace in one. Would the new believer be found with an understanding that all of life was to now fall under the sway of Jesus' lordship? Was it plain that the call to discipleship was a call to *separate* from things heretofore loved for the sake of Christ? For if one is not willing to forsake all, his heart—and, thus, himself—would not rightly bear the label of 'holy to the Lord.' Elsewhere, Baxter addresses the matter of sanctification as something to be understood as existentially essential, which, if understood incorrectly, would hamper the flow of Christian vitality. Accordingly, he speaks of sanctification as being an all-encompassing reality for Christian experience: "The essence of sanctification, as denominated from its opposite objects, is nothing but our renunciation and rejection of the flesh, the world, and the devil; of pleasures profits,

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[11] Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, ed. William Orme, vol. 8 (London: James Duncan, 1830), 147.

and honours, as they would be preferred before God, and draw us to forsake him."[12] To be sanctified is to be committed to the worship of God, whereas to diminish the place of the walk of holiness is to commit nothing less than apostasy and forsaking the worship of God.

Already cited above, John Owen wrote prolifically as both a systematician and practical theologian. As to the all-encompassing nature of sanctification, Owen plainly states that the genuine Christian—and the genuine Christian alone—has the right to be regarded as set apart for God:

> All believers, and only believers, being sanctified and made holy, *what it is* that is sanctified in them, or what is the *proper seat and subject* of this work, is, in the next place, to be declared; for it is not a mere *external denomination*, as things were called "holy" under the Old Testament, nor any *transient act*, nor any *series* or course of actions, that we plead about, but that which hath, as a *real being* and *existence*, so a *constant abiding* or residence in us. Hence, he that is holy is always so, whether he be in the actual exercise of the duties of holiness or no, though an omission of any of them in their proper season is contrary unto and an impeachment of holiness, as to its degrees. Now, this subject of sanctification is the entire nature or whole person of a believer. It is not any one faculty of the soul or affection of the mind or part of the body that is sanctified, but the whole soul and body, or the entire nature, of every believing person. And hereby is the work of sanctification really distinguished from any other mere common work which may represent it, or pretend unto it; for all such works are partial. Either they are in the mind only by light and notions of truth, or on the affections only in zeal and devotion, or on the mind and conscience in the convictions of sin and duty; but farther they proceed not. But true holiness consists in the renovation of our whole persons;[13]

Regard for sanctification as, primarily, the work and guarantee of God is critical in understanding the Puritan theology of personal holiness. Not only does a God-worked sanctification ensure the glory of God in the holiness of Christian people, but it guarantees that those who have experienced genuine saving grace will surely demonstrate sanctified lives. This made the Puritan vision for godliness impossible to accomplish by mere personal effort and moral reform and requiring the personal work of a God whose mighty grace could work so as to actually change the heart and redirect it from affection

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[12] Baxter, *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, 16:202.

[13] Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 3:417.

to affection. Remarking on one of the most foundational passages in distinguishing the marks of a life lived under the New Covenant, that of the changed heart, Owen locates sanctification squarely in the center as both necessary and God-wrought:

> The whole of our sanctification and holiness is comprised in these promises. To be cleansed from the defilements of sin, whatever they be, to have a heart inclined, disposed, enabled, to fear the Lord always, and to walk in all his ways and statutes accordingly, with an internal habitual conformity of the whole soul unto the law of God, is to be sanctified or to be holy. And all this God promiseth directly to work in us and to accomplish himself.[14]

It would be a great disservice if the Puritan vision for holiness should not include representation of its placing of love for God as the operating personal affection. The Christian's individual devotion to the Lord is an important consideration since the issue of suffering involves the intimate, personal communion and union of Christ and Christian, not merely an abstract commitment to holiness, that moves the Christian heart toward obedience in the presence of temptation and pain. Richard Sibbes (1577–1635) clearly states his understanding of sanctification and personal love from and to Christ in these terms:

> God so loveth us when he is appeased by Christ, that the bar being taken away, our sins being pardoned, and the sluice of mercy open, there is way made for another life, the life of sanctification by the Spirit. Upon pardon of our sins he gives the Spirit; and we feeling that love, have love wrought in us to him again, and that love stirs up every Christian to obedience.[15]

For Sibbes, as with Owen and his other Puritan contemporaries, the concept of holiness entailed that the sanctified believer was set apart because God had performed a supernatural work that actually marked the believer out as belonging to God, with a new allegiance being effected by the Holy Spirit. For such as claim to belong to Christ, the defining mark of personal love to the Savior communicates true participation in this lifelong process and eternal inheritance of holiness unto the Lord:

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[14] Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 3:383.

[15] Richard Sibbes, *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Alexander Balloch Grosart, vol. 5 (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; W. Robertson, 1863), 209.

> They must be such as love God, such as are altered, and changed, and sanctified to love him; because no unclean thing shall enter in thither; because we cannot so much as desire heaven without a change. We cannot have communion there with Christ and those blessed souls without likeness to them, which must be by a spirit of love; our natures must be altered. Therefore it is a vain presumption for any man to think of heaven unless he find his disposition altered. For we may read our eternal condition in heaven by our disposition upon earth.[16]

Sanctification and Suffering in Puritan Perspective

Before looking specifically at Bunyan's own words pertaining to the significance of suffering, it will be helpful to consider the way in which some of his contemporaries perceived the role of hardship as a means of spiritual growth. Because sanctification was seen as pervasive, all-encompassing, and the universal tenor of the Christian life, it should not be surprising to see the issue of suffering treated regularly by Puritan authors. Whether owing to the reality of experiencing life in a fallen world or the unique difficulties of their own time, the Puritans were masterful physicians of the soul who located these hardships in the providential designs of God. A few examples will suffice to establish that Bunyan was certainly not alone among his contemporaries in providing a perspective on suffering that saw it woven into the fabric of the normal Christian life.

Returning to John Owen, we find a plain discourse on the matter of sanctification through suffering as he provides commentary on the twelfth chapter of the letter to the Hebrews. Picking up on the author's filial language in describing the peculiar difficulties facing the Christian, which many were tempted to shrink back from and thus occasioned the writing of the letter, Owen assures the believer that to experience the rod of fatherly discipline is to partake in the holiness of the one who disciplines him. Commenting on Hebrews 12:11, in which discipline is said to "yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness," Owen states:

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[16] Sibbes, *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes*, 4:179.

> Wherefore by "righteousness" in this place, our sanctification, or the internal principle of holiness and obedience, is intended; and the "fruits" hereof, are its increase in the more vigorous actings of all graces, and their effects in all duties. Especially, the fruits of righteousness here intended, are patience, submission to the will of God, weanedness from the world, mortification of sin, heavenly-mindedness, purity of heart, readiness for the cross, and the like.[17]

Owen's perspective—taken directly from Scripture itself—is that God engages his people with suffering as a kind of tool to effect something more significant than the experience itself. The experience is a *necessary* means to pull the Christian away from the competing objectives of life in the flesh and show the necessity and beauty of a holy life in contrast. This perspective is uniquely afforded to those who undergo the rod of suffering, for Owen states: "Those who cannot see an excellency in the abounding of the fruits of righteousness before described, can never apprehend that there is either good or benefit in chastisements."[18] The Christian should then perceive any manner of suffering as tending to something greater than the mere moment itself and not ascribe to God some sort of mischievous intent in weaving those moments into the lives of his people. Believers benefit when they bear up under this rod of suffering at length. Sanctification is a process in which enduring and persevering through trials changes and strengthens the believer: the Christian "can never find any benefit in chastisements, unless we are 'exercised' by them; that is, that all our graces are stirred up by them unto a holy, constant exercise."[19]

To see suffering as ordained by God toward a greater end, namely the fruit of righteousness, godliness, sanctification, and holiness, is an exercise in wisdom and a righting of perspective that otherwise would be wholly disposed to regard pain and suffering as anything other than a futile obstacle to personal fulfillment. As such, Owen offers these summary remarks: "Herein lies the wisdom of faith in this matter, not to pass

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[17] John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. W. H. Goold, vol. 24, Works of John Owen (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1854), 275.

[18] Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 24:276.

[19] Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 24:276.

a judgment on chastisements, from the present sense we have of what is evil and dolorous in them, but from their end and use, which are blessed and glorious."[20]

Again, counterintuitive to the natural disposition of the human heart, Thomas Watson (1620–1686) treats the Christian under affliction as one who is being uniquely loved, rather than forsaken by God: "We think God cannot favour us except he hath us in his lap; yet he loves his people when he is giving them the bitter diet-drink of affliction. God's rod and God's love, they both stand together. It is no love in God to let men go on in sin, and never smite . . . Let us feel God's hand, so that we may have his heart."[21] Watson would have the Christian understand that to be sanctified is to be loved—that remaining untested in the midst of impenitence or in view of some moral defect yet to be discovered is to the believer actually a far greater misery than temporary affliction that is designed to drive out ungodliness from the heart and replace it with godliness. Suffering, says Watson, is a "love-token" from God to his people: "The nature of affliction is quite changed when experienced by a good man: it is to him, by Divine chemistry, turned into a blessing; it becomes a love-token, a badge of adoption, a preparatory to heaven."[22] Far from representing divine displeasure, suffering was tied to sanctification as an act of love designed to pursue the greater good of Christlikeness, the path of holiness that must needs be traveled for any to be known as a genuine follower of Jesus.

Finally, Sibbes directs those who suffer with a heavy burden of unbelief and discouragement to turn to the Lord who will not "break a bruised reed." Encouraging a sense of godly introspection, Sibbes directs the Christian to consider just how significant a thing must be dwelling in the believer's heart for God to employ something as hard as

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[20] Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 24:276.

[21] Thomas Watson, *Puritan Gems; Or, Wise and Holy Sayings of the Rev. Thomas Watson, A. M.*, ed. John Adey, Second Thousand. (London: J. Snow, and Ward and Co.; Nisbet and Co.; E. F. Gooch, 1850), 2.

[22] Watson, *Puritan Gems; Or, Wise and Holy Sayings of the Rev. Thomas Watson, A. M.*, 9.

discipline to accomplish the purpose of sanctification. For the Christian under trial, the instruction is plain—to seek the Lord's purpose in it and humbly acknowledge that this tool is specified for each heart, in order to accomplish the beautifying work of sanctification: "Let us lament our own untowardness, and say, Lord, what an heart have I that needs all this, that none of this could be spared! We must lay siege to the hardness of our own hearts, and aggravate sin all we can."[23] In God's hands, the Christian endures hardship as one under the purifying grace of God. In erudite fashion, Sibbes suggests: "So it is with a Christian: those afflictions that he suffers, and under which he seems to be buried, they are as useful to him as all his comforts. Nay, a Christian is more beholden to afflictions for his graces and comforts than he is to outward blessings."[24] This final phrase—"a Christian is more beholden to afflictions for his graces and comforts than he is to outward blessings"—summarizes well the Puritan perspective on suffering and sanctification.

Any growth in godliness that does not recognize the regular and peculiar usages of hardship to conform the believer to Christ is fundamentally missing a key aspect of how God accomplishes the task of making his people holy in practice. To be sanctified without suffering is a concept foreign to the Puritans (and, ultimately, to Scripture) and it will do the believer well to acknowledge that suffering not only has a place in Christian living, but a central and indispensable place that cannot be substituted for. The Puritan vision of suffering and sanctification is one in which virtually all Christian people endure for the sake of refinement and a move toward personal godliness. Sibbes summarizes thus:

> Nay, a Christian is more beholden to afflictions for his graces and comforts than he is to outward blessings. One would think that the goldsmith were a-spoiling his plate when he is a-burning of it, when all that while the dross is but a-consuming out of it; and the vessel so hammered and beaten out, is but a-preparing to be a vessel of

[23] Sibbes, *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes*, 1:47.

[24] Sibbes, *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes*, 2:358.

> honour, to stand before some great man . . . The Spirit of God is working an excellent work in them, preparing and fitting them for grace and glory.[25]

Bunyan's Vision of Sanctification and Suffering

As we turn attention to Bunyan himself, it will become evident that he was consistent with his above-cited contemporaries. If Owen, Watson, Sibbes, etc., wrote about suffering, having tasted it in part through the normal course of life in the tumultuous religious environment of seventeenth century Britain and their part in the Great Ejection, Bunyan wrote about it as one who had imbibed multiple drafts of affliction throughout the course of his life. Having suffered so greatly, both personally and ministerially, Bunyan has much to say about the issue and its place in the Christian's spiritual formation. His theology of sanctification and suffering will be examined from two different perspectives: suffering as an agent of holiness in the Christian life and God's direct activity in the sanctifying administration of suffering.

Suffering as an Agent of Holiness

Bunyan's theology of sanctified hardship is pronounced, running through the course of his writings, both pastoral and allegorical. As the purpose of this work is to examine the pastoral material, the extensive amount of material related to Christian suffering in the allegorical works will be excluded. Further, it is granted that Bunyan agreed with his contemporaries on the themes already addressed above in the brief survey of Puritan thought above, those broad principles will not be reasserted from Bunyan himself. Rather, we turn to Bunyan to gain an even broader perspective on how suffering operates as an agent of holiness in the Christian's life, one informed with deeply personal levels of participation in the sanctifying effects he wrote of.

To begin this examination of Bunyan's view of suffering as an agent of holiness, we first turn to the end of the tinker's life. Over his years of walking with and

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[25] Sibbes, *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes*, 2:358.

suffering for Christ he had gained perspective, which he shared as proverbial, pastoral thoughts intended to help others who were struggling. Aware that his many years in prison had had a profound effect not only on his own heart, but on his beloved church, Bunyan wrote, "I have often thought that the best of Christians are found in the worst of times. And I have thought again that one reason why we are no better, is because God purges us no more. Noah and Lot, who so holy as they in the time of their afflictions? And yet who so idle as they in the time of their prosperity?"[26]

As he had opportunity to reflect on the shape his life had taken over several years of pronounced difficulties, Bunyan saw the immense benefit of suffering in fitting Christian people to be genuinely holy people. Interestingly, the two individuals referenced here are themselves examples used by the apostle Peter in his second epistle, given to encourage believers that "the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials" (2 Pet 2:9a). A cursory reflection of the broader passage in 2 Peter, which is obviously in view for Bunyan as he makes this observation, may suggest that Peter is providing a lifeline to suffering Christians that will extract them from their hardship. If God knows how to rescue the godly from trials, would it not seem appropriate to assume that this rescue will spare them from the same? Is sparing the godly from trials, in light of their present godliness, the way in which suffering touches the Christian—by not touching him?

