

## JOHN BUNYAN

Questions

1. What pathological features do you see in John Bunyan's condition as he describes it in his "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners?"
2. According to the sub-title "Grace Abounding" was written "for the support of the Weak and Tempted People of God." In other words Bunyan looked upon his experience as a religious experience. To what extent would you be inclined to accept Bunyan's interpretation of his experience? Is it possible to have mental disorder and religious experience in one and the same person at the same time?
3. Discuss Pratt's view that Bunyan's experience was similar to that of David Brainerd and that his sins about which he was so distressed were nothing more serious than swearing and Sabbath-breaking. (See "Religious Consciousness," page 140).
4. Discuss Pratt's conclusion that through the experience described in "Grace Abounding" nothing was accomplished beyond the substitution of one feeling for another. "No new insight," he says, "was gained, no change of will or character was wrought, no new ideas were revealed, no unification of purpose and no new devotion of self and its energies brought about." There was in other words no victory and nothing of any moral significance. ("Religious Consciousness, pp. 140-147).
5. What pre-suppositions underlie Royce's statement that John Bunyan was a man of genius who bore with an heroic fortitude a heavy and morbid load of nervous ill and in the end won the mastery of it. (See Case of John Bunyan in "Essays in Good and Evil.")
6. What is your interpretation of the unpardonable sin which Bunyan committed?
7. How do you explain John Bunyan's temporary recovery?

References

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|-------|-------------------------|
| Pratt | RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS |
| Royce | ESSAYS IN GOOD AND EVIL |

## THE CASE OF JOHN BUNYAN

### S o u r c e s

Our principal source of information concerning the morbid period in Bunyan's life is an autobiographical account entitled "Grace abounding to the Chief of Sinners." It was written during the sixth year of his imprisonment and the thirty-eighth year of his life and the thirteenth year after the end of the period of disorder with which it is mainly concerned. Six years later just before his release from prison this account was supplemented with an account of his imprisonment. This book was published according to the title page of the first edition "for the support of the weak and tempted people of God." The facts in the account have been selected and interpreted in accordance with the current theological ideas of the danger of pride and of "the blessedness of being led to the evil of one's own heart and the multitude of corruptions and infirmities therein" (296). There is therefore a great exaggeration of his own sins. At the same time the account gives evidence of a certain reticence. While going into great detail in regard to such symptoms as the "battle of the texts," and while he heaps all manner of reproaches upon himself for his "vileness and wickedness," the only sins which he specifically mentions are swearing and Sabbath-breaking.

### B u n y a n ' s   S t o r y

Early Influences      Bunyan's account of his childhood is meagre and as in the rest of the autobiography he is mainly concerned with his sins. The following are the more significant statements:

Parentage            "My father's house was of that rank which was meanest and most despised of all the families of the land" (2).

                          According to Brown, however, the father was a tinker neither better nor worse than others of his handicraft and the grandfather was a village trader. The mother was of poor but honest and thrifty family.

Education            "But yet notwithstanding the meanness and inconsiderableness of my parents it pleased God to put it into their hearts to put me to school to learn me both to read and to write." (3).

The Swearing Habit            "From a child I had but few equals both for cursing and swearing and blaspheming the holy name of God." (4).

The Fearful Dreams      "That which did so offend the Lord that even in my childhood he did scare and frighten me with fearful dreams and did terrify me with fearful visions. For often after I have spent this and the other day in sin I have in my bed been greatly afflicted in sleep with the apprehensions of devils and wicked spirits..... (5) Also I would all these years be greatly afflicted with the thoughts of the fearful torments of hell-fire.... (6) Those things I said when I was but a child, but nine or ten years old, did so distress my soul, that when in the midst of my many sports and childish vanities, amidst my vain companions, I was often much cast down and afflicted in my mind therewith, yet I could not let go my sins." (7).

