

## **John Bunyan (1628-1688)**

John Bunyan was born in the parish of Elston, two miles from Bedford, England. His father, like himself, was a poor tinker, but he managed to send John to school for a short time. Later, John served for two years in the Parliamentary army during the civil war against Charles I.

In 1660 Bunyan was put in the Bedford jail for twelve years for preaching without a license. While in prison he supported his family by making shoelaces. It was in prison that he wrote *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (first published in 1666), an autobiographical sketch of his conversion, call to ministry, and subsequent imprisonment. After his release in 1672, Bunyan was appointed pastor of the Baptist church in Bedford but was again sent to prison (on the same charge) for six months. It was then that he wrote his most famous work, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, published in 1678. This book is a monumental classic, thought to be second only to the Bible in the number of copies sold since its first printing.

The following passage is Bunyan's own account of his call into ministry. His writings reveal the anguish he endured as one who was called by God to preach the gospel. Bunyan touches on some important themes for anyone engaged in ministry. Like St. Paul, he knew both the pain and the glory of being an instrument in the hands of God.

## GRACE ABOUNDING TO THE CHIEF OF SINNERS

### *Called to the Work of the Ministry*

I want to speak a word or two about preaching the Word and of God's dealings in calling me to this work. I had been awake to the Lord for five or six years, having seen the great worth of Jesus Christ our Lord, and my need for him, and having been enabled to trust my soul to him.

Some of the saints who had good judgment and holiness of life seemed to feel that God had counted me worthy to understand the blessed Word and that he had given me some measure of ability to express helpfully to others what I saw in it. So they asked me to speak a word of exhortation to them in one of the meetings.

At first this seemed to be an impossible thing for me to do, but they kept at it. I finally consented and spoke twice to small meetings of Christians only, but with much weakness and infirmity. So I tested my gift among them, and it seemed as I spoke that they were being given a blessing. Afterward many told me, in the sight of the great God, that they were helped and comforted. They gave thanks to the Father of mercies for this gift he had given to me.

The church continued to feel that I should preach, and so after solemn prayer to the Lord, with fasting, I was ordained to regular public preaching of the Word among those who believed and also to those who had not yet received the faith.

### *Exercising the Gift*

About this time I began to feel a great desire to preach to the unsaved, not for the desire of glorifying myself, for at that time I was particularly being afflicted with the fiery darts of the Devil concerning my eternal state. I could not rest unless I was exercising this gift of preaching, and I was pressed forward into it.

I began to see that the Holy Spirit never intended that people who had gifts and abilities should bury them in the earth, but rather, he commanded and stirred up such people to the exercise of their gift and sent out to work those who were able and ready. And so, although I was the most unworthy of all the saints, I set upon this work.

Though trembling, I used my gift to preach the blessed gospel, in proportion to my faith, as God had showed me in the holy Word of truth. When the word got around that I was doing this, people came in by the hundreds from all over to hear the Word preached.

### *God's Instrument*

At first I could hardly believe that God would speak through me to the heart of anyone, and I still counted myself unworthy. Yet those who were quickened through my preaching loved me and had a respect for me. Although I insisted that it was not because of what I had said, still they publicly declared that it was so. They, in fact, blessed God for me, unworthy wretch though I was, and counted me as God's instrument who showed them the way of salvation.

And when I saw that they were beginning to live differently, and that their hearts were eagerly pressing after the knowledge of Christ and rejoicing that God sent me to them, then I began to conclude that God had blessed his work through me. And so I rejoiced. Yes, the tears of those whom God had awakened by my preaching were my solace and my encouragement.

### *Ministering in Chains*

In my preaching of the Word I noticed that the Lord led me to begin where his Word begins with sinners; that is, to condemn all flesh and to state clearly that the curse of God is upon all people as they come into the world because of sin. And this part of my work I fulfilled easily for the terrors of the Law and the guilt of my transgressions lay heavy upon my conscience.

I preached what I felt, even that under which my own poor soul groaned and trembled. Indeed, I was as one sent to them from the dead. I went myself in chains, preached to them in chains, and had in my own conscience that fire which I pleaded with them to beware of.

I can honestly say that many a time as I have gone to preach I have been full of guilt and terror right up to the pulpit door, and there it has been taken off and I have been at liberty until my work was done. Then immediately, before I could get down the pulpit stairs, it was upon me as bad as before. Yet God carried me on, but surely with a strong hand.

### *My Heart Full of Concern*

In all my preaching, thank God, my heart has earnestly cried out to God to make the Word effectual to the salvation of souls, for I have been fearful that the enemy would take the Word away from the conscience and so it would be unfruitful. I have tried to speak the Word so that a particular person might realize himself guilty of a particular sin.

And after I have preached, my heart has been full of concern to think that the Word might now fall as rain on stony places, and I have often cried out from my heart, "Oh, that

those who have heard me speak today will see as I do what sin, death, hell, and the curse of God really are, and that they might understand the grace and love and mercy of God, that it is through Christ to them no matter in what condition they are, even if they are his enemies!"

During those times, especially when I have spoken of the life that is in Christ without works, it has sometimes seemed as if an angel of God were standing behind me to encourage me. With great power and with heavenly evidence upon my soul I have been laboring to unfold this wonderful doctrine, to demonstrate it, and to fasten it upon the consciences of my hearers. For this doctrine seemed to me not only to be true, but more than true!