As Peter invokes Noah and Lot as examples of men who were "rescued," the rescue in view is eschatological in nature. Prior to the ultimate rescue they received, both of these men endured significant hardship for extended periods. While Noah dwelt among the antediluvian masses, he experienced ridicule for his confidence in the promises of God. While Lot dwelt in the wicked cities of the plain, his righteous soul was

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[26] John Bunyan, *Bunyan's Dying Sayings*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006), 66.

"tormented" by the godlessness of his contemporaries (2 Pet 2:7–8). These were not passing moments for either man, but prolonged and regular experiences of difficulty directly related to their being set apart by God in the midst of a world at odds with him. So, when Bunyan asks the question of "Who so holy as they?", he is appealing to the Petrine approach to suffering, in which it is no strange thing, but, in fact, a component of being set apart by and for God (1 Pet 1:6–7). As redeemed men and women endure the afflictions of life in a fallen world, there will be natural opposition. The world that called for the crucifixion of Christ would undoubtedly cause trouble for Christ's people. Suffering, then, is an inevitable part of the Christian life, because Christian people, like their Old Testament counterparts, are genuinely different. If holiness is to be set apart, then those who are set apart will necessarily experience resistance that deepens the qualities of holiness that characterize them. Prosperity, in Bunyan's estimation, produced weak characteristics of holiness, because it rarely provides for the true, distinguishing characteristics of holy men and women to be seen against the backdrop of the world from which they have been set apart. Thus, suffering is an *inevitable* component of Christian experience, because to be sanctified means one has been sanctified—set apart—as different in a fallen world.

Moving from the proverbial to the poetic, Bunyan wrote in verse on the topic of suffering as he considered his time imprisoned for the sake of Christ. Having spent years behind bars, it would be easy to assume a man would become bitter toward the efficient cause of his incarceration. The exact opposite was in Bunyan's mind as he perceived the purifying effects of adversity in directing the Christian's heart toward a proper perspective on life:

> 26. God sometimes visits prisons more
> Than lordly palaces,
> He often knocketh at our door,
> When he their houses miss.

27. The truth and life of heavenly things

Lift up our hearts on high,

And carry us on eagles' wings,

Beyond carnality.[27]

The fact that Bunyan freely confesses that "God sometimes visits prisons more" reveals an assumption naturally made by all is flipped on its head, that a perspective had been radically altered to think in a different way about the place of hardship in the life of one beloved of the Lord. If sanctification was perceived as a 'whole life' experience by the Puritans, then, the experience of hardship ensured that the way a Christian understood the world and God's operations in it would function according to divine standards and not those of a fallen system opposed to God and the spiritual maturity of the Christian.

Implicit in his proclamation that the "truth and life of heavenly things" lifts the Christian's heart is Bunyan's belief that suffering leads the believer to follow—out of necessity—the command of Colossians 3:1–2 to "seek the things that are above, where Christ is" and to set his mind "on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." This passage is detected in the poetry of his *Prison Meditations*, revealing that Bunyan found the place of pain as the place where the Christian's imagination is sanctified. Just as he suggested that strong Christians are necessarily produced by times of hardship, because suffering tends to the inevitable effect of contrasting the godly from the ungodly, so it also inevitably directs the Christian's mind to consider things that are significant, eternal, and weighty. When Paul commands the Colossians to seek things that are above because Christ, who is their life, is there, so suffering has a sanctifying effect for Bunyan because it *forces* the believer to turn his mind to things that pertain to Christ. What comfort can be found when no earthly comfort exists? What hope is there for the one

[27] John Bunyan, *Bunyan's Prison Meditations*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006), 66.

whose earthly hopes have been removed? What lasting joy when things that are transient have vanished like the wind? On the wings of suffering a Christian can transcend the transient realities of a fallen world and gain a sanctified perspective of things rightly ordered. When the things of Christ are perceived as lasting and life-giving in suffering, believing hearts are lifted high through being brought low.

A final aspect of Bunyan's broader theology of holy affliction is his belief that endurance and perseverance in the midst of suffering serves as proof that a Christian is a real professor of faith in a holy God. The experiences of suffering endured by genuine believers show, both to the one afflicted and those watching, that they are genuine participants in Christ, God's life being manifest in his. In his allegorizing interpretation of the "house of Lebanon" spoken of in 1 Kings, Bunyan extends an allegorical interpretation of the house's vessels as being most closely identified with cups of affliction. He writes, "Nor is there anything more natural to the church, while in a wilderness condition, than such cups and draughts as these. Hence she, as there, is said to be clothed, as was said afore, in sackcloth, to mourn, to weep, to cry out, and to be in pain, as is a woman in travail. See the Lamentations and you will find all this verified."[28]

Notice that Bunyan asserts that there is nothing more natural to the church, in a fallen world, than to experience the constant currents of suffering. It would be a strange thing for the Christian to not experience peculiar types of affliction in a fallen world. Bunyan estimates that God intends for this type of regular experience to *confirm* the holiness that Christians are being conformed to. Continuing with the allegorization of the house of Lebanon and its vessels, he suggests:

> The afflictions, therefore, that the church in the wilderness hath met with, these cups of gold, are of more worth than are all the treasures of Egypt; they are needful and profitable, and praiseworthy also, and tend to the augmenting of our glory when the next world is come (1 Thess 3:3; Rev 2:10; 1 Peter 1:6). Besides they are signs,

[28] John Bunyan, *The House of the Forest of Lebanon*, vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006), 528.

> tokens, and golden marks of love, and jewels that set off the beauty of the church in the sight of God the more (Gal 6:17; Rev 3:19; Heb 12:6). They are also a means by which men are proved sound, honest, faithful, and true lovers of God, as also such whose graces are not counterfeit, feigned, or unsound, but true, and such as will be found to praise, and honour, and glory, at the appearing of Jesus Christ (Isa 27:9; Heb 12:7–10; 1 Peter 2:19; 2 Cor 4:17, 18; 2 Thess 1:5).[29]

Bunyan holds that the regular occurrence of difficulty in the Christian life is an abiding proof checker, an agent God employs to detect the genuineness of claims made by those who bear the name of Christ. For those who are sincere professors of faith in Jesus, suffering is a way in which they are "proved sound, honest, faithful, and true lovers of God." Strange as the consolation may seem, it is a great grace afforded by God that his people should have assurances that don't simply accord with a positive self-estimation, but that show the course of holiness to be one that is actually succeeding.

A man who feels himself at ease in his prosperity may perhaps have no need to question his own authenticity when his confidence is never put to the test. It would be an epic tragedy for such a man to get to the end of his life and have found that the absence of any confirmatory, external test was provided that showed the presence of actual holiness, not simply the perception that 'easy-believism' can afford when real choices have to be made that display the real condition of the heart. God employs suffering as a means of confirmation, both through internal assurance as such tests are 'passed' and through external confirmation that such tests bear out a life seen to be genuinely sanctified. The genuine believer dares not presume upon the nature of his own sanctification, but, if God should offer a way to ensure it is not "counterfeit, feigned, or unsound," then he should receive this vessel from the Lord as a blessing, designed for the good of the Christian's progress in obedience as it is continually confirmed. The tendency of even a regenerated human heart toward self-deception requires that God employ a searching mechanism, outside of the desire or design of the individual, to ensure that the hedges along the narrow way are clearly seen. In a work directed specifically toward suffering believers,

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[29] Bunyan, *The House of the Forest of Lebanon*, 3:529.

Bunyan simply relates these words, so as to make clear that the cause of holiness needs such a test as that provided by suffering to verify it:

> That sufferers, if they have not a care, may be too negligent as to the securing of their souls with God, even when persecution is upon them. For these words, as they are an instruction, so they are an awakening instruction; they call as to people in danger; as to people, not so aware of the danger; or as unto a people that forget, too much, that their souls, and the ruin of them, are sought after by Satan, when trouble attends them for the gospel sake . . . The reason is, for that we are more flesh than spirit, and because the voice of the world makes a bigger sound in our carnal mind, than the word of God doth.[30]

The Christian's willingness to tarry along the narrow way, coupled with the fact that it is quite easy—and, indeed, tempting—to design measures that are merely self-confirmatory, requires that the Lord employ an agent to walk alongside the believer and act as a sort of third party to keep each believer honest about the authenticity of the holiness he professes.

God's Activity in the Sanctifying Application of Suffering

The Puritan worldview was eminently God-centered in its character. The Puritans are unsurpassed as champions of the supremacy of God and his sole ownership of all the glory in the world. This was true of their theology proper, their soteriology, and even their ecclesiology, as they fought for the purity of the church's worship according to a conviction that God, not man, is at the center of corporate worship. God stands as the great Lord and Captain of time and space. He is over all and working out a sovereignly designed plan for all of history.

The beauty of Puritan God-centeredness is that in the midst of setting forth expositional and logical arguments for reasonable belief, it ultimately made no apologies for a worldview in which God is at the center. Baked into the Puritan theology of the everyday is the idea that the best life is the life that reckons God as the sovereign, no

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[30] John Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006), 696.

matter the circumstances, including the hardest points of human suffering. The intersection of divine sovereignty, everlasting love, and the most painful moments of a Christian's life is a place in which Bunyan wrote often in order to ensure that his church and his readers would be confident in knowing that suffering isn't simply a tool wielded at random by God. Suffering is divinely employed with the utmost intentionality and personality, a tool that accomplishes the task of conforming God's people to the image of his Son.

In his work *Seasonable Counsel, or, Advice to Sufferers,*[31] Bunyan engages in a detailed account of how he perceived God's design to be employed in the manner of a Christian's suffering and the influence of such suffering on Christian maturity. He begins this discussion by providing initial remarks affirming the God-centered perspective on the workings of human history:

> God is the great orderer of the battle that is managed in the world against antichrist. Hence that battle is called, "The battle of that great day of God Almighty" (Rev 16:14). It is not what enemies will, nor what they are resolved upon, but what God will, and what God appoints; that shall be done. This doctrine Christ teacheth when he saith, "Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows" (Luke 12:6, 7). He speaks in the verses before of killing, and bids them that they should not be afraid for that. "Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him." Then he leads them to the consideration of this, that the will of God governs, and disposes of his [people] to suffering; as well as declares to them for what, and how they should suffer, saying, "Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings," &c.[32]

In offering "seasonable counsel" to those who are suffering, a consoling word may be received only if those who entertain it are willing to accept the premises communicated above regarding God's purpose to sanctify even the 'deepest distress' to his people—namely, that every moment of hardship, affliction, persecution, or pain is not

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[31] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, vol. 2, 2006.

[32] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 2:722.

just permitted, but designed by God for the specific needs of each of his people. Any worldview that entertains the idea that God is not specifically at work in all things, no matter how unpleasant a circumstance it may be, is incompatible with Bunyan's theology of suffering. If difficulty is an intended part of the process of God making his people holy, then it necessarily follows that God is involved with the intricacies of ensuring that these hardships take place in a manner tailored to the needs of the one being sanctified. The interplay between the battles facing God's people and his knowing of each hair on their heads is significant for Bunyan as he seeks to establish in his readers' minds that God is not unaware or impotent in their difficulties, but rather, has designed them with purpose. Thus, when Bunyan writes, "It is not what enemies will, nor what they are resolved upon, but what God will, and what God appoints; that shall be done,"[33] he is solidifying for those who suffer that the only proper metanarrative is the one in which God retains his lordship and has not abdicated it out of sentimentality.

Following from this is what may be considered the invincibility of the believer in the midst of suffering, for just as God will have his way in conforming people to the image of his son, so also, nothing will either stand in the way of it or run afoul of God's purposes in that process—even the most hateful enemy or difficulty trial. Accordingly, his *Counsel* continues in this way:

> It is not the way of God to let the enemies of God's church do what they will; no, the Devil himself can devour but "whom he may" (1 Peter 5:8). And as no enemy can bring suffering upon a man when the will of God is otherwise, so no man can save himself out of their hands when God will deliver him up for his glory. It remaineth, then, that we be not much afraid of men, nor yet be foolishly bold; but that we wait upon our God in the way of righteousness, and the use of those means which his providence offereth to us for our safety; and that we conclude that our whole dispose, as to liberty or suffering, lieth in the will of God, and that we shall, or shall not suffer, even as it pleaseth him.[34]

The Christian is liberated to endure suffering knowing that the good work of

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[33] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 2:722.

[34] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 2:722–723.

sanctification, having begun by God, will be carried to completion at the day of Christ Jesus, as Paul states in Philippians 1, and that the suffering that is endured in the process of sanctifying his people takes place solely under the rule of the one who sanctifies. This was surely a balm to Bunyan as he sat imprisoned for several years, knowing that a wounded conscience would easily procure a release from a tortuous incarceration, while a whole conscience was tied to entrusting himself to a faithful God, a sovereign God, while doing what is good. To hear the words "that we shall, or shall not suffer, even as it pleaseth him" may have a certain romantic bravery ringing through them if they are merely words, but when they are the words of one who has practiced them, they become dreadfully serious.

As John Bunyan lay in a Bedford jail, he came to realize that his time of incarceration would be no longer and no less than what was intended by the King of kings. A certain kind of invincibility attaches itself to a man who knows that God's eternal purpose of sanctification will come to pass even through the things that other men might regard as hindrances to their purpose in life. Suffering is an appointed means whereby God personally concerns himself with a disposition of affairs to make sure his people are dealt with in the ways most needed for their holiness. How many foes must have been in view for the man who would rather have "moss grow on his brows" than violate his convictions in Christ! An otherworldly confidence belongs to the man or woman who knows that it is not God's way to be uninvolved in the lives of his people, even in the things that seem to be so far from what represents joy and life.

Having confirmed this God-centered perspective on suffering, he proceeds to ask and answer several questions that make plain God's design and implementation of this strangely formed device to promote real and lasting godliness in the lives of his elect. Those several question and answer sets have to do with who God appoints to suffer; when such suffering is appointed; where such suffering takes place; the manner of hardship engineered for the believer; "for what truth" or what sanctifying purpose God

has appointed this suffering; the mechanism by which it takes place; and, the duration of the affliction. Of particular interest for what remains in this section pertains to how Bunyan conceived of God allotting specific suffering for the believer and his place in the mechanism of affliction, as they will round out the picture of a man who knew God to be intimately involved in the process of sanctifying his people through bitter providences.

