

John Bunyan: Blessing God for Affliction

“Like the tearing of my flesh from my bones.”

That’s how John Bunyan described parting with his family after their brief visits with him in prison. Each time they walked away, John was reminded of the great difficulty his incarceration imposed on them, especially on his blind daughter, Mary. “What sorrow you are likely to have as your portion in this world!” he wrote. “You must be beaten, must beg, suffer hunger, cold, nakedness, and a thousand other calamities, even though I cannot so much as bear the wind blowing upon you.”



Adding to John’s misery was the knowledge that by just saying the word, he could be released. Just one simple statement—“I will not preach the gospel of Jesus Christ”—was all it would take to set him free to support his family again. But John couldn’t do it. “I have determined,” he said, “the almighty God being my help and my shield, yet to suffer, if frail life might continue so long, even till the moss shall grow on mine eyebrows, rather than thus to violate my faith.” And so John waited on God for twelve long years in the overcrowded, unsanitary, poorly heated Bedford jail. Here’s something of what he learned there.

“I have often thought that the best of Christians are found in the worst of times.” It was a great mercy that John found himself in a position to both minister and be ministered to in the Bedford jail. Most of the men housed in the Bedford jail at that time were there because of religious persecution. They were free during the day to study Scripture together, to pray and to encourage one another. John found himself in the ironic position of doing in prison what he was imprisoned for doing—preaching and teaching the Gospel—as well as learning from the other imprisoned preachers. Members of his church often came to the jail to comfort John and ask his counsel, and his family was allowed to visit regularly. God ministered His sustaining grace to John through His people.

“Nothing can render affliction so insupportable as the load of sin; would you, therefore, be fitted for afflictions, be sure to get the burden of your sins laid aside, and then what afflictions soever you may meet with will be very easy to you . . .” John learned many spiritual lessons in prison, and came to a clear understanding that he

needed to entrust his family to God. He meditated on Jeremiah 49:11—“Leave your fatherless children, I will preserve them alive; and let your widows trust in Me.” Later he wrote,

I also considered that if I entrusted all to God, I engaged God to take care of my concerns. But if I forsook His ways, then I would not only falsify my profession, but would also consider that my concerns, if left at God’s feet while I stood true to, and for, His name, were not as secure as they would be if they were under my care, even though I was denying the way of God.

“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.” John Bunyan discovered his voice as a writer while in prison. He began writing as an extension of his ministry to the church and had written four books before his arrest. However, Bunyan’s two major works were written during his stay at the Bedford jail. The first, *Grace Abounding*, is an autobiographical testimony of his own conversion. The second, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, is an allegorical novel that in many ways tells the same story as *Grace Abounding*, universalizing and personifying Bunyan’s struggles with guilt, doubt, despair and even incarceration.

Could these books have been written without the rod of affliction? George Whitefield didn’t think so. He said, “It [*Pilgrim’s Progress*] smells of the prison. It was written when the author was confined in the Bedford jail. And ministers never write or preach so well as when under the cross; the Spirit of Christ and of Glory rests upon them.”

“In times of affliction we commonly meet with the sweetest experiences of the love of God . . . Jesus Christ was never more real and apparent than now. Here I have seen and felt Him indeed!”

After being released from prison, John added a chapter to the second edition of *Grace Abounding* describing some of his experiences there. In the final paragraph he described the comfort he received from God during a time of doubt in prison. He wrote, “I would not have exchanged this trial for much else; I am comforted every time I think about it and I hope I shall bless God for ever for the things I have learned by it.”