The Life of Pleasure      "A while after those terrible dreams did leave me, which also I soon forgot, for my pleasures did quickly cut off the remembrance of them as if they had never been. Wherefore with the more greediness, according to the strength of my nature, I did let loose the reins of my lust and delighted in all transgressions against the law of God; so that until I came to the estate of marriage, I was a very ring-leader of all the

was thinking on it and fearing lest it should be so, I felt my heart sink in despair, concluding that it was too late; and therefore I resolved in my mind I would go on in sin; for thought I, if the case be thus, my state is surely miserable, miserable if I leave my sins and miserable if I follow them. I can but be damned, and if it must be so, I had as good be damned for many sins as be damned for few. (23) Thus I stood in the midst of my play before all that then were present, but yet I told them nothing; but having made this conclusion, I returned desperately to my sport again, and I can well remember that presently this kind of despair did so possess my soul that I was persuaded that I could never attain unto other comfort than what I would get in sin; for heaven was gone already, so on that I must not think; wherefore I found within me great desire to take my fill of sin, still studying what sin was yet to be committed that I might taste the sweetness of it. And I made as much haste as I could to fill my belly with its delicacies, lest I should die before I had my desire; for that I feared greatly. In these things I protest before God I lie not, neither do I feign this form of speech." (24).

Outward Reformation The conflict is now on. The tension has become great and he has heard a voice "darting from heaven into his soul." By a curious reasoning process he has refused to heed this voice and has "returned desperately" to the pursuits which to him are sins. But this continues only a short time. It is to be noted that the shift takes place through a subconscious or automatic process.

"This did continue with me about a month or more. But one day as I was standing at a neighbor's shop window, and there cursing and swearing, and playing the madman; after my wonted manner, there sat within the woman of the house and heard me; who though she also was a very loose and ungodly wretch, yet protested that I cursed and swore at that most fearful rate that she was made to tremble to hear me; and told me further that I was the most ungodliest fellow for swearing that she had ever heard in all her life; and that I, by thus doing, was able to spoil all the youth in the whole town, if they came but in my company. (26). At this reproof I was silenced and put to secret shame, and that too as I thought, before the God of heaven. (27). But how it came to pass I know not, I did from this time forward so leave my swearing that it was a great wonder to myself to observe it; and whereas before I knew not how to speak unless I put an oath before and another behind to make my words have authority; I could now, without it, speak better and with more pleasantness than ever I could before. All this while I knew not Jesus Christ nor did I leave my sports and plays." (28)

Soon after this he fell into the company of a man whose talk "concerning the matters of religion" greatly impressed him and he "betook himself to the Bible." The result he describes as follows:

"Wherefore I fell to some outward reformation both in my words and life, and did set the commandments before me for my way to heaven; which commandments I did also strive to keep, and, as I thought, did keep them pretty well sometimes.....(30). Thus I continued about a year; all which time my neighbors did take me to be a very godly man, a new and religious man, and did marvel to see such a great and famous alteration of my life and manners." (31).

The Doctrine of the New Birth Looking back Bunyan tells us that this was only an "outward reformation," that all this while he "knew not Christ, nor grace, nor faith nor hope." We must probably accept this statement to the extent of recognizing that the inner conflict was not as yet fully resolved, if we are to understand what follows:

"In these days when I have heard talk of what was the sin against the Holy Ghost, then would the Tempter so provoke me to desire to sin, that I was as if I could not, must not, neither should be quiet until I had committed it; now no sin would serve but that. If it were to be committed by speaking of such a word, then I have been as if my mouth would have spoken that word whether I would or no." (105).

The Tender  
Conscience

The term "tender" or "sore" conscience occurs frequently in the narrative and may be taken as an outstanding characteristic of his condition. The following is characteristic:

"All this while as to the act of sinning, I was never more tender than now. My hinder parts were inward. I durst not take a pin or a stick, thought but so big as a straw; for my conscience was sore and would smart at every touch. I could not tell how to speak my words for fear I should misplace them." (52).

Even of the period following the final solution he tells us:

"But because of my former frights and anguish were very sore and deep therefore it would often befall me still, as it befalleth those that have been scared with fire. I thought every little voice was Fire; Fire! Every little touch would hurt my tender conscience."

The "Original and  
Inward Pollution"

The only specific sins which Bunyan at any time mentions are swearing and Sabbath-breaking and his castigation of himself for these sins is severe to the utmost extreme. This is sufficiently indicated in passages already quoted (p. 4). Nevertheless there are many passages which suggest a deeper seated difficulty. The most important is probably the following:

"But my original and inward pollution; that was my plague and affliction, that I saw at a dreadful rate always putting forth itself within me;..... I was more loathsome in mine own eyes than was a toad, and I thought I was so in God's eyes too: Sin and corruption would as naturally bubble out of my heart as water would bubble out of a fountain: I thought that everyone had a better heart than I had.... I thought that none but the devil himself could equalize me for wickedness and pollution of mind." (34).