In the course of his argument, Bunyan speaks to some of the 'mechanics' of affliction before utilizing that practical foundation to assert the personal nature of providence in pairing sanctification to its particular need in the individual believer's life. Says Bunyan, "Every saint has his course, his work, and his testimony, as is allotted him of God (Mark 13:34)."[35] He proceeds by providing examples, such as John and Stephen, whose lives ended differently, but who were appointed the task of glorifying God just the same. While identifying specific doctrinal issues with those who bear witness to them, Bunyan considers the "Acts and Monuments," being *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, and reviews the lives of those who lived and died in defense of truth: "Some are there said to suffer for the Godhead, some for the manhood, some for the ordinances of Christ, and some laid down their lives for the brethren. And thus far we see that he that suffers for righteousness' sake, suffers, in this sense, according to the will of God."[36] If sufferings are tailored to truths defended, so the practical and personal realities belonging to suffering pilgrims are tailored to meet the cause of truth and holiness in their hearts.

The final observation regarding Bunyan's view of God's role in blessing the believer's life through hardship concerns the Lord's actual involvement. Does God bear a responsibility for the difficulties of his people? The question of "By whose hand does suffering take place in the lives of God's people?" is responded to by invoking one of the oldest and most famous examples of divine rule: Pharaoh and Moses. When Paul spends

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[35] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 2:723.

[36] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 2:724.

three chapters expressing concern for fellow Jews and their salvation in Romans 9–11, he answers objections to a sovereign soteriology by drawing attention toward God and the unambiguous and unapologetic position he holds over even the fiercest and most trying of afflictions. Bunyan plainly states, "It was appointed that Moses and Israel should suffer by the hand of Pharaoh."[37] And how did Bunyan know this? Because God has spoken clearly to the fact that even Pharaoh had been personally and uniquely called for in his grand providence. It is, again, a theological perspective distasteful to many who do not see God's purposes of sanctification extending beyond personal comfort. However distasteful a thought may be, it must be captured by Christ. In this case, God gives people a peek behind the curtain of the eternal halls of providence, by declaring in multiple places throughout the Bible, that it is "for this very purpose, said God, have I raised thee up, that is, to be a persecutor, and to reap the fruits thereof (Exo 9:16)."[38]

Is God, then, personally and intimately involved with the sufferings of his people? Has he truly planned them, ordained them, ensured them? To Bunyan and his Puritan contemporaries, the answer is a resounding 'yes':

> For if a sparrow falls not to the ground without God, she shall not be killed without God; not by he knows not who. And if a Christian man is better than many sparrows, it follows, that God concerns himself more with, for, and about him than with, for, or about many sparrows. It follows, therefore, in right reason, that as the person who is appointed to be the sufferer, so the persons who are appointed to be the rod and sword thereby to afflict withal.[39]

The involvement of God with his people does not stop at the doorstep of comfort, prosperity, and material happiness. Many may be happy for this to be true, but it misses the mark quite dramatically. To be known by God is to not simply be known in order to avoid worry, because God will provide for felt needs, but to be known for the

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[37] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 2:724.

[38] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 2:724.

[39] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 2:724.

liabilities of our own hearts, the ways that we may otherwise stumble, those things buried deep inside that only the giver and sustainer of life can know. To be known in this way is to have the great purpose of Christian living—sanctification—realized in spite of the many things that would otherwise be an obstacle. If a man's spiritual maturity should catch God unaware, how much confidence could be had that there is any design at all? Yet for the Bunyan—and Puritan—worldview, the very fact that God knows the human heart even before it is formed is a reason for the Christian to endure hardship, because he knows that God is personally attending to each and every circumstance, whether desired or undesired, because his interest in each believer is personal. The exhaustive sovereignty of God is good news for those who suffer, because it means that his personal involvement far outweighs any indifference or impotence he may otherwise be accused of. Though pain be painful, it is not an end in itself, when the God who gives life, breath, and being sets it apart to the particulars of daily life and works the regular pattern of holiness in the lives of those called to participate in Christ.

For John Bunyan and his Puritan colleagues, the comprehensive life of sanctification can never be separated from the trials, hardships, afflictions, and persecutions endured by Christian people. To suffer as a Christian is to be an increasingly holier Christian, so long as the proper perspective is cultivated and wisdom prevails to direct a constant reckoning of God's hand in the hard places of life. Any pastoral theology that robs people of a sovereign God committed to the holiness of his people is deficient and requires the kind of correction that listening to a man who suffered over a decade of prison with a pastor's heart can provide. For the genuine Christian, to suffer is to realize where life may be found and who holds it in his hand. The way to life entails regular stops at the way to death, superintended graciously by the God who is blessing eternal and purposeful circumstances to the true well-being of one who, having been perfected for all time, now endures, not as a victim, but as a holier vessel prepared for good works.

CHAPTER 4

THE ROLE OF SUFFERING IN PERSEVERANCE

The Puritan vision of salvation necessarily included both a dynamic experience of sanctification and an assurance of participation in Christ through the persevering faithfulness of professing believers. Perseverance is an earmark of a true Christian as far as Bunyan and the Puritans were concerned. Consequently no one, whether under duress or in prosperity, who fails to finish well in Christ can find true consolation. A Christian's faith endures, even rejoices, in the presence of hardship. As the apostle Peter explains, genuine believers may be visited with grievous trials, but those afflictions are purposed to test genuineness of their faith, a faith "found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 1:6–7).

The Persevering Puritans

Echoing the early church, the Puritan experience was one regularly punctuated by acute suffering, even as the cultural, social, and political milieu displayed a chronic hostility to those whose allegiance transcended earthly rulers and was given wholly to Christ. This sense of ongoing hardship as inevitable and proper for a Christian person would result in a defining characteristic of the Puritan ethos as the seventeenth century wore on. Leland Ryken, commenting on the minority status of the nonconforming Puritans in British religious culture, notes,

> The Puritans were not only a minority, but also a *persecuted minority*. In England they were subjected to harassment and persecution at virtually every stage of their history (excepting, of course, the mid-seventeenth century, when they became the ruling party in the government and the church). Puritan leaders were in and out of prison as a way of life. Laypeople were hauled into court for holding religious meetings in their homes . . . Ministers who refused to wear Anglican vestments or support Anglican ceremony or read services from the Prayer Book were ejected

> from their positions. Consciousness of alienation gave the Puritans their major archetype, the pilgrim passing through an alien world to his or her true country.[1]

Ryken's assertion of the pilgrim archetype is, no doubt, captured most famously in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The popularity of the book in the English-speaking world ensured that a Puritan vision for the Christian life as being one of perseverance in the midst of hardship would attach itself to the imagination of its readers. Throughout Bunyan's most famous work, the allegorized experience of the faithful Christian sees conflict upon conflict befalling the pilgrim seeking a home that awaits in the Celestial City. It is not an easy journey, nor does it often finish quickly; rather, it is one that takes repeated tolls on those who journey faithfully in the pilgrim way.

As previously discussed, the Puritan movement was marked by social and political difficulties that would, in most instances, tend toward the extinguishing of a movement. While it may be difficult for many in the twenty-first century West to conceive of a life without at least some semblance of religious toleration, the roots of the Reformation, from which grew the tree of Puritanism, sprang from the soil of absolute opposition on the part of every major sixteenth century European institution, whether it be governmental, academic, or religious. As the German Augstinians followed Luther's lead in seeking reformation within the church, they experienced dramatic and swift pushback. Robert Christmas suggests that those sympathetic to Luther in Lower Germany were already feeling intense pressure just two years after the posting of the Ninety-Five Theses in Wittenberg: "[F]rom 1519 onwards they were under increasing and direct pressure from a variety of ecclesiastical and temporal authorities, observed multiple burnings of Luther's books in their cities, and experienced arrests and detentions of their colleagues and supporters. Some had been forced to recant publicly."[2]

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[1] Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans As They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 13.

[2] Robert J. Christmas, *The Dynamics of the Early Reformation in Their Reformed Augustinian Context* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 113.

As the Reformation continued to spread throughout Europe, so did the vitriol and violence of the Roman Catholic and secular authorities toward those who held to and sought to advance its theological priorities. John Calvin was himself a refugee of the persecution that broke out against the reform-minded Christians in France. Having witnessed bloodshed among his own countrymen and seeking to establish in Geneva a church aligned with Scripture and not Rome, he related the experience of believers in Nismes, who had been hopeful about religious toleration, yet were cruelly deceived at great cost to their company:

> We rested secure in this expectation, until word was brought to us, that the fire of persecution was again raging in that quarter. Two persons have been burnt, concerning the manner of whose death you will hear from the eye-witness himself . . . Many have been thrown into prison, who are in jeopardy of their lives, unless timely opposition is made to the fury of those who, already drunk with the blood of these two victims, are not otherwise at all likely to set any bounds to their persecuting spirit. The two who suffered have shown a remarkable spirit of constancy to the very last, although their patient endurance of suffering was tried with the most exquisite cruelty.[3]

As the Reformation spread to Great Britain, the movement found an unexpected ally in Henry VIII, whose personal life was at odds with Romish doctrine, thus providing a slightly more favorable political environment for the reformation of the church. Nevertheless, the ambition of the monarchy to control the theology of the church would generally prevail against those seeking a church governed by Scripture and ruled by Christ. Like a pendulum, the nation swung back and forth between monarchs committed to the Roman church and those with Protestant convictions. Within twenty years of Henry VIII's death and after the frenzied conflict regarding the rightful successor to Edward VI, Mary I began a heated persecution of Protestants throughout Britain. Provoked to connect the sufferings of the burgeoning Protestant church, John Foxe published a powerful volume detailing the major sufferings of Christ's church through the

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[3] John Calvin to the Ministers of the Church of Basle, Geneva, 1537, in *Letters of John Calvin*, ed. Jules Bonnet, trans. David Constable, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable and Co., 1855), 1:34-35.

ages until his own day, which included deeply personal and moving accounts of his contemporaries suffering under the inquisitorial reign of Mary and her Roman Catholic successors. John King remarks on the unique nature of this early iteration of English Puritanism's view of suffering in a persevering capacity, even to the point of martyrdom, in this way:

> The suffering experience of saints is a common element in Protestant and Catholic martyrologies, but Foxe and his co-religionists insist that sainthood means risking even life itself to testify on behalf of Christ, rather than the marvellous elements emphasized in late medieval saints' legends. Instead of the older belief that saints are exceptional individuals who possess miraculous power to intercede on behalf of sinners (e.g., Saint Barbara and Catherine of Alexandra), Protestants believed that sainthood is accessible to any 'true' believer, including Lollard dissidents of the late Middle Ages and lowly peasants and artisans, many of whom died for their faith under Mary I.[4]

As the Reformation necessitated a high degree of steadfastness in the face of religious, political, and social pressure, it is no surprise that the successors to the sixteenth century revolution should inherit this as a value pervading their worldview and ethos. From Luther to Calvin to the English Reformation, the blood and persistence of those committed to the principles undergirding Puritanism fueled the resoluteness of those bearing the mantle and ministering throughout seventeenth century Britain. Accordingly, the interplay between suffering, perseverance, and the genuineness of one's profession of faith is, arguably, one of the most significant contributions to practical theology on the part of the Puritan movement, within which Bunyan's contributions both popularized and practicalized as well as any of his fellow ministers. Before turning entirely to considering Bunyan's own assessment and practical application of this theology, a general survey of his contemporaries is warranted in establishing the environment in which he ministered and its significance in providing a setting for Bunyan's exhortations and the popularization of works such as *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

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[4] John Foxe, ed. John N. King, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs: Select Narratives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), xxvii.

The Puritan Vision of Perseverance

Without a doubt, the Puritan movement emphasized the absolute necessity of perseverance as an hallmark of the genuine Christian. The circumstances surrounding Puritan ministries, both in their inherited legacy and ongoing hardship, produced some profound exposition aimed at encouraging, strengthening, and even warning their audiences. What follows is a representative, albeit limited, review of Bunyan's contemporaries, which can help establish a robust, practical Puritan theology of perseverance in Christian experience.

Of any writings to have been produced during the Puritan era, perhaps the most widely known and continually used is the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Drafted in 1646 by an assembly of Puritan ministers, the Confession represents the core doctrinal commitments of orthodox Presbyterianism, specifically, while influencing the confessional statements of their contemporaries, notably the 1656 Savoy Declaration, adopted by the English Congregationalists, and the 1689 London Baptist Confession, an essential adaptation for Baptist distinctives. As the Confession held great sway over the theological convictions of the Puritan movement's leadership, so the catechesis of congregations, families, and individuals exercised a profound influence on shaping the private doctrinal commitments of the laity.

Arguably the most important exposition of the Westminster Standards came from Thomas Watson, whose pastoral heart and theological precision drove doctrine into practice by way of his work *A Body of Practical Divinity*.[5] In this work, whose scope extends from the beginning to the end of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Watson asserts that the "fifth and last fruit of sanctification is perseverance in grace."[6] As he continues to exposit the importance of perseverance as a mark of the genuine Christian,

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[5] Thomas Watson, *The Select Works of the Rev. Thomas Watson, Comprising His Celebrated Body of Divinity, in a Series of Lectures on the Shorter Catechism, and Various Sermons and Treatises* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1855).

[6] Watson, *Body of Divinity*, 186.

he espouses a view that while Christians are active in remaining steadfast professors of faith in Christ,[7] they are, nevertheless, upheld in that participatory process by nothing short of divine power.[8] Nevertheless, the underwriting power of divinity in persevering grace is not merely an intellectual assertion for Watson. It reflects the convictions of a man who himself was ejected from his pulpit for nonconformity and who knew the potential cost associated with continued, steadfast devotion to Christ. Watson concisely summarizes the primacy of perseverance as a mark of grace in saying: "It is the crown and glory of a Christian to persevere . . . The glory and excellency of a Christian is, when he hath finished the work of faith."[9]

If perseverance in the faith is simply a matter of unresisted mental assent to the work of Christ, it would be relatively easy to convince people of its importance. However, perseverance is only worth something if it exists alongside a threat that unsettles confidence. When the actual cost of steadfastness becomes factored into the equation of Christian living, as when acute or chronic hardship attends their way, the abstract requires a grounding to make sense of why an individual must persevere *through* the difficulties, however unpleasant they may be. Many find the promise comforting when hardships are absent, yet turn bewildered when perseverance encounters the actual resistance it is designed to be tested against. John Owen (1616–1683) offers deeply pastoral words that ties this convergence of perseverance and that through which must be persevered to the fatherly discipline of God, as assured by grace and yet effected specifically through the various sufferings of the individual believer. In his exposition of Hebrews, after encouraging the Christian to consider Christ and his sufferings as the

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[7] "Christians do not arrive at perseverance when they sit still and do nothing." Watson, *Body of Divinity*, 187.