As sometimes happens, those who were awakened by my ministry afterward fell back into sin. I can say that their loss was more terrible to me than if my own children had gone to their graves. I think I can say this without any offense to the Lord, that nothing has ever hurt me so much unless it was the fear of the loss of my own salvation.

#### *Travailing to Bring Forth Children to God*

Sometimes I have noticed that a word cast in, by the way, has done more than all the rest of the sermon. Sometimes when I thought I had done the least, then it developed that the most had been accomplished; and at other times when I thought I had really gotten hold of them, I found that I had fished for nothing.

In my preaching I have actually been in real pain, travailing to bring forth children to God, and I have never been satisfied unless there has been some fruit. If not, it made no difference who complimented me, but if it were fruitful I did not care who might condemn me.

It never pleased me to see people merely drinking in opinions if they were ignorant of Christ and the value of his salvation. When I saw sound conviction for sin, especially the sin of unbelief, and hearts set on fire to be saved by Christ, those were the souls I counted blessed.

#### *Temptations Abounding*

But in this work, as in any other, I had my different temptations. Sometimes I would suffer from discouragement, fearing that I would not be of any help to anyone and that I would not even be able to speak sense to the people. At such times I have had a strange faintness seize me. At other times I have been assaulted by thoughts of blasphemy before the congregation.

Again, there have been times when I have been about to preach on some searching portion of the Word and I have found the Tempter suggesting, "What! Will you preach this? This condemns you. Your own soul is guilty of this; you must not preach on it. If you do, you must leave the door open for you to escape from the guilt of what you will say. If you preach like this, you will lay that guilt upon your own soul and you will never be able to get out from under it."

I've been kept from consenting to these horrid suggestions and instead have preached against sin and transgression wherever I found it, even though it did bring guilt upon my own conscience. It is far better to bring oneself under condemnation by plain preaching to others, than to save yourself by imprisoning the truth in unrighteousness. Blessed be God for his help also in this.

#### *A Sledge Hammer Upon the Head of Pride*

I have also had the Word come to me with some sharp, piercing sentence concerning the gifts God has given me. For instance, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as a sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal" (1 Cor. 13:1, KJV). Though a tinkling cymbal is a musical instrument that can make heart-inflaming melody, the cymbal does not contain life; though it can make wonderful music, it can be crushed and thrown away.

So are all those who have gifts but do not have saving grace. Christ can use gifted people to affect the souls of the people in his Church, yet when he has finished using them, he can hang them up without life. Such considerations were a sledge hammer upon the head of pride and the desire of vainglory. What! thought I, shall I be proud because I am a sounding brass? Does not the person who has the least of the life of God have more than these instruments?

#### *Grace the Forerunner of Glory*

I perceived that although gifts are good to accomplish the task they are designed for – the edification of others – yet they are empty and without power to save the soul unless God is using them. And having gifts is no sign of a person's relationship to God. This also made me see that gifts are dangerous things, not in themselves, but because of those evils of pride and vainglory that attend them. Blown up with the applause of ill-advised Christians, the poor creatures who possess these gifts can easily fall into the condemnation of the Devil.

Gifts are desirable, but great grace and small gifts are better than great gifts and no grace. The Bible does not say that the Lord gives gifts and glory, but that he gives grace and

glory. Blessed is everyone to whom the Lord gives true grace, for that is a certain forerunner of glory.

## BIBLE SELECTION

1 Timothy 4:9-16 (NRSV)

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. These are the things you must insist on and teach. Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders. Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers.

## BREATH PRAYER

(Inhale) "Jesus, teach me to practice ..."

(Exhale) "... your gifts entrusted to me."

## JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. In the section "Exercising the Gift," John Bunyan employs the biblical metaphor of burying one's talents. While Jesus referred to money in this parable, talents are often interpreted as symbolic of spiritual gifts. What are some gifts that you believe God has entrusted to you? Are they lying dormant or are you actively utilizing them for good purposes?
2. Bunyan writes that the devil discouraged him from exercising his gift by accusing him of being unworthy. Reflect on moments when you've felt discouraged or unworthy to use your own gifts. How have these feelings impacted your willingness to engage with and share your talents?
3. Optional Stretch Exercise: Over the next week, take time to reflect on your spiritual gifts. Ask others how you have positively impacted them or been helpful. This serves as an excellent starting point for recognizing your gifts. Their responses might reveal talents you hadn't fully recognized, as many gifts often go unnoticed by those who possess them.



## REFLECTIONS FROM RICHARD J. FOSTER

*We must forever lift high the sacredness of all vocation, but in the economy of God the work of proclaiming the gospel is especially significant. Paul stated it succinctly, "How are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?" (Rom. 10:14). It is a high calling, a holy vocation, this proclamation of the gospel. It is a calling worthy of "double honor," says Scripture (1 Tim. 5:17).*

*Unfortunately, we live in a day when the preaching ministry has been trivialized and demeaned and ridiculed. It is sad indeed, but take courage – God is now raising up new leaders, leaders of integrity and humility, leaders who are*

*Lone like the Tishbite, like the Baptist, bold;  
Cast in a rare and apostolic mold.*

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