Anxiety  
and Fear

Fear of hell and anxiety about his soul's salvation were prominent throughout his disturbed condition. These both figured prominently in the theology of the time and Bunyan took that theology seriously. The attainment of the new birth which constituted for him unquestionably a genuine motive had as its corollary the escape from hell. Bunyan is therefore constantly beset with doubts, Is he among the elect? Has he faith? The following passages are typical:

"And as I went on and read, I lighted on that passage, 'To one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom, to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit, to another faith.... On this word I mused, and could not tell what to do. Especially this 'Faith' put me to it, for I could not help it but sometimes must question whether I had faith or not; but I was loath to conclude that I had no faith; for if I do so, thought I, then I shall count myself a very east-away indeed.'" (47).

"Neither as yet could I attain unto any comfortable persuasion that I had faith in Christ; but instead of finding satisfaction here, I began to find my soul assaulted with fresh doubts about my future happiness; espe-

that by these things was laid upon my conscience, but also from the very filth thereto: for the temptation was removed and I was put into my right mind again as other Christians were." (114).

One of the factors in this recovery was the influence of the group of pious people at Bedford with whom he now identified himself. Concerning this he tells us:

"I began to break my mind to those poor people in Bedford, and to tell them of my condition, which when they heard it they told Mr. Gifford of me, who himself also took occasion to talk with me, and was willing to be well persuaded of me, though I think from little grounds." (77).

The influence of Mr. Gifford was also most important, as appears in the following:

"At this time also I sat under the ministry of the holy Mr. Gifford whose doctrines by God's grace did much for my stability. This man made it much his business to deliver the people of God from all those false and unsound tests which by nature they are prone to." (117).

Still another factor was apparently the awakening of an objective interest in connection with the controversy with the Quakers.

"For as the Quakers did oppose the truth, so did God the more confirm me in it, by leading me into the scriptures that did wonderfully maintain it." (123).

A fourth factor is given in the following passage:

"God in whose hand are all our days and ways, did cast into my hand one day a book of Martin Luther's; it was his Comment on the Galatians. It was so old that it was ready to fall piece from piece if I did but turn it over. Now I was pleased much that such an old book had fallen to my hand, the which when I had but a little perused, I found my condition in his experience, so largely and profoundly handled, as if his book had been written out of my own heart..... I do prefer this book of Martin Luther's upon the Galatians (excepting the Holy Bible) before all the books that I have ever seen, as most fit for a wounded conscience." (129-30).

Of his condition at this time he tells us:

"God did open the Scriptures unto me and make them shine before me, and cause them to dwell with me, talk with me and comfort me over and over." (126).

"Now I had evidence as I thought of my salvation from heaven, with many golden seals thereon, all hanging in my sight." (126)

#### The Unpardonable Sin

How long this period of temporary recovery lasted it is hard to determine. Apparently it was not of long duration. We read:

"For after the Lord had in this manner thus graciously delivered me from this great and sore temptation, and had set me down steadily in the faith of his holy gospel, and had given me such strength consolation and such blessed evidence from heaven..... the tempter came again and that with a more grievous and dreadful temptation than before. And that

"Now I should find my mind to flee from God as from the face of a dreadful judge, yet this was my torment that I could not escape His hand. But blessed be His grace, that scripture in these flying fits would call as running after me, 'I have blotted out as a thick cloud thy transgressions, and as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me for I have redeemed thee.' This I say would come into my mind when I was fleeing from the face of God: for I did flee from His face; that is my mind and spirit fled before Him: By reason of His brightness I could not endure; then would the text cry, Return unto me; it would cry aloud with a very great voice, Return unto me for I have redeemed thee. Indeed this would make me stop a little, and, as it were, look over my shoulder behind me, to see if I could discern that the God of grace did follow me with a pardon in His hand; but I could no sooner do that, but all would be clouded and darkened again by the sentence, For you know how that afterwards, when he would have inherited the blessing, he found no place of repentance though he sought it carefully with tears. Wherefore I could not refrain but fled, though at some times it cried, 'Return, return' as if it did follow after me..." "Once as I was walking to and fro in a good man's shop, bemoaning myself of my sad and doleful state.... and being ready to sink with fear, suddenly there was as if there had rushed in at the window, the noise of wind upon me, but very pleasant, and as if I heard a voice speaking, 'Didst thou ever refuse to be justified by the blood of Christ?' and withal my whole life of profession past was in a moment opened to me, wherein I was made to see that designedly I had not: so my heart made answer groaningly, No. Then fell with power that word of God upon me, 'See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh.' This made a strange seizure upon my spirit; it brought light with it and commanded silence in my heart, of all those tumultuous thoughts that did before use like masterless hell-hounds to roar and bellow and make a hideous noise within me." (174).