[8] "God will so love his people that he will not forsake them; and they shall so fear him, that they shall not forsake him." Watson, *Body of Divinity*, 187.

[9] Watson, *Body of Divinity*, 190-191.

banner of the suffering believer, Owen counsels his readers to reckon their hardships in this way:

> The gospel never requires our suffering, but if we examine ourselves we shall find that we stand in need of the divine chastisement in it. When, by the wisdom of God, we can discern that what we suffer on the one hand is for the glory of God and the gospel, and on the other is necessary to our own sanctification, we shall be prevailed with to patience and perseverance . . . A due consideration of this sacred truth, namely, that all our troubles, persecutions, and afflictions, are divine chastisements and reproofs, whereby God evidenceth unto us our adoption, and that he instructs us for our advantage, is an effectual means to preserve us in patience and perseverance unto the end of our trials.[10]

Although his own experience was not nearly as difficult as that of his contemporaries, Owen demonstrates a self-awareness of what was happening in his own day in the opening pages of his work *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance Explained and Confirmed*. As he treats the significance of the doctrine of assured perseverance for God's elect, he states, regarding his own day: "For the first, these are days wherein we have as sad and tremendous examples of apostasy, backsliding, and falling from high and glorious pitches in profession, as any age can parallel . . . as ever in so short a space of time since the name of Christ was known upon the earth."[11] The Puritan ethos, from the ivory tower of Oxford to the Bedford jail, consistently emphasized that perseverance in suffering is God's gracious gift to the genuine believer. Henry Knapp correctly asserts that "the saints' eternal perseverance was an important aspect of Puritan preaching and underwent crucial development in seventeenth-century England . . . Orthodox churchmen saw teaching on the gift of perseverance, and the accompanying formation of assurance in the mind of the believer, as a primary concerns of their pastoral ministry."[12]

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[10] John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. W. H. Goold, vol. 19, Works of John Owen (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1862), 531.

[11] John Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance Explained and Confirmed*, ed. W.H. Goold, vol. 11, Works of John Owen (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1862), 79.

[12] Henry M. Knapp, "John Owen's Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6: Eternal Perseverance of the Saints in Puritan Exegesis," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 34, no. 1 (2003): 29.

One additional contemporary is worthy of consideration before turning the focus entirely on John Bunyan. This man, like the Bedford tinker, also suffered the fate of imprisonment after refusing to capitulate on the issue of preaching. Although others may have broader name recognition today, Thomas Brooks' (1608–1680) reputation in his day was that of a thorough exegete and resolute pastor. The anonymous editor of the "Banner of Truth" edition of *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices*[13] offers the following reflections in his synopsis of Brooks' life and ministry: "Brooks' works certainly follow him. Not only did he serve his own generation by the will of God, but all generations since have seen reason to call him blessed. His writings have 'built up in their most holy faith' not a few of the Lord's stalwarts, besides the many who have made less impact on the Church of God."[14] Alexander Grosart likened Brooks to Bunyan in his accessibility and pastoral heart, writing that, "Everything is subordinated to '*usefulness;*' and while he gathered around him the cultured and the titled—who all but worshipped the 'good old man'—it was his chief rejoicing that, like his Master, 'the common people' heard and read him 'gladly.'[15] Brooks is therefore a fitting subject to examine the pastoral flavor of the Puritan insistence on perseverance in the midst of hardship.

In what is likely his best known work, Brooks' *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices* communicates a pastoral heart engaged in the activity of strengthening believers in the face of sin, temptation, and suffering. In the work's dedicatory epistle, Brooks states his charge to the reader in these terms: "For a close, remember this, that your life is short, your duties many, your assistance great, and your reward sure; therefore faint not, hold on and hold up, in ways of well-doing, and heaven shall make amends for

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[13] Thomas Brooks, *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2008).

[14] Brooks, *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices*, 14.

[15] Thomas Brooks, *The Complete Works of Thomas Brooks*, ed. Alexander Balloch Grosart, vol. 6 (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; G. Herbert, 1867), vii.

all."[16] As a man whose convictions lived beyond the printer's ink, Brooks served to illustrate the principle while advocating for it through preaching and the printed word. In *Apples of Gold*, a deeply pastoral work enjoining sustained obedience to Christ among young Christians, he draws the connection between his day and the ancient church, whose mettle was regularly tested through suffering and offers a pearl of wisdom to those in the throes of suffering: "An old Christian knows that that good will do him no good which is not made good by perseverance . . . He will courageously venture life and limb rather than by one foot of retreat discredit profession with the reproach of fearfulness."[17] It was Brooks' desire for Christian people to see that the credibility of a profession of faith is intimately tied to its sustained fruits, with the genuine believer moved of God to endure whatever hardships may befall them so as not to cast doubt on the genuineness of Christ's redeeming work toward them. Throughout history, many believers have struggled—including Bunyan, as earlier detailed—with issues of assurance of salvation. To persevere in obedient faith is an aid to confirming a believer's faith as credible and be a means of assurance.

As this section draws to a close, it is fitting to blend together the matter of sanctification, treated earlier, with this Puritan doctrine of perseverance. In pastoral tenderness, Brooks uses *Precious Remedies* to aid the believer in resisting the temptation to break with Christ in the midst of suffering and hardship. It is not uncommon for suffering Christians to ask why God may deign to lord over instances of acute, profound suffering and seemingly withhold his hand and remain at some perceived distance. Yet in Brooks' call for the Christian to resist and endure in the face of such difficulties, he provokes the suffering believer to consider the 'flip side of the coin':

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[16] Brooks, *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices*, 20.

[17] Thomas Brooks, *Apples of Gold,* ed. Alexander Balloch Grosart, vol. 1, The Complete Works of Thomas Brooks (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; G. Herbert, 1866), 194–195.

> God will so order the afflictions that befall you in the way of righteousness, that your souls shall say, We would not for all the world but that we had met with such and such troubles and afflictions; for surely, had not these befallen us, it would have been worse and worse with us. Oh the carnal security, pride, formality, dead-heartedness, lukewarmness, censoriousness, and earthliness that God hath cured us of, by the trouble and dangers that we have met with in the ways and services of the Lord![18]

The Puritan heart for perseverance was steeped with pastoral sensibility and consistency, as those who called for steadfastness in the face of difficulty did themselves stand steadfastly against the same. Their labors were informed by the lives of saints who had trod the same pilgrim road, enduring and persevering in the name of Christ, over a millennia prior. They were informed by Scripture, as the continual appeal of these ministers, having been stripped of their public ministries on account of their commitment to the Word of God, was to obedience toward God before men. Finally, they were informed by the needs of the church to be stirred up in heart-felt obedience to its Savior, so that when temptation to fall away closes in on the wearied saint, it might be resisted with an appeal to a far greater pleasure than a temporary release can effect. To this end, Brooks calls all Christian people to this consideration:

> Oh, the saints can say under all their troubles and afflictions, that they have meat to eat, and drink to drink, that the world knows not of; that they have such incomes, such refreshments, such warmings, that they would not exchange for all the honours, riches, and dainties of this world . . . We lose pins in his service, and find pearls; we lose the favour of the creature, and peace with the creature, and haply the comforts and contents of the creature, and we gain the favour of God, peace with conscience, and the comforts and contents of a better life.[19]

Bunyan's Vision of Perseverance and Suffering

Having surveyed some of Bunyan's contemporaries on the matter of perseverance in the midst of hardship, this portion of the thesis moves toward consideration of his own counsel and reflections on the intersection of hardship and endurance. No stranger to resoluteness for the sake of Christ, and fully recognizing the

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[18] Brooks, *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices*, 115.

[19] Brooks, *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices*, 116-117.

challenges facing other believers in his day, Bunyan had a profound ability to winsomely communicate the need for fellow believers to stand firm and brave the difficulties of being holy strangers in an unholy land. In this examination of Bunyan's pastoral theology of perseverance, three of his perspectives will be highlighted: suffering serves as an abiding confirmation that the persevering Christian is on the narrow way; perseverance is evidence of the sustaining grace of God in the believer's life; and perseverance is an essential obligation in which, entrusting oneself to God, the believer finds encouragement, joy, and strengthened faith.

Perseverance as Christian Confirmation

The cost of Christian discipleship is commonly referred to as the daily picking up of one's cross—the instrument of self-crucifixion—to follow after Jesus, putting to death the remnants of sin that remain after conversion and growing in conformity to the image of Christ. In the case of the Puritans, this cost was clearly understood out of necessity, for to be faithful to Jesus, in their estimation, meant eschewing their own political and cultural environs and enduring the consequences. Failing to count the real cost of discipleship was strongly warned against as a main avenue by which spurious professions of faith arrived. Richard Baxter sharply challenged prospective believers this way: "Sit down and count what it will cost you to be Christians, and receive not Christ upon mistakes, or with reserves."[20] Genuine discipleship necessarily involves the dynamics of Luke 9:23–25 in any biblical estimation of the authentic Christian life, which Bunyan evidently took to heart in his willingness to feel the sting of crucifixion through so many years of imprisonment and social alienation to remain true to his Lord.

For Bunyan, the cross and Christian experience were inextricably intertwined. As a result, his counsel to Christian people on what makes for a life transformed by Jesus,

[20] Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, ed. William Orme, vol. 4 (London: James Duncan, 1830), 377.

regularly flowed from and pointed to a cruciform lifestyle. In a rudimentary catechism intended for those who lacked any real grasp of Christian doctrine and conduct, Bunyan includes a question particularly aimed at the issue of self-denial.[21] Not only does he address self-denial as a basic component of Christian obedience, but Bunyan specifically treats the question of the person who may start well, yet gives up a good conscience and fails to persevere in self-denial. In the question/answer format of a catechism, Bunyan writes: "Q. How if a man has been willing to lose all that he hath, but is not now, will not God accept of his willingness in time past, though he be otherwise now?—A. No; for the true disciple must deny himself daily, take up his cross daily, and go after Jesus Christ (Luke 9:23)."[22] It is not unexpected, therefore, that as he counseled believers on how to run the race of a true disciple, the quality of perseverance must involve an awareness of its difficulty in light of the cross itself. In *The Heavenly Footman*,[23] Bunyan encourages steadfastness in Christian obedience by stating: "The doctrine of perseverance is also cross to the flesh; which is not only to begin, but for to hold out, not only to bid fair, and to say, Would I had heaven, but so to know Christ, to put on Christ, and walk with Christ as to come to heaven."[24] A common theme in Bunyan's work is the concept of the Christian life as a journey, a pilgrimage that is fraught with difficulties an dangers whose travelers' primary objective is to remain on the narrow path. When stating that "the doctrine of perseverance is also cross to the flesh," there is a direct invocation of the Luke 9 language cited above.

Within the process of enduring in faithfulness to Christ, Bunyan connects the cost of discipleship with the implications of walking closely and continually with Jesus.

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[21] John Bunyan, *Instructions for the Ignorant*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006).

[22] Bunyan, *Instructions for the Ignorant*, 688.

[23] John Bunyan, *The Heavenly Footman*, vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006).

[24] Bunyan, *The Heavenly Footman*, 387.

"Cross to the flesh" entails that the work of crucifixion, of death to what remains of the 'old self,' is tied to perseverance. Each and every step forward on the narrow way inevitably includes one of the primary markers of genuine Christian faith: death to the flesh. Whereas any number of spiritual experiences or miracles may be counterfeited, the progress in godliness that is attached to the genuine Christian life simply cannot, ultimately, be faked. False professors fall off in the presence of difficulties, whereas genuine professors experience the pain of daily discipleship and yet endure. Elaborating on this contrast between true and false confession and its ties to endurance in hardship, Bunyan states:

> It is an easy matter for a man to run hard for a spurt, for a furlong, for a mile or two; O, but to hold out for a hundred, for a thousand, for ten thousand miles: that man that doth this, he must look to meet with cross, pain, and wearisomeness to the flesh, especially if as he goeth he meeteth with briars and quagmires, and other incumbrances, that make his journey so much the more painfuller. Nay, do you not see with your eyes daily, that perseverance is a very great part of the cross? why else do men so soon grow weary? I could point out a many, that after they have followed the ways of God about a twelvemonth, others it may be two, three, or four, some more, and some less years, they have been beat out of wind, have taken up their lodging and rest before they have got half-way to heaven, some in this, and some in that sin; and have secretly, nay, sometimes openly said, that the way is too strait, the race too long, the religion too holy, and cannot hold out, I can go no farther.[25]

It may seem to be a strange concept for those who typically mark the love of God through ease and the blessings of prosperity, but just as those who seek their life will lose it, so the authenticity of Christian experience is marked in an upended manner. Health, wealth, and physical comforts are not markers of a right relationship with God, as daily taking up of the cross necessitates offering up those comforts in favor of pleasures at God's right hand, held out for the believer in the person of Christ. In the pithy pearls of wisdom found in his *Dying Sayings*, Bunyan asserts, "The Lord useth his flail of

[25] Bunyan, *The Heavenly Footman*, 387.

tribulation to separate the chaff from the wheat."[26] It was beyond evident to Bunyan, who found his own convictions strengthened and communion with Christ deepened through the afflictions he faced, that the true and the false are quickly distinguished when the object of hope and consolation is driven to the fore. If affliction takes away imagined confidences and exposes the true nature of a human heart, it is to be regarded as a powerful tool employed by God to either confirm the suffering believer or sift out those with a superficial profession of faith.

The Christian, therefore, is to be comforted and assured of his genuineness by the ongoing perseverance that regularly means death to the flesh. This confirmation works continually and builds upon itself as time passes, for as false professors may leave off of following Christ after one hardship, two hardships, three hardships, etc., the genuine believer lives in such a way that, no matter the difficulty, the resolution to treasure Christ as the sought after reward undergirds the determination to walk the Calvary road. Each episode of pronounced obedience and every year of daily commitment, validates, confirms, and strengthens one's profession of faith.

