

John Bunyan

by J.C. Philpot

J.C. Philpot's sermon on John Bunyan explores the profound impact of Bunyan's genius and experiences on his writing, particularly in 'Pilgrim's Progress'.

Scripture: Psalm 119:130, Proverbs 15:28, 1 Corinthians 2:4, 2 Corinthians 3:6, Ephesians 6:17, Colossians 3:16, 1 Thessalonians 1:5, 2 Timothy 1:7, Hebrews 4:12, 1 Peter 4:11

Topics: "Christian Biography", "Sanctification"

Description

J.C. Philpot reflects on John Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress,' highlighting Bunyan's unique genius and the grace of God that sanctified his natural talent for the glory of God. Bunyan's vivid imagination, dramatic representation, and expressive style brought to life characters and scenes that resonate deeply with readers. His experience of the abiding power of eternal things shaped his powerful preaching, filled with heavenly evidence and conviction. Bunyan's clear, simple, yet fiery words pierced the conscience, making him a mighty preacher whose legacy continues to impact the church of God.

Transcript

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by J. C. Philpot

John Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" is known wherever the English language is spoken. No, it has become known beyond those limits, by means of translation into most of the European, and into some Oriental tongues. A great critic and historian has said that the seventeenth century, so prolific in writers, produced but two thoroughly original works, which would be handed down to posterity; and it was noteworthy that both these were produced by the pens of Dissenters--Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress," and Milton's "Paradise Lost."

Bunyan himself, we believe, was not aware of his own peculiar genius. Owing nothing to education, his powerful intellect grew like a wild tree, unpruned and unnailed to university wall, but it made up in strength for what it might lack in symmetry. He possessed by nature three rare gifts, which education might have refined, but could not have imparted, and possibly might have weakened--a most vivid imagination,--a singular power of dramatic representation,--and a most expressive style and language. The first and last are self-evident; the second may require a few words of explanation. Bunyan possessed, then, one of the rarest faculties of the human mind--the power of so throwing himself into the very character which he was

drawing that he makes him speak exactly as that person would have spoken had he actually existed.

A Puritan in principle and practice, he justly abhorred the theater; and yet, without knowing it, he possessed in the highest degree that very talent in which consists the perfection of that species of writing. By means of this peculiar talent, his men and women are to us as substantial realities, as thoroughly living, breathing characters as if they had actually existed. Christian, Pliable and Obstinate, Faithful and Hopeful, with matronly, prudent Christiana, and modest, maidenlike, timorous Mercy--we know them all as if we had lived next door to them. This perhaps is his most striking faculty, and has made the "Pilgrim's Progress" a spiritual drama. What life and animation has this gift cast over it! Look, as a sample, at Obstinate's short and characteristic sentences. "Tush! away with your book. Will you go back with us or no?" "What, more fools still!" Compare these sharp, short, iron sentences with Pliable's soft, wax-like, ductile words, "And do you think that the words of your book are certainly true?" How his pliable disposition is shown by this soft, drawling sentence to turn and wind itself round Christian's belief! But what a peculiar gift was this to strike off with a few words two characters which have imprinted themselves on the minds of hundreds of thousands! But look also at his vivid, powerful, picturesque imagination. How image after image comes forth with unflagging interest and boundless variety! What force and power in his pictures! The Slough of Despond, and the Wicket Gate, and the Hill of Difficulty, and the Castle of Giant Despair, the Valley of the Shadow of Death, Vanity Fair, Faithful's trial, and the close of all--the passage of the Dark River--why does the mere mention of these scenes recall them at once so distinctly to mind?

Because they are drawn by a master's hand, giving form and body to scenes pictured in his imagination as living realities. His hand but executed what his eye saw; and thus his vivid imagination has engraved them more deeply on our memory than many scenes which we have seen with our bodily eyes. Is any book so well remembered? Has any made so vivid an impression? And all without the least effort on the part of the writer.

The third striking feature is the plain, clear, strong, noble, good old Saxon English in which it is written, a style so admirably suited to the great mass of readers, and at the same time possessing, from its purity and simplicity, a peculiar charm for the most refined English ear.

"But," suggests a reader, "you have merely noticed the genius of Bunyan! What was that? It was only nature. There was no grace in that. Why do you not speak of his grace and experience, and the teaching of the Spirit in his soul?" But, my good friend, don't you see how the Lord bestowed this genius on a poor illiterate tinker for a special purpose? Did not grace sanctify his natural genius, and direct it to the glory of God and the good of his people? And don't you perceive how this peculiar genius, of which you think so lightly, was absolutely necessary to produce the "Pilgrim's Progress," a work which will live when our heads are laid low? Bunyan was not striving after effect, beyond the best of all effects--being made a blessing to the church of God. He was not aiming at a dramatic representation of character, which a playwright might well envy. He saw Christian with his mind's eye in the Slough of Despond. His own feet had been fast held there. He saw and heard him in the dungeons of Giant Despair. He had lain there himself, and the iron had entered into his soul. He did not sit down as a play-writer to produce a drama, of which every character and scene were thoroughly fictitious. He had himself passed through all the scenes, and was, under the name of Christian, the leading character, the hero of the piece. The successive scenes were all deeply imbedded in his memory, and they came forth from his mind and pen as the deepest and most solemn realities.