But the great calm did not last long. The tempter came back at him with other verses of scripture until as he puts it:

"By the strange and unusual assaults of the tempter my soul was like a broken vessel, driven by the winds and tossed headlong into despair." (186)

In the midst of his fears he cries unto the Lord and receives the assurance:

'I have loved thee with an everlasting love.' (190).

But the tempter does not leave him.

"For it could not be so little as a hundred times that he did that day labor to break my peace. Oh the conflicts and the combats that I did then meet with; as I strove to hold this word, that of Esau did fly in my face like lightning: I should sometimes be up and down twenty times in an hour. Yet God did bear me up and keep my heart upon this word." (191)

"By these words (My grace is sufficient for thee) I was sustained yet not without exceeding conflicts, for the space of seven or eight weeks; for my peace would be in it and out sometimes twenty times a day; comfort now and trouble presently; peace now and before I could go a furlong a s full of fear and guilt as ever heart could hold. And this was not only now and then but my whole seven weeks' experience, for this about the 'sufficiency of grace' and that about Esau's parting with his birthright, would be like a pair of scales within my mind; sometimes one would be uppermost, and sometimes again the other; according to which would be my peace or trouble." (205).

But the solution finally comes, and it comes in the form of a very peculiar test by which he became convinced of the supremacy of the words of grace.

He continued thus preaching occasionally, chiefly on trips into the country until:

"At last being still desired by the church, after some solemn prayer to the Lord, with fasting, I was more particularly called forth, and appointed to a more ordinary and public preaching of the word..... Wherefore, though of myself of all the saints most unworthy; yet I, but with great fear and trembling, did set upon the work and did.... preach the blessed gospel that God had showed me in the holy word of truth: which when the country understood, they came in to hear the word by hundreds, and that from all parts, though upon sundry and divers accounts.... and I had not preached long before some began to be touched, and to be greatly afflicted in their minds at the apprehension of the greatness of their sin and their need of Jesus Christ..... Thus I went on for two years crying out against men's sins and their fearful state because of them. After which the Lord came in upon my own soul with some staid peace and comfort through Christ..... wherefore I now altered in my preaching (for still I preached what I saw and felt)..... after this God led me into something of the mystery of union with Christ; wherefore that I discovered and showed to them also. ( -279).

Of his condition during the early years of his ministry he tells us:

"But in this work as in all other, I had my temptations attending me, and that of divers kinds; as sometimes I should be assaulted with great discouragement therein, fearing that I should not be able to speak a word at all unto edification..... at which times I should have such a strange faintness and strengthlessness seize upon my body, that my legs have scarce been able to carry me to the place of exercise. Sometimes in my preaching I have been strangely assaulted with thoughts of blasphemy and strongly tempted to speak the words with my mouth before the congregation..... I have also while in this blessed work of Christ been often tempted to pride and liftings up of the heart." (291 to 296).

Along with these "divers temptations" he had also the strong sense of divine guidance. He says:

"I have observed that where I have a work to do for God I have first felt as it were the going of God upon my spirit, to desire that I might preach there; I have also observed that such and such souls in particular have been strongly set upon my heart and I stirred up to wish for their salvation; and that these very souls have after this, been given in as the fruits of my ministry. I have observed that a word cast in by the bye hath done more execution in a sermon than all that was spoken besides; and sometimes when I thought I did no good, then I did the most of all." (287).

It is important to notice that although Bunyan is by no means sparing in his condemnation of himself for his manifold sins, nevertheless when he is assailed by others he comes vigorously to his own defense:

"But when Satan perceived that his tempting and assaulting of me would not answer his design; to wit to overthrow the ministry and make it ineffectual, as to the ends thereof: he tried another way, which was to stir up the minds of the ignorant and malicious to load me with slanders and reproaches..... It began therefore to be rumored up and down among the people that I was a witch, a Jesuit, a highwayman and the like..... but that which was reported with the boldest confidence was that I had my misses, my whores.