Perseverance Evidence of God's Saving Activity

Bunyan sees as normative these sorts of 'spot checks' throughout the Christian experience. Accordingly, a profession of faith that does not persevere is itself illegitimate on an existential level. In his treatise *Saved By Grace*, he makes this plain enough for the reader in saying: "To be saved is to be preserved in the faith to the end . . . Not that perseverance is an accident in Christianity, or a thing performed by human industry; they that are saved 'are kept by the power of God, through faith unto salvation' (1 Peter 1:3–6)."[27] That perseverance is existentially entwined with salvation is evident as Bunyan

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[26] John Bunyan, *Bunyan's Dying Sayings*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006), 65.

[27] John Bunyan, *Saved by Grace*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006), 339.

declares that "to be saved is to be preserved in the faith to the end." Someone cannot, in his view, be said to be a partaker of salvation if their faith, in the midst of whatever trial or temptation, gives way. There would be no consolation given, for instance, if an inquirer would approach Bunyan and declare that past performances were sufficient for him to have confidence regarding his standing with God.

As the superintendent of his peoples' redemption, God is intimately involved in both the trials and attendant endurance running throughout the lives of his elect. Neither the one who believes perseverance to be unnecessary or a product of self-resolution ought to be encouraged in their conclusions. Because, says Bunyan, God's people are kept by him, then it necessarily follows that those who do persevere show evidence of their belonging to him, while those who fall away demonstrate that they never belonged to him from the start. If, therefore, a suffering Christian can consider the ways in which God has preserved him personally throughout his course, he can then look to the broader declarations of God's sovereign design and rule when reviewing his own case. Has he found it peculiar that, no matter what affliction has found him, that he should remain committed to Christ? Does he find it to be eminently true that, to regard salvation as God's own work, that the faithful endurance of hardship should demonstrate God's own sustaining hand according to his promise? Then he ought to be strengthened and confirmed in his belonging to Christ. To the end, he concludes the following:

> Christians, were you awake, here would be matter of wonder to you, to see a man assaulted with all the power of hell, and yet to come off a conqueror! Is it not a wonder to see a poor creature, who in himself is weaker than the moth, to stand against and overcome all devils, all the world, all his lusts and corruptions? (Job 4:19). Or if he fall, is it not a wonder to see him, when devils and guilt are upon him, to rise again, stand upon his feet again, walk with God again, and persevere after all this in the faith and holiness of the gospel? He that knows himself, wonders; he that knows temptation, wonders; he that knows what falls and guilt mean, wonders; indeed, perseverance is a wonderful thing, and is managed by the power of God; for he only "is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy" (Jude 24).[28]

[28] Bunyan, *Saved by Grace*, 340.

Perseverance as Soul-Strengthening Obligation

While one may draw encouragement from the confirmations active through perseverance, Bunyan's counsel on perseverance does not simply apply in instances of relief. Helpful as such balms might be in seasons of prolonged or moments of acute suffering, Bunyan sought to shepherd people toward a recognition that the existential necessity of perseverance belonging to the Christian experience is also a call to press forward. Simply because perseverance is evidence of God's saving work does not mean that an individual passively endures. The vigor and liveliness of such endurance is actually applied to by the Christian, as he seeks to show himself as one committed to Christ over all else. If perseverance is a promise and descriptor of the genuine Christian, then the command to endure is essential in living the Christian life and carries with it tremendous significance and rich blessings from the one to whom the believer is engaged in steadfast trust and allegiance.

In 1 Peter 4:19, the apostle instructs the church to entrust itself to a faithful creator while doing good—to stand fast, to persevere in pursuing what pleases God, regardless of the earthly cost or sense of personal loss. That is, essentially, the duty of a Christian. Says Bunyan, "A Christian is not to commit his soul unto God to keep, and so to grow remiss, carnal, negligent, cold, and worldly . . . He must commit the keeping of his soul to him 'in well-doing.' He may not now relinquish God's cause, play the apostate, cast off the cross, and look for heaven notwithstanding."[29] As Bunyan sought to shepherd those under his charge and the broader church through his writing, the concept of a consolation without commitment was unthinkable. Thus, when he states that such as would desire the comfort of assurance apart from the obedience of perseverance "cast off the cross," he was entirely consistent in his theology. It is not as if Bunyan holds out the

[29] John Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006), 703.

consolation of graciously-empowered perseverance and a lifestyle of self-effort in the other. The consolation offered by Bunyan was found in the actual hard moments of obedience itself. His assertion was that there simply could not be any assurance offered to someone who, when tempted or pressed with suffering, fails to entrust his soul to a faithful creator and remain steadfast in doing good.

Continuing on this topic, Bunyan says that "the man that has committed his soul to God to keep has not at all disengaged himself from his duty, or took himself off from a perseverance in that good work that, under a suffering condition, he was bound to do before."[30] Contrary to the impressions those who suggest that trusting is a passive effort, Bunyan makes clear that whether in difficulty or ease, the same obligation binds the Christian, namely, walking faithfully with God, i.e., doing good. No separate set of rules apply that absolves a believer of the need to hold fast when suffering under a particular weight of affliction. For a Christian to disengage from his duty in times of affliction is as legitimate a thing to do as disengaging in times of prosperity. Accordingly, Bunyan does away with any notion that perseverance is necessary insofar as an individual is personally willing to endure. There are no exemptions or conditions. The call to steadfastness binds the obedience of every genuine believer.

In summarizing the call to endure, Bunyan says: "For he that saith in his heart, I will now commit my soul to God, if he knows what he says, says thus: I am for holding on in a way of bearing of my cross after Christ, though I come to the same end for so doing as he came to before me. This is committing the soul to him in well-doing."[31] This description of perseverance returns the reader to the cross-shaped confirmations held out as consolation in *The Heavenly Footman*. A diagram of Bunyan's doctrine of perseverance and its relationship to Christian discipleship might look something like this:

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[30] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel*, 703.

[31] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel,* 703.

Christian people are commanded to remain allegiant to Christ regardless of circumstance or season of life, which necessarily involves the daily practice of crucifying what remains of the sinful nature. Those who do not take up the cross daily cannot, by the plain statement of Scripture, be Christ's disciples. Those who do take up their cross may do so, especially in times of difficulty, only by the gracious work of God. In this endurance, the Christian gains confidence to further persevere, even as such perseverance evidences the authenticity of God's work in the soul and further obedience is implied and strengthened as this cycle repeats throughout the Christian life.

As this cycle plays out in the lives of genuine believers, Bunyan then holds out particular blessings that fall along the path of obedience, to be enjoyed by God's elect. Firstly, believers experience a certain kind of peace and freedom from worry that regards God as the one who will preserve. Says Bunyan, "When a man has, by faith and prayer, committed the keeping of his soul to God, he has the advantage of that liberty of soul to do and suffer for God that he cannot otherwise have. He that has committed his soul to God to keep is rid of that care, and is delivered from the fear of its perishing for ever."[32] If God is keeping watch over the souls of those who entrust themselves to him by his own grace, then those who entrust are freed up from fearing the most terrible of terrible fates in the perishing of their souls. The acknowledgment of peace with God and the freedom from sin's consequences strengthens the soul in order to pursue what pleases God without fear of that which is truly fatal. If a man should worry about whether or not his witness to Christ will endanger his reputation, business, or personal peace, he need not look any further than the fact that his soul has been taken into the custody of God himself. What fear could stand in the way of one whose commitment to persevere is found in the God whose grace bankrolls their keeping on in faith? The answer, of course, is that fear is displaced through perseverance, for further perseverance.

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[32] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel,* 701.

Next, the believer who obeys the command to endure receives a special deposition of joy in the soul that would be otherwise missed had perseverance in suffering been avoided. Bunyan draws on multiple examples from Scripture in *Seasonable Counsel* to prove this point, including those saints recounted in Hebrews 11 who had suffered the loss of life, loves, and limbs for obedience to Christ. On recollection of these saints, he turns to the apostle Paul, who, arguably more than any New Testament author, promotes the joy of enduring hardship for the sake of Jesus, and asserts: "[I]t is upon this account that Paul doth call to mind the most dreadful of his afflictions, which he suffered for the gospel sake with rejoicing; and that he tells us that he was most glad, when he was in such infirmities."[33] Paul had confessedly learned the secret to being not only content, as he says in Philippians, but joyful throughout all manner of circumstances. The great litany of Romans 8:31–39 details a host of things that might threaten the security and well-being of the Christian, yet God's commitment to keep a people who endure is championed through it all. When a Christian encounters the hard command to follow Christ through daily crosses, be they large or small, there is a promise that God will supply adequate levels of joy to sustain the believer, just as he did with Paul. Thus, Bunyan encourages his readers to heed the call to endure with a sure hope of this in mind by saying: "That God has done thus, a thousand instances might be given; and that God will still do thus, for that we have his faithful promise."[34]

Should the promise of joy still be insufficient to incentivize a believer's patient endurance of suffering, Bunyan continues to answer the insecurities of those with doubting questions: Is it possible for joy to actually result from affliction? How can walking a harder course lead to greater joy, when it would be almost certainly easier to relent and leave off following Christ? Taking up the Pauline categories of suffering and

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[33] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel*, 700.

[34] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel*, 700.

the subsequent joys that ought to, on history and promise, ultimately find their way to the believer, he proceeds in this way: "I answer, though they be not so in themselves, yet Christ, by his presence, can make them so: for then his power rests upon us . . . For when my people are afflicted and suffer great distress for me, then they have my comforting, supporting, emboldening, and upholding presence to relieve them."[35]

In essence, to persevere as Christ persevered and as he commanded his people to persevere ensures that greater fellowship with Christ will be had in endurance than in falling away. Jesus endured "for the joy set before him," (Heb 12:2) so that in fellowship with Christ, Christians not only look forward to a future joy that exceeds the promise of a pleasant day today, but knowing the comfort, support, emboldening, and upholding fellowship of the Savior on a daily basis. The question of joy, then, comes down to whether or not the professing believer finds the approval of Christ a greater joy to be had than the self-approval of a cross-less life. As the genuine Christian, according to Bunyan, will most assuredly choose the cruciform option, then, it follows, that there is a joy experienced by sincere believers unknown by those who simply rejoice in the presence of pleasure or pain. Fellowship with Christ in the jail cell is to be preferred to severance from Christ in the courts of the king, providing a sure and abiding joy available to each and every Christian who suffers faithfully in Christ.

Conclusion

The review of Bunyan's pastoral counsel on perseverance concludes with what is, effectively, a summary of how precious a thing he viewed the long-haul of Christian obedience to be. To be sure, Bunyan regarded as nothing short of a grace, a gift from the Almighty given generously to those whom he has taken to belong to his family. In his treatise on reprobation, he folds the necessity of perseverance into the broader scope of

[35] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel*, 701.

necessary Christian identity and experience. In distinguishing false professors from true, the reprobate from the elect, Bunyan states: "The grace that is offered in the general tenders of the gospel, promiseth happiness upon the condition of persevering in the faith only; but the special grace of election causeth this perseverance."[36] In the "grace that is offered in the general tenders of the gospel," Bunyan effectively asserts that the very task of evangelism and catechesis necessarily involves a presentation of the command and promise of perseverance to the true believer. To present the gospel and call to repentance without touching on these issues is, Bunyan might say, an insufficient presentation, at least inasmuch as it fails to mention the characteristic of the bulk of what follows in Christian experience. To walk with Christ is to persevere, no matter the circumstance.

God's glory is magnified in this perseverance, Bunyan goes on to say, as those who are truly elect show forth that special work of God through endurance: "The grace offered in the general tenders of the gospel, when it sparkleth most, leaveth the greatest part of men behind it; but the special grace of election, when it shineth least, doth infallibly bring every soul therein concerned to everlasting life."[37] The gospel sparkles most brilliantly when it shows this power in the lives of God's people, particularly against the backdrop of otherwise preferring comfort and ease if left to themselves. Christ is to be preferred over everything else. The life of perseverance is a self-attesting mark of the believer, so that he is assured that he is walking well; it is a demonstration of God's mighty power to keep his people; it is a command that brings about joy and assurance; and it is a living display of how beautiful and powerful the work of Christ is, that such people should even exist while the rest of a perishing world gladly and blindly pursues a different course. Perseverance is a special gift of God's own making, a perpetual provision of sovereign grace to the elect. Thus, he concludes: "So then, the blessed grace

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[36] John Bunyan, *Reprobation Asserted*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006), 351.

[37] Bunyan, *Reprobation Asserted*, 351.

of election chooseth this man to good, not because he is good; it chooseth him to believe, not because he doth believe; it chooseth him to persevere, not because he doth so; it fore-ordains that this man shall be created in Christ Jesus unto good works (Eph 1:4–6), not if a man will create himself thereto."[38]

[38] Bunyan, *Reprobation Asserted*, 351–352.

CHAPTER 5

COUNSEL TO SUFFERING PILGRIMS TODAY

Having considered the life and times of Bunyan, his and his contemporaries' theology of suffering as it relates to sanctification and perseverance, the last movement of this work will aim to synthesize the material and forge a pastoral theology of suffering, drawing on the aforementioned source materials and relevant biblical texts that will serve to inform ministers seeking to serve in the spirit of Paul, Timothy, and Bunyan. It is evident in Bunyan's life that he not only suffered personally, but suffered on behalf of the church, whether he was aware of it at the time or not. It is obvious that Bunyan did not seek to remove himself from the hardships faced by his people. Bunyan and his contemporaries understood that enduring hardship while entrusting themselves to a faithful creator while doing good was an unavoidable component of living the set apart life. Accordingly, the pastoral theology to follow will focus on what it means for a pastor to both personally endure difficulty and minister to the church in and from those hardships. In reviewing the apostle Paul's experience and inspired interpretation of those experiences, it will be evident that those called to pastoral ministry, like Bunyan, have a ministerial design to their suffering and should expect to experience hardships that inform their ministries. Attention will then turn to considering how Bunyan reckoned his own suffering and turned personal experience and biblical wisdom toward shepherding the church. The work will conclude with a review of Bunyan's exhortation to suffer well and its unique applicability to the pastor as one traversing and shepherding others on the narrow way of following Christ.