He therefore, under an allegory, described what he himself had seen, and where he himself had been, as a voyager in the Arctic regions might depict the frozen seas and piercing climate where the iceberg dwells in lonely grandeur; or as a tropical traveler might retrace the bright skies and lovely isles where the sun walks in its meridian glory. Thus Bunyan is himself reflected from every page of the "Pilgrim's Progress." He is the pilgrim who progresses from the City of Destruction to the heavenly Jerusalem. It is, in fact, his own experience so far modified as not to be exclusive. He did not, like some, set up his own experience as a standard from which there must not be the slightest deviation. Mercy, who hardly knows why or wherefore she set out, except to accompany Christiana, is drawn as a vessel of mercy as much as Christian, who spends his nights in sighs and tears. But still he has drawn with vigorous hand a certain definite path, in tracing which the highest genius and the greatest grace combined to produce a work blessed beyond measure to the church of God, and yet so animated with natural talent as to be handed down to an earthly immortality. Who shall say the hand of God was not here? Who but he raised the immortal tinker to this distinction? The same hand which took David from the sheep-cotes to feed his people Israel raised Bunyan from the tinker's barrow to feed the church of God; and the same power which gave David strength and skill to sling the stone put into Bunyan's hand a pen which has done far more execution.

But besides these extraordinary endowments of genius and grace, Bunyan's experience was in itself peculiarly calculated to produce a work like the "Pilgrim's Progress." Were we to characterize this experience in one short sentence we should say it was the abiding power of eternal things resting on his soul. He did not only believe, he saw. The word of God did not merely speak to him; it entered into his inmost soul. Hell, with its sulphurous flames, Heaven, with its glorious abodes, were to him more distinct realities than the earth on which he trod; for the latter was but temporal, while the former were eternal; the one but a passing shadow, the other an enduring reality. So when the law sent its curses into his inmost conscience, he saw more clearly its lightnings, and heard more distinctly its thunders, than his outward eyes ever saw the vivid flash or his natural ears ever heard the pealing thunders of a passing storm. The dark clouds of the natural sky soon rolled away, and ceased to peal forth their terrors, but the Law knew no intermission for time or eternity. Thus, too, when Christ was revealed to him, he saw him by the eye of faith more distinctly than he ever saw any literal object by the eye of sense; for the natural sun itself, the brightest of all objects, could but fill his eye, but the Sun of Righteousness filled his very soul. When he talked with God, he talked to him more really, truly, and intimately than he could ever talk with an earthly friend, for to God he could unbosom all his heart, which he could not do to any human companion. His spiritual sorrows far outweighed all his temporal griefs, and his spiritual joys far surpassed all his earthly delights. The one were measured by time, the other by eternity; man was but the subject of one, God the object of the other. The experience of the power of eternal things made Bunyan such a mighty preacher.

"For I have been in my preaching, especially when I have been engaged in the doctrine of life by Christ, without works, as if an angel of God had stood at my back to encourage me. Oh! it has been with such power and heavenly evidence upon my own soul, while I have been laboring to unfold it, to demonstrate it, and to fasten it upon the consciences of others, that I could not be contented with saying, I believe, and am sure; methought I was more than sure (if it be lawful to express myself) that those things which then I asserted were true."

His was no cut-and-dried ministry, but the outpouring of his whole heart; and as God had blessed him with remarkable powers of expression, he sent arrow after arrow from his full quiver, lodging them in the hearer's conscience up to the very feather. He was not what men commonly call eloquent, and yet was so

in the highest sense of the term, for his words were words of fire. The most manly fervor was combined with the greatest simplicity; language which a child could understand came forth from his lips, but a giant wielded the words. Blow after blow, thrust after thrust came from his vigorous hand. The subject was simple, the manner of handling it was simple; but the simplicity was that of the life-guard's sword, of which the hilt is not gilded nor blade filigreed. Ornament would be foreign to the massive strength of either. Bunyan will make himself understood. He uses many words, but not a cloud of idle epithets. He thus addresses at the same time the understanding and the conscience, and reaches the latter through the former. The point of the sword enters the understanding; one home-thrust carries the blade deep into the conscience. This is the perfection of preaching--clear thoughts and words which pass at once into the understanding, and home-thrusts which reach the very soul. How many preachers and writers fail here! Confused ideas, cloudy, long, entangled sentences, which require the utmost stretch of attention to understand, perplex alike speaker and hearer. "What is the man driving at? Poor fellow! he hardly knows himself what he means;" and similar thoughts rise up almost involuntarily within. Others again speak and write with tolerable clearness, but their words are like Jonathan's arrows. None hit the mark. The arrow is beyond the lad, and the conscience is no more touched than the great stone Ezel, behind which David hid himself.

Bunyan was a most prolific writer. His mind teemed with divine thoughts. His heart was ever bubbling up with good matter, and this made his tongue the pen of a ready writer. Besides the "Pilgrim's Progress" and "Grace Abounding," his two best works, for in them his whole heart lay, his "Holy War," "The Two Covenants," his little "Treatise on Prayer," his "Broken Heart the Best Sacrifice," and others which we need not name, are deeply impregnated with Bunyan's peculiar power and spirit. There is some powerful writing in the three treatises contained in the little volume before us.

That he is in places somewhat legal, and speaks too much of the "offers" of the gospel, we freely admit. This was the prevailing theology of the day, from which scarcely any writer of that period was free. But he sometimes employs the word "offers" where we should rather use the term "promises" or "invitations;" these said "offers" being not so much offers of grace to dead sinners as promises of mercy to God's living family who feel they are sinners.

But we are unwilling to dwell on his blemishes. The Lord, whose servant he was, honored him in life, was with him in death, and his name will be dear to the church of God while there is a remnant on the earth.

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