The Biblical Foundation for Ministerial Suffering

Before turning to Bunyan's own counsel regarding suffering's role in a minister's life, it is important to establish that the experiential counsel offered by the pastor-author of a work titled *Seasonable Counsel or Advice to Sufferers*[1] is itself informed by the source material marking any faithful minister of Christ. If Bunyan's work is simply a matter of personal experience, it may be imitable, but not normative for other shepherds or sheep. If the directives are merely Bunyan's musings, they also lack the authority that is attached to matters standardized through the witness of sacred Scripture. However, if there is something incarnational about Bunyan's work, namely, a representation to others of what it is to suffer well after a pattern present in the Word of God itself, then his counsel is bound to inform the lives of those servants of God who would walk faithfully with Bunyan. A cursory review of the relevant biblical texts—largely from the apostle Paul—is appropriate at this point, as Bunyan himself writes that, "All transgression beginneth at wandering from the Word of God."[2] As Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892) famously noted about the pervasiveness of Scripture in Bunyan's work in his endorsement of *The Pilgrim's Progress*,

> Read anything of his, and you will see that it is almost like reading the Bible itself. He had read it till his very soul was saturated with Scripture; and, though his writings are charmingly full of poetry, yet he cannot give us his *Pilgrim's Progress*—that sweetest of all prose poems—without continually making us feel and say, "Why, this man is a living Bible!" Prick him anywhere—his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him. He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his very soul is full of the Word of God. I commend his example to you, beloved.[3]

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[1] John Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006).

[2] John Bunyan, *The Fear of God*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006), 444.

[3] Charles Spurgeon, "Mr. Spurgeon as a Literary Man," in *The Autobiography of Charles H. Spurgeon, Compiled from His Letters, Diaries, and Records by His Wife and Private Secretary*, vol. 4, 1878–1898 (Chicago: Curtis and Jennings, 1900), 268.

Suffering Produces Humble Servants of the Church

As Saul of Tarsus rode confidently in his zealous persecution of Christian people, a most unexpected event occurred in his conversion from self-righteous Pharisee to humbled servant of Christ. The apostle's conversion if widely known and many who may be unfamiliar with much of Paul's theology can at least recognize the dramatic turn of events that played out on the Emmaus Road. Yet history is no collection of happenstance moments, but a superintended symphony, whose every movement is written with intent. In a rudimentary catechism, Bunyan reflects this conviction when he says that God's works of providence declare him: "They must needs do it, since through his providence the whole creation is kept in such harmony as it is, and that in despite of sin and devils; also, if you consider that form an angel to a sparrow nothing falls to the ground without the providence of our heavenly Father."[4] The manner and purpose of Paul's conversion has much to say, not only about the apostle's personal experience, but as an informing narrative arc that is represented later in Paul's own ministry.

In Luke's record of Paul's conversion (Acts 9:1–19a), the soon-to-be apostle is savingly confronted by the resurrected and ascended Christ. In the middle of this narrative, an unsuspecting disciple, Ananias, is instructed by Jesus to pray for and serve this same Saul of Tarsus whose persecuting activities had become notorious among the early church. Surprised by this command, Ananias' hesitation is met with these divine words: "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:15–16). A man struck blind, only to be healed at the hands of Ananias, would subsequently see a host of difficulties and hardships that would be suffered on behalf of the one whom he had just been persecuting.

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[4] John Bunyan, *Instructions for the Ignorant*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006), 676.

While some might perceive Jesus' words as a plan to exact some sort of karmic suffering for things Paul had previously inflicted on the church, there is further interpretation provided by the apostle to show that this guarantee of suffering had more to do with his calling than his history and offenses. In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, Paul recounts the numerous hardships he had come to experience as a servant of Christ. As a minister of the great mysteries of God, Paul had been privy to countless encounters with the miraculous power and providence of God as he witnessed the gospel taking root among Jew and Gentile alike. His own pedigree was such that he wrote to the church at Philippi that he had more reason to be confident in his own performance and background than anyone else (Phil 3:4). Yet despite Paul's giftedness, heritage, and religious performance, the Lord had ordered Paul's life so that these potential sources of boasting would be put in their place for service to Christ, an ordering that came about specifically through suffering.

In his second epistle to the Corinthians, Paul describes in detail his own experiences for a church suspicious of his grounds for apostolic authority, largely due to his unimpressive physical presentation and constant suffering. As his recounting comes to a climax with a third person reference to a heavenly vision, Paul states in 2 Cor 12:7: "So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited." David Garland comments on the divine intervention of purposed suffering in this way: "God wanted Paul to remain humble and fully aware of his own weakness. The thorn punctured any pride that might surge within him because of his grand entry into heaven, and the result was that he dealt with others with the meekness and gentleness of Christ (10:1) rather than with the arrogant puffery of Satan."[5]

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[5] David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, New American Commentary, vol. 29 (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1999), 519.

As God works to equip his servants for the task of conveying the glories of Christ to his church, it is necessary that such servants are regularly reminded that it is not their own glory being magnified in their ministry 'successes.' From the apostle Paul to John Bunyan, the purpose of God remains the same in fostering the humility of pastors, so as to deal with the most significant obstacle to their course's completion in human pride. This humbling purpose of suffering in God's arsenal of ministerial qualification is noted by John Calvin in a colorful way:

> [I]f anyone's face has been beaten black and blue, they do not dare to appear in the sight of others on account of shame. In a similar manner, whatever infirmity we struggle with, let us remember that we are, as it were, struck by the Lord with the view of attacking our pride so that we might learn humility. Let those people who possess illustrious virtues especially keep this in mind: if they have any mixture of vices; if they are attacked by anyone with hatred; if they are bruised by anyone with insults—these things are not merely rods of the heavenly Master but blows to instill them with shame and beat back their pride. Now let all godly people take notice of how great is the poison of pride, just as Augustine says in in his third sermon "On the Words of the Apostle," that "it cannot to be cured except by poison." And certainly, as it was the cause of the ruin of humanity, so it is the last vice with which we must contend.[6]

Suffering Produces Ministers Capable of Comforting the Church

The flavor of Bunyan's writing exudes comfort as well as exhortation in both his allegorical and practical works. Many throughout the centuries have read *The Pilgrim's Progress* and found their souls stirred to continue on as faithful followers of Christ, while others have heard the voice of a pastor sympathetic with their hardship, knowing the exhortations in works like *Seasonable Counsel to Sufferers* came from one who had himself suffered. Sitting under the written ministry of Bunyan, the reader is met with a man who counsels encouragement and continued obedience because he himself had found consolation and motivation to draw near and live in faithful obedience to the Lord through the Scriptures and in personal communion with the Suffering Servant.

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[6] John Calvin, "God Humbles His People Through Their Thorns," in *2 Corinthians*, ed. Scott M. Manetsch, Reformation Commentary on Scripture: New Testament IXb (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 598.

Is this relatability simply a matter of Bunyan's own personality working into his writing? Should a pastor be expected to engage suffering believers in the same way as Bunyan? Is sympathy in suffering merely a useful trait? Is personal suffering a necessary feature of pastoral ministry, intended and worked by God generally among ministers of the gospel? While personal experience certainly permeated Bunyan's writing, it would seem that these personal experiences are part of a divine design, not just for Bunyan's own case, but fitted for the particular ministries to which each faithful minister of the gospel is called to throughout his life.

As 2 Corinthians opens, the apostle Paul engages the church with a personal account, interpreted from the perspective of God's purpose for Paul and his companions. The apostolic company had suffered so severely that desperation had set in. Thus, the apostle writes to the church in 2 Cor 1:8b–9a, "For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death." Whatever the degree and manner of suffering, the reality of death stands as the most profound and looming specter. If a person is assured that his suffering will cease and he be restored to health, it might be endured with a sense of hope in the circumstance changing. Yet if one feels as though his circumstance is hopeless, the suffering may feel meaningless and unmanageable. The latter describes the experience of Paul and his companions in Asia, subsequently referenced in his letter to the church at Corinth.

Preceding the reference to the severe trials in Asia, Paul greets the church with a pastoral prayer, intended to direct the church to see that there was purpose in Paul suffering as a minister. Not only does suffering serve the heart-level purpose of humbling ministers, as mentioned above, but it accomplishes a practical goal by fitting the pastor to the actual work of shepherding the flock of God in a way that would be otherwise close to impossible. Any pastor who has sat with someone experiencing devastating loss knows that the most effective shepherding involves not only the relation of Scripture truths, but

an ability to sympathize with the one suffering. Indeed, the pastor fulfills a shepherding responsibility tied to the ministry of Christ himself, who himself sympathizes with the church in its weaknesses and temptations (Heb 2:10–18). Accordingly, Paul offers in 2 Cor 1:3–6 a theologically driven benedictory prayer to open a letter permeated with a recounting of the divine purpose for suffering:

> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.

Is the suffering/comfort dynamic here related merely a matter of coincidence? Would Paul, in his effort to comfort the suffering church, also find the same type of comfort from the Corinthians if the opportunity arose? Thomas Schreiner suggests that Paul (and subsequent ministers) undergo suffering and find comfort in a unique way and for a unique purpose in relationship to the church: "We must notice here that Paul does not argue that he and the Corinthians both experience afflictions and mutually comfort one another. God comforts *Paul* in his sufferings, and in turn Paul comforts *the Corinthians*. He does not say that the Corinthians also comfort him."[7] Paul's logic regarding the hardships endured by servants of the church follows thus: God has appointed unique cases of hardship to be experienced by pastors, so that those pastors can find comfort in God, who in turn offer that comfort to Christian people who suffer the same types of circumstances already undergone by their pastors. Even the most dreadful of circumstances experienced by a servant of the church serves the purposes of the church, as God intends for his suffering ministers to be the conduit through which the church experiences the comfort that comes from the Lord.

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[7] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 85.

As Paul spoke to the acutely divided and troubled Corinthian church, one might wonder what could possibly upset their continued obedience to Christ? Is there anything that could make its way into the lives of professing believers that would lead them to *actually* despair, not only of life, but of the eternal life found in Christ? In Paul's case, he had endured the very sufferings that may be common among those he ministered to. As John Bunyan sat in a miserable jail cell for years, the threat of his people trading a clear conscience in profession of faith for the comfort of a life free from the pressures of royal persecution was a temptation. The remedy for the church was to find in its pastor a man who had found that enduring such suffering was worth the cost, as he was appointed to suffer and comforted by God accordingly. This pattern appears to be the normal shape of pastoral ministry: suffering appointed by God, comfort given by God, all for the sake of a comforted and encouraged church. Geoffrey Grogan aptly summarizes the pastoral purpose of this divine order in this way:

> Paul is saying he has come to realise that, through Christ, his own sufferings may lead to comfort for his Corinthian readers. What does he mean? Simply that difficult experiences in which he has received strengthening comfort from God enable him in his turn to minister comfort to other Christians . . . Suffering can often be a very lonely experience, and the lonely sufferer often tends to feel he or she is passing through something others can never really understand. Paul was able to say in effect, "I know God can give you strength in your trials because he gave me strength in mine," but this is a thousand miles away from "I know how you feel," which can seem insensitive to a sufferer, no matter how sincerely it is said.[8]

Suffering Belongs to Faithful Servants of Christ

The final biblical foundation for understanding suffering as a normal part of pastoral ministry is found in Paul's counsel given to his fellow pastor and beloved son in the faith, Timothy: "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 2:3). Paul employs three pictures of pastoral service while enjoining Timothy to remain faithful to

[8] Geoffrey Grogan, *2 Corinthians: The Glories & Responsibilities of Christian Service*, Focus on the Bible Commentary (Fearn, Ross-Shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2007), 43.

Christ, particularly in light of the fact that Paul would soon be dying and leaving Timothy without his friend, mentor, and father in the faith. Similar to Bunyan, Paul had spent extended periods of time in prison, from which he ministered effectively through personal and written conversation. Nevertheless, while Bunyan would be released, Paul had actually received the sentence of death and writes to Timothy in order to, among other things, charge him to be the kind of pastor worthy of the gospel being proclaimed. Paul urges Timothy to eschew shame over the kind of ministry that is faithful to proclaiming a crucified Christ and to "share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God" (2 Tim 1:8). The scent of Paul's prison cell is, as with Bunyan, very detectable in the words of the apostle's final letter.

While all of Scripture is good for all of the church, the letters to Timothy and Titus are uniquely designed to communicate what good pastoring and healthy churches look like. When Paul charges Timothy with the task of carrying out the multiplying discipleship of the church in 2 Tim 2:1–2, he is made aware of the type of pastoring that fosters the proliferation of the gospel and faithful churches: the pastor as a soldier who is willing to suffer whatever cost is called for by the risen Lord, one who will share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ. Robert Yarbrough sees more than analogy in the exhortation, as Paul's example of suffering tremendously in the service of Christ is in the background: "In 2 Tim 2:3 Paul exhorts Timothy to fresh readiness to exercise faithfulness to his Savior and Master whatever the cost or loss of personal comfort or advantage. The simile of a soldier who is exposed to wounding or even death as a standard feature of his vocation is only barely metaphorical."[9] If a standard feature of a soldier's vocation is possible wounding or death, then a pastor should function as one aware that his calling bears the same potential for suffering and hardship if he would be

[9] Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2018), 374.

faithful to Christ. As Paul had declared to the elders of the church at Ephesus in Acts 20:24, his main concern was not the preservation of his own life, but only that he may finish his course of faithfully discharging the ministry he had received from the Lord. These same elders were now functioning under the leadership and pastoral example of Timothy, whose life was to be patterned after the apostle's in its endurance of hardship for the sake of Christ and his church.

When Paul 'passed the leadership baton' to Timothy, he not only transferred ministerial care, but he charged Timothy to stay true to and not deviate from the standard model for cruciform ministry, whatever the cost. Just as Paul had ministerially carried the death of Christ in his personal sufferings (2 Cor 4:7–12), Timothy was to recognize that hardship belonged to his calling as a servant of the church. To refuse the call to suffer as a shepherd of the church is to entangle oneself in the 'civilian affairs' that would displease the 'commanding officer.' It can be confidently said, then, that a faithful servant of the church must not only be prepared to suffer, but recognize the truth that a call to suffering is part of the job description that belongs to a pastor. A loyal servant of Christ is willing to "endure everything for the sake of the elect" (2 Tim 2:10), as the suffering is, surprisingly and mysteriously, a means of commending and strengthening the faith of the saints. John Stott address the indispensability of pastoral suffering and its attachment to the conversion and perseverance of the saints this way:

> [I]t is not just the preaching but also the resultant suffering which are the means of the elect's salvation. Paul's statement that in some sense the salvation of others is secured by his sufferings may at first astonish us. Yet it is so. Not of course that his sufferings have any redemptive efficacy like Christ's, but that the elect are saved through the gospel and that he could not preach the gospel without suffering for it. It is another case of 'glory through suffering', the 'eternal glory' of the elect through the sufferings endured by the apostle.[10]

[10] John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Gospel: The Message of 2 Timothy*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 63.

Bunyan on Suffering and Shepherding the People of God

Having established that pastoral suffering is a designed feature of New Testament ministry and not simply a feature of Bunyan's life, it is now time to turn back to Bunyan and hear from the man whose course so closely mirrored Paul's. The suffering of John Bunyan was, like Paul's, a designed and normal component of faithful ministerial service. How does John Bunyan's understanding of the cost of discipleship help a pastor undergo and/or counsel in the midst of loss? How does Bunyan help a pastor understand the aim of counseling a suffering believer? How does Bunyan's writing illustrate the heart of a pastor who had been shaped in the divine mold? These three questions will be addressed in setting forth Bunyan's ministry as particularly helpful and important for any pastor to consider in pursuing a more biblically faithful service to Christ and the church.

Bunyan on Reckoning Suffering and the Cost of Discipleship

Paul's perspective on affliction and comfort for ministers of the gospel is clear based on the preceding discussion. It then behooves us likewise to understand Bunyan's counsel to suffering believers. That understanding must begin with insight into this man's own relationship with hardship. While this topic has been, at least in part, part of an earlier discussion, the matter warrants reconsideration in light of Bunyan's pastoral counsel. In *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, Bunyan provides a reflection on a verse in 2 Corinthians that captured his attention when trying to understand how to reckon the potential deprivation of so many comforts and blessings while suffering for the sake of Christ. How could he endure while imprisoned, knowing that so much had been or would be taken? Bunyan had received "the sentence of death" mentioned earlier in relation to Paul, who was at the end of his wits in desperation. In identifying with Paul, Bunyan proceeds to find that the greatest help to understanding faithfulness in suffering was to see a particular end in view, which would make Bunyan rely not on himself, "but

on God who raises the dead" (2 Cor 1:9). Bunyan remarks on the reckoning process in this way:

> [T]hat saying (2 Cor 1:9), was of great use to me, But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead. By this scripture I was made to see, that if ever I would suffer rightly, I must first pass a sentence of death upon everything that can properly be called a thing of this life, even to reckon myself, my wife, my children, my health, my enjoyments, and all, as dead to me, and myself as dead to them. "He that loveth father or mother, son or daughter, more than me, is not worthy of me" (Matt 10:37).[11]

Bunyan reached this conclusion at what was effectively the outset of his ministry as a pastor and writer. Though he had little by way of formal ministry experience, he knew that the most important thing that could be done when facing the prospective loss of so much over faithfulness to Christ was to suffer in view of the biblical command to reckon worldly comforts a loss and divine comfort a gain. It is a hard thing—perhaps the hardest thing—for any man to look at his wife, his children, his health, and his enjoyments and see them as having undergone a kind of severing work, a calculated separation in the heart so that suffering might not be seen as the source of loss itself. It belongs to Christian discipleship to prefer Christ over "father or mother, son or daughter" or any other worldly comfort, no matter how rich that blessing might be.

As Bunyan looked at prolonged imprisonment, his personal reckoning of suffering is notable. The temptation may be strong to provide some sort of practical advice for someone who is about to endure or is in the midst of hardship. While sentiments such as "This too shall pass" may seem helpful when a toe is stubbed or a child has a cold, they are of little help when one is presented with the choice between honoring Christ and guaranteed difficulty or shrinking back and guaranteed pleasure. This is where Bunyan begins, both in his own experience and in pastoral counsel, to be immensely helpful. If a Christian person can be taught to see that it is no optional part of

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[11] John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006), 47–48.

discipleship to count even the most precious blessings as to be preferred after Christ, then their potential or actual loss can be seen as a normal, albeit painful, part of any believer's path of obedience to the Savior.

In writing extended poetry regarding his imprisonment, he continues to offer similar thoughts that demonstrate a man who had first made the decision to see loss and hardship through the lens of their relationship to the preferment of Christ. Bunyan's *Prison Meditations*[12] offers a rich perspective on how he had come to understand these matters, just a few years after his initial confinement. What he had reckoned on his way to the jail cell received further confirmation when he was actually deprived of the blessings about which he had previously wondered in *Grace Abounding*. His poetic reflection on such 'losses' are detailed in *Prison Meditations* this way:

44. We sell our earthly happiness
For heavenly house and home;
We leave this world because 'tis less,
And worse than that to come.
45. We change our drossy dust for gold,
From death to life we fly:
We let go shadows, and take hold
Of immortality.
46. We trade for that which lasting is,
And nothing for it give,
But that which is already his
By whom we breath and live.
47. That liberty we lose for him,

[12] John Bunyan, *Bunyan's Prison Meditations Directed to the Heart of Suffering Saints and Reigning Sinners*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006).

Sickness might take away:

Our goods might also for our sin

By fire or thieves decay.[13]

When a pastor continues to endure faithfully by accepting loss as a matter of discipleship and recognizing that ownership of all he has lost always belonged to God, then his counsel to other suffering Christians rings with absolute authenticity. To counsel the church of God, Bunyan must first have been convinced that enduring suffering as a Christian was more than an abstract call or ancient words demanding obedience. The heart had to have been captured with the goodness of counting these gifts as having been given by the God who could take them away for an even better portion. A pastor, therefore, must be absolutely convinced in his heart that even the choicest blessings of God come freely from his hand, just as the pastor is to hold them with open hands, knowing that the Lord may require them at any point, without having done any injury in their deprivation. The third to last stanza of *Prison Meditations* captures this well, even as his poem exhorts others to cultivate the same heart as Bunyan had come to find actively driving his relationship to these matters:

68. And let us count those things the best

That best will prove at last;

And count such men the only blest,

That do such things hold fast.[14]

Bunyan on Counseling Believers in the Midst of Suffering

Having concluded that bearing hardship is a normal part of Christian obedience, how does Bunyan counsel Christian people to endure? If the heart has been

[13] Bunyan, *Bunyan's Prison Meditations*, 66.

[14] Bunyan, *Bunyan's Prison Meditations*, 66.

informed by such a conviction that Christ is to be preferred as the blessing giver over the blessings given, how does Bunyan offer counsel to those in the throes of such difficulties? How does a pastor minister to suffering saints after the manner of Bunyan? In his *Seasonable Counsel*, the question is effectively answered directly, as he writes pastorally to those suffering. There is plainness in his prefatory remarks, addressed to the Christian reader who may be, has been, or will be in the throes of suffering, such that suffering is assumed in Christian experience, making this work valuable for any believer. Though some may blush at the thought of Christian suffering, Bunyan unapologetically states: "Why then should we think that our innocent lives will exempt us from sufferings, or that troubles shall do us such harm? For verily it is for our present and future good that our God doth send them upon us. I count therefore, that such things are necessary for the health of our souls, as bodily pains and labour are for [the health of] the body."[15]

What can be extracted from his pastoral counsel to help pastors counseling suffering believers today? Three insights from Bunyan's ministry may be particularly helpful: the pastor is to direct believers to the safekeeping power of God; the pastor is to direct believers to a clean conscience and godly conduct in the midst of their suffering; and, the pastor is to direct believers to see the wise, tailored design of God in each and every affliction.

Directing Believers to the Safekeeping Power of God

The composition of *Seasonable Counsel* is notable, as it, like other Puritan works, starts from a position that necessarily undergirds the work as a whole, informing the reader with a grounds for legitimization of the exhortations and counsels to follow. For Bunyan, the foundation from which he would have a Christian operate in the midst of hardship is a confidence that, no matter the circumstance, the believer may entrust

[15] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 693.

himself to God for safekeeping. Operating from the command issuing through the apostle Peter in 1 Peter 3, Bunyan is concerned that a Christian recognize that his soul is of greater value than any earthly possession, including physical health. Accordingly, he defines the soul as "that most excellent part of man, that dwelleth in the body; that immortal, spiritual substance, that is, and will be capable of life, and motion, of sense and reason; yea, that will abide a rational being, when the body is returned to the dust as it was."[16] In another context, this type of prioritization of the soul above the body may be regarded as a form of Gnosticism, eschewing the physical for the sake of the spiritual. Yet context must rule any interpretation of an author, with Bunyan's being the temptation to forfeit spiritual integrity for the sake of physical comfort. The argument made by Bunyan begins with a commitment to follow Peter's command of entrusting the soul to God, though the body be threatened. This stands in the same line of thought as Jesus' own words in Matthew 10:28, where Christ warns the disciples thus: "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

Having established the significance of the soul as being the central concern in suffering, he directs the believer to find security for his soul by casting it wholly upon God for safekeeping. To entrust one's soul to God, according to Bunyan, is "to carry it to him, to lift it to him, upon my bended knees, and to pray him for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, to take it into his holy care, and to let it be under his keeping. Also, that he will please to deliver it from all those snares that are laid for it . . . ."[17] In the suffering that tries the very soul—not the temporary moments of fallenness complicating life, but the hard moments in which life seems to be a wearisome cause—someone may feel utterly out of control. When health is fundamentally threatened, when a child dies, when a

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[16] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 695.

[17] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 695.

marriage implodes through adultery, when life and livelihood are on the line for profession of faith in Christ, the believer may feel that no effort will suffice to move the scales in his favor. In those moments, Bunyan says, the believer ought to consider that the only thing at a Christian's disposal is the activity of his own soul:

> Let them that suffer, even to the loss of goods, liberty, or life, 'commit the keeping of their souls to God.' . . . Wherefore, let him commit the keeping of his soul to God, lest he also through his negligence or carelessness be also spoiled of that. The sufferer, therefore, hath his soul at his own dispose, he may give that away to God Almighty, in spite of all that the devil and the world can do.[18]

The natural impulse of a pastor is to help and protect, to fix a situation so that those under his charge are spared the experience of pain. This may be possible in many instances—through crisis interventions, relational counseling, or material benevolence offered by the church—yet nothing makes a pastor feel so impotent as when he can merely observe the unfolding of a circumstance portending pain. Bunyan's counsel is seasonable, then, not simply to the sufferer, but to the shepherd over the sufferer. Would a pastor serve a powerless sufferer well? Then he ought to entrust himself to God's own care, so as to see that his primary charge is to direct a believer to God's care and protection. This instruction destroys the burgeoning roots of codependency that can plague ministries, just as it levels the sense of control that tempts a suffering saint. Wise counsel follows Bunyan's prioritization in calling believers to engage in the one activity available when every other avenue seems closed: entrust the most valuable thing in one's possession, which will always be at his disposal, to the God who keeps his people secure. In all tenderness, a pastor can echo Bunyan's exhortation:

> Poor sinner, thou art engaged for God in the world, thou art suffering for his Word: leave thy soul with him as with one that is more willing to save it, than thou art willing he should: act faith, trust God, believe his Word, and go on in thy way of witness-bearing for him, and thou shalt find all well, and according to the desire of thy heart at last.[19]

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[18] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 697.

[19] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 698.

Directing Believers to Godly Conduct in the Midst of Suffering

In keeping with the apostle Peter's enjoinment to entrust the soul to God in the midst of hardship, Bunyan calls Christian people to maintaining an obedient heart when suffering. The temptation to neglect the well-being of the soul is significant when discomfort settles in, even to the point where one may require the warning of eternal perdition should they continue on in neglect of the most weighty matters of the soul. If the Christian would suffer rightly, says Bunyan, then he must seek a clear conscience, so that he may be able to look at his circumstances and conclude that it is not due to his own misconduct or sin that he is in the straits he finds himself. It is incumbent upon a believer to take stock of himself and to review his own concerns, that they follow after what pleases the Lord. This is how Bunyan exhorts those who suffer to soberly assess themselves, lest they not suffer "according to the will of God":

> These are cautions to Christians to persuade them to take heed to themselves, their tongues and their actions, that all be kept within the bounds of the Word. For it would be a foolish thing to say, that these are cautions to persuade to take heed of that, into which it is not possible one should fall. It is possible for Christians to suffer for evil-doing, and therefore let Christians beware; it is possible for Christians to be brought to public justice for their faults, and therefore let Christians beware. It is possible for Christians to suffer justly by the hand of the magistrate, and therefore let Christians beware. This also is insinuated in the text itself, and therefore let Christians beware.[20]

While this may not be a particularly sensitive issue to raise when counseling a suffering believer, the potential for pastoral negligence is sizable. Since the pastoral responsibility is to redirect sufferers' souls unto God, then these matters must be addressed in some way. That is not to say it must be dealt with insensitively, though it must be addressed somehow. With great humility and self-awareness, Bunyan asks rhetorically whether or not a man exists in whom sin does not still have some sway and answers thus: "Sin is in the best of men: and as long as it is so, without great watchfulness, and humble walking with God, we may be exposed to shame and suffering

[20] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 705.

for it. What sin is it that a child of God is not liable to commit, excepting that which is the sin unpardonable?"[21] As God will not bless disobedience, a man cannot feel himself to be tended in security while suffering for doing wrong. The plain truth is that sometimes believers do suffer as a direct result of their disobedience. To entrust one's soul to God in such an instance is to first recognize the gap in right communion with God that exists and to repent before seeking other comforts from God. This is a matter of pastoral common sense to Bunyan, who says: "Where is repentance, reformation, and amendment of life amongst us? Why, then, do we shrink and winch."[22]

After a suffering Christian has examined his life to see whether or not something has provoked hardship by way of sin, it is time for the believer to resolve that such introspection may indeed be a blessing, because it brings him to a keeping in view of what is most pleasing to God. Bunyan almost seems to relish the opportunity to have the matters of heaven more heavily pressed upon his heart through the seasons of forced introspection when he says: "I have often thought that the best Christians are found in the worst of times: and I have thought again, that one reason why we are no better, is because God purges us no more (John 15). I know these things are against the grain of the flesh, but they are not against the graces of the Spirit."[23] To someone who has made it his ambition declare fleshly comforts unworthy of comparison to having Christ and a clean conscience, submitting the soul to God for review is no real burden. In a pithy and frank statement, Bunyan sums up the matter of ensuring that one's conduct in suffering is itself honoring to God like this: "Evil courses bring to evil ends; shun all appearance of evil, and ever follow that which is good."[24]

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[21] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 705.

[22] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 707.

[23] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 707.

[24] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 708.

The pastoral implications of Bunyan's counsel here are profound, as it keeps the perspective on the Lord instead of the hardship. Even if a Christian person searches himself and finds nothing egregious to turn from, he has still been afforded an opportunity to consider the most significant matters of his life from the Lord's perspective. If Bunyan's musing is accurate, that the best Christians are forged and found in the worst of times, then one of the reasons many Christians are weak in the graces of the Spirit is found in the fact that the pain of suffering takes center stage when the purpose of suffering is neglected entirely. Would a pastor have a spiritually virbrant church, filled with believers whose main aim in life is to please Christ? Then he would do well to direct their attention to the weightiest matters of life when the weightiest pains of life are laid upon them. Even if they bear clean hands and suffer righteously, they have been brought to see their hardships through a divine lens before merely reacting to pain. For Bunyan, this is a significant win for the sufferer and, by extension, for the one tending to the sufferer's soul in their grief.

Directing Believers to Seeing the Tailored Design of Suffering as Designed by God

Once a soul has gone through the necessary introspection in regards to its potential liability, Bunyan then instructs believers to spend time in introspective reflection on what God himself may be doing in the hardship they endure. The caution here, of course, is to avoid the proverbial and superstitious reading of tea leaves, and to capture something of the divine perspective as to why this affliction is visiting someone at this point in time. Bunyan utilizes a degree of word-play when he posits a similarity between suffering according to the will of God in things revealed and things hidden. Even in the most trying of circumstances, where it may seem that the whole host of humanity is arrayed against a believer, Bunyan pleads with the Christian to see things in this manner: "It remaineth, then, that . . . the use of those means which his providence offereth to us for our safety; and that we conclude that our whole dispose, as to liberty or

suffering, lieth in the will of God, and that we shall, or shall not suffer, even as it pleaseth him."[25]

To reflect on suffering from the divine perspective and process God's divine purpose for their specific circumstance, Bunyan asks believers to embrace seven core truths.[26] These truths are, in order: that God has appointed who will suffer; that God has appointed when Christians should suffer in this world; that God has orchestrated, as the Lord of history, where this suffering should take place; that God has appointed what kind of sufferings shall belong to each particular saint; that God has determined for what truth a particular believer will suffer difficulty; that God has determined by whose hand such difficulties will visit his adopted child; and, that God has determined for how long these difficulties should last.

Serious consideration of these particulars makes it evident that God's own hand has designed the difficulties to address a deficiency or prepare his child for something more significant than personal comfort. Indeed, if God has called his people to live a cruciform life, then it follows that he who reigns over all things should design and execute his own particular course for each and every one adopted into his family. The goodness of God's specific designs contrasted against the backdrop of the call to follow Christ is commended to the suffering saint by Bunyan in this way:

> These things are sent to better God's people, and to make them white, to refine them as silver, and to purge them as gold, and to cause that they that bear some fruit, may bring forth more: we are afflicted, that we may grow (John 15:2). It is also the will of God, that they that go to heaven should go thither hardly or with difficulty. The righteous shall scarcely be saved. That is, they shall, but yet with great difficulty, that it may be the sweeter. Now that which makes the way to heaven so strait, so narrow, so hard, is the rod, the sword, the persecutor, that lies in the way, that marks where our haunt is, that mars our path, digs a pit, and that sets a net, a snare for us in the way.[27]

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[25] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 723.

[26] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 723.

[27] Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, Or, Advice to Sufferers*, 725.

The words of *Seasonable Counsel* are, by design, intensely practical. Bunyan is writing to believers who are experiencing hardship. The great benefit for the pastor in reading this work is to see Bunyan's counsel in action. It is as if a pastor in the twenty-first century had the privilege of sitting in a counseling session, observing the masterful pastoring work of a man who had suffered so hard himself and learned the lessons he is here conveying in written form. Although the theme of suffering runs through so many of Bunyan's works, the practicality of *Seasonable Counsel* and specificity of application set it apart as a uniquely helpful work that sheds light for any pastor, in any age, on the way in which John Bunyan shepherded believers in the midst of suffering.

Bunyan and the Pastor's Heart for Suffering Saints to Run Well

Having seen that Bunyan would have a believer reckon his blessings and sufferings accord to the cost of discipleship and the ways in which he would counsel a believer to take stock of his course so as to ensure that holiness is lining the path walked, the final observation regarding Bunyan's counsel of suffering believers is found in the frequency and intensity with which he pressed believers on to finish well. While this theme may be assumed in any pastoral counsel, there is something unique about a man who willingly endured suffering—not that he sought it, but he refused release for the sake of Christ—and the way in which he speaks to the church and encourages them to finish well. The remainder of the reflections on the applicability of Bunyan's counsel to pastors will highlight the ways in which his admonitions and encouragements, largely taken from *The Strait Gate*,[28] spurred believers on and ought to inform the counsel given to suffering saints today. In George Offor's editorial remarks on *The Strait Gate*, he prepares the reader to find deep and weighty pastoral counsel, which is a fitting conclusion to a review

[28] John Bunyan, *The Strait Gate or Great Difficulty of Going to Heaven*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006).

of Bunyan's pastoral concern: "Faithfulness becomes the ministers of Christ in dealing with the souls of men; and pre-eminently faithful is John Bunyan in this treatise. Reader, he will be clear of thy blood."[29]

The World Resists Christian Perspective on Suffering

One of the most difficult obstacles for a pastor ministering to suffering believers in a twenty-first century Western context is the obstacle of entitlement. Few Christians would think of themselves as entitled, yet the atmosphere in which many live and breathe is saturated with the conviction that no one should ever have to suffer. Further, if suffering is encountered, the hand by which it came is to be regarded as fundamentally at odds with the good of the one enduring the difficulty. This type of counsel finds its way into many pastoral counseling sessions, where a desire to assuage a church member pushes aside the uncomfortable truths that Bunyan was so insistent on in *Seasonable Counsel*. If Scripture is to be believed and Bunyan is a faithful handler of it, then a Christian must know that suffering is designed, ordained, and brought about by the good hand of a wise Father.

What is a pastor to do, then, when his heart is tempted to counsel a believer that the measure of God's love is found in the absence of pain? What is a Christian to be counseled with when they feel as though the love of God is most clearly felt when their circumstances run afoul of their sense of comfort? For Bunyan, the solution is found in a willingness to recognize that the world is actively opposed to a Christian seeing God at the center and holiness as the goal of suffering. This is no occasional skirmish with a piece of bad advice, but it belongs to the world to sow the seeds of doubt in God's care

[29] George Offor, ed., John Bunyan, *The Strait Gate*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006), 362.

when suffering arrives. The believer ought to strive, then, to cultivate an enduring heart in the face of suffering because the world will do them no favors in its cultivation:

> Strive, because thou hast a whole world against thee. The world hateth thee if thou be a Christian; the men of the world hate thee; the things of the world are snares for thee, even thy bed and table, thy wife and husband, yea, thy most lawful enjoyments have that in them that will certainly sink thy soul to hell, if thou dost not strive against the snares that are in them.[30]

The voice of the world in the Christian's ear is loud and persistent. How can a good and caring God allow, even ordain, suffering? This matter is of great significance in the course of Christian obedience. Affliction is a means by which someone can demonstrate both perseverance and endurance. The demonstration of both brings assurance that faith is genuine. To short circuit the divine process or, what's worse, to impugn the character of God for employing his stated strategies for holiness and confirmation of profession, threatens and potentially harms the integrity of a believer's walk with Christ. It is best, says Bunyan, for the soul to strive in faithfulness to Christ because the world is actively seeking to distort and disrupt. To help suffering believers, pastors must direct them to the God-centeredness against which the world rages. Finding answers apart from this God-centered perspective can never make sense of the normalcy, regulation, or purpose of such suffering in the economy of God.

The Christian is Called to Press Forward No Matter What

If *The Pilgrim's Progress* is any indicator, the narrative of Christian experience for Bunyan necessarily witnessed a struggle of obedience always aiming forward, which Bunyan worked into practical counsel as he called the church to press on in the narrow way. The ultimate aim for any pastor is that the sheep under his charge be led safely home to the Good Shepherd. Could there be any greater purpose for an undershepherd of Christ to fulfill than that his sheep be tended and not left to wander and

[30] Bunyan, *The Strait Gate*, 370.

perish? So it is that in any case of counseling, where the temptation to shrink back is concerned, the call to endure is the most significant pastoral charge. Eternal matters are on the line, with more significant stakes than those that pass away with a fallen world. To fold in the face of temporal difficulty leads to an even greater threat in the eternal suffering promised to those who do not find their hope and righteousness in Christ. The pastor must encourage the believer to finish well and enter that narrow, strait gate where few go, save for the sovereign grace of God:

> They shall not be able to enter in that do not persevere in this blessed faith and holiness; not that they that have them indeed can finally fall away, and everlastingly perish; but it hath pleased Jesus Christ to bid them that have the right to hold fast that they have: to endure to the end; and then tells them they shall be saved—though it is as true that none is of power to keep himself; but God worketh together with his children, and they are 'kept by the power of God, through faith unto salvation,' which is also laid up in heaven for them.[31]

The call to press forward, no matter the cost, completes the circle for Bunyan. The ability to endure hardship begins with an internal purposing, that the cost of discipleship may be great, but having Christ is a far greater reward than anything that may be pleasurable but fleeting. There are real, actionable steps for those who suffer to follow and for their shepherds to guide them in thinking through, so as to see God's good and wise purposes in what otherwise seems chaotic and senseless. Finally, the reckoning of discipleship's cost comes back and informs the continued endurance. Endure, says Bunyan, lest you fail to arrive at the Celestial City and all of the sufferings of this world are for naught. The sufferings of hell make those experienced only in this present fallen world seem trivial. The ultimate pastoral goal of dealing frankly in the matter of suffering is to help the one suffering see things from the perspective of eternity. For the believer, eternity's perspective is essential in avoiding the type of spiritual mismanagement that will send Christian expectations out the window, only to be replaced with worldly convictions. There have been many who have turned to Christ in the midst of suffering

[31] Bunyan, *The Strait Gate*, 378.

because they have found him to be a comforting Savior, even if the occasion for pain remains. It is on this note, then, that Bunyan's pastoral example will conclude, for the following words summarize the eternally significant nature of the whole matter of suffering and endurance, as it directs believers, professing believers, and unbelievers alike to turn their gaze on that which is more significant than any earthly sorrow: "I will yet propound to thee God's ponderous question, and then for this time leave thee: 'Can thine heart endure, or can thine hands be strong, in the days that I shall deal with thee?' saith the Lord. (Eze 22:14) What sayest thou? Wilt thou answer this question now, or wilt thou take time to do it? or wilt thou be desperate, and venture all?"[32]

Conclusion

The issue of suffering will be perennial as long as the world in which a believer dwells is fallen. Suffering is the dreadful byproduct of sin, the pernicious and alien weed that has proliferated on the earth since the fall of man. Because a pastor functions within this fallen world, he will regularly experience his own hardships, even as those he serves are visited by their own. Suffering is a regular reminder that the world is not as it should be and, while it vexes the soul with its frustrating descent on everyone, it serves as a reminder for sufferers to turn their attention above, to the real and substantial things of life.

Any pastoral theology of suffering that refuses to acknowledge the way in which God employs difficulty to accomplish significant purposes—whether it be to sanctify the believer or confirm him in the genuineness of his profession as it is repeatedly tested and endured over time—fails to appreciate the way in which God uses the most difficult realities of a fallen world redemptively. It would be foolish to suggest that suffering, in itself, is a good thing. Yet it is wise for a pastor to consider the breadth

[32] Bunyan, *The Strait Gate*, 387.

of biblical material, from Joseph's divinely appointed imprisonment to the shipwrecks and beatings of the apostle Paul, that make clear that suffering is more than a byproduct of sin. In the hands of God, suffering is a powerful tool to sanctify, confirm, and tend to the souls of his people.

John Bunyan's life and ministry was regularly marked by acute episodes and chronic seasons of difficulty. Yet in his life and ministry, he learned and pastors today can recognize that the divine purpose of hardship is far more significant than the pain people must endure. John Piper wisely states: "No pastoral suffering is senseless. No pastoral pain is pointless. No adversity is absurd or meaningless. Every heartache has its divine target in the consolation of the saints, even when we feel least useful."[33] A pastor then can understand his calling as a sufferer, who helps sufferers, just as Bunyan regularly recognized God's redemptive purposes for his hardships as he ministered to other believers. To learn from Bunyan in this matter is essential for any pastor to shepherd well and endure in his own calling, a calling intentionally peppered with varying and peculiar hardships. It is fitting, then, to close this work by quoting these warm and pastoral words from *Bunyan's Dying Sayings*: "If thou canst hear and bear the rod of affliction which God shall lay upon thee, remember this lesson-thou art beaten that thou mayest be better."[34]

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[33] John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), 140.

[34] John Bunyan, *Bunyan's Dying Sayings*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006), 65.

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ABSTRACT

CONTINUING WEAK ALONG THE NARROW WAY: THE ROLE OF SUFFERING IN JOHN BUNYAN'S PASTORAL THEOLOGY OF SANCTIFICATION AND PERSEVERANCE

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This thesis argues that the theme of Christian suffering was a significant feature of John Bunyan's life, ministry, and writing. It asserts that this theme is of deep value to pastors looking to assist their people in navigating the difficulties of the Christian life. Chapter 1 introduces the thesis by surveying available literature and arguing for the study's academic value. Chapter 2 reviews Bunyan's life and ministry from the perspective of his own recorded experience, biographical observations, and cultural historical context. Chapter 3 reviews the doctrine of sanctification and its relationship to suffering in Puritan context and Bunyan's pastoral theology. Chapter 4 reviews the doctrine of perseverance and its relationship to suffering in Puritan context and Bunyan's pastoral theology. Chapter 5 concludes the work by providing points of application for pastors to help the church navigate its relationship to suffering.

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