

Bunyan's Grace Abounding: A Gritty Memoir from the Spiritual Front Lines

by [Jeff Plude](#) (December 2022)



John Bunyan in Prison, George Frederick Folingsby, 1864

The most dramatic account of a sinner converted to a saint is no doubt the apostle Paul's. He literally saw the light, "a light from heaven," a light so brilliant it forced him to the ground and blinded him for three days. He was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians, which is why he later calls

himself “the chief of sinners.” But as Paul later writes in his letter to the Romans, “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.” It’s certainly a compelling story, but I think a longer version of the spiritual rebirth that Jesus requires of his followers is much more common, and in some ways perhaps even more intriguing.

The most conspicuous and best of the latter type, I think, is John Bunyan’s. He’s widely known for his novel *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, whose first of two parts was published in 1678, the year he turned fifty. It depicts salvation in the form of an allegory, a harrowing but enlightening trek by a protagonist named Christian of course, from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. But often overlooked is Bunyan’s next most important book (he wrote nearly sixty in all), his spiritual memoir, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, a sort of grittier prequel to his fictional masterpiece. To me, it makes Augustine’s *Confessions* seem like a coffee klatch.

Bunyan’s nonfiction narrative depicts the same overall journey as its figurative counterpart but with a very different method, tone, and in some ways even purpose.

The Pilgrim’s Progress has its darkness—the slough of Despond, “the destroyer” Apollyon, Faithful’s execution at Vanity Fair, the Giant Despair and his Doubting-Castle—but it’s similar to a fairytale. For the most part its monsters are concrete and therefore defeatable in theory, and the human antagonists are types. We are subliminally reassured that all’s going to be well with the hero in the end. Not only that, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* has a buoyancy that lingers with a sympathetic reader. It’s plainly told, engaging, instructive, and uplifting. It sticks with you, like a mentor you never forget. Samuel Johnson famously said it was one of three books he wished never ended—very high praise indeed from one of literature’s most insightful and tough critics.

Grace Abounding, on the other hand, is like a real-life

metaphysical soul-blasting—overwhelming and insidious, yet amorphous and ungraspable (“We wrestle not against flesh and blood,” Paul warns in his letter to the Ephesians). It’s a firsthand account of a grunt on the front lines of the Faustian wars who barely escapes with his sanity intact. Minefields lurk everywhere, in the most seemingly innocuous and mundane places and situations. While encouraging, *Grace Abounding* is anything but lighthearted. It’s grim and gritty. Though its style is direct, its action is almost all interior and meanders and double backs with Bunyan’s vacillating thoughts and feelings. It leaves you weary, wary, and much, much wiser.

Though Bunyan took his title of *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* from Paul’s epistles, in some ways he and the apostle to the Gentiles couldn’t have been more different.

Paul was well educated, a Pharisee, a student of the highly regarded rabbi Gamaliel. Bunyan, as he writes in the opening of *Grace Abounding*, came from “a low and inconsiderable generation.” He was a brazier like his father, or more specifically a tinker, who traveled around fixing utensils and such in Bedford, which is about fifty miles north of London. Except for his early years in the local school, Bunyan was essentially uneducated, but he must have had a considerable native intelligence, and most of all a prodigious imagination and passionate intensity. At sixteen he joined the Parliamentary army during the English Revolution but was back home a couple of years later. He got married and became a father, but inwardly was at loose ends.

Then his spiritual experience began. Bunyan endured a long, slow, torturous slog of stutter steps, strides forward and one or two backward, and at least one time into a theological hole whose walls kept him slipping deeper into unbelief. It was five or so years before he was assured that his salvation was sealed, and it was a couple of years more before he started preaching at the local church at the urging of some of his

Christian brothers and sisters who recognized his rhetorical and literary gift.

The Bedford congregation eventually made him pastor, which is especially noteworthy since he was then in prison, though near the end of his sentence.

He'd been arrested for preaching in a "private meeting," that is, he wasn't an ordained priest in the Anglican church, which became the national religion after the end of the English Civil Wars and the restoration of Charles II. Nor did Bunyan attend the Church of England's services or use its Book of Common Prayer, both of which were required by law. He was a committed dissenter, or Nonconformist, as evangelicals were then known in Britain. He was brought up on charges, found guilty, and at about the age of thirty-two was imprisoned for twelve years, from 1660 to 1672. Which means he spent a fifth of his nearly sixty years in jail; his mentor Paul was also familiar with legal proceedings and the inside of a cell. Bunyan was ordered to stop preaching and return to tinkering (which sounds comical to modern ears). *Grace Abounding* ends with two short sections, one about his ministry and another about his trial, if you can call it that; usually appended to the memoir is a posthumous longer account written by Bunyan of his farcical go-rounds with rogue judges (whom the Honorable Hate-good in *Vanity Fair* serves as a composite of), and it would be humorous if it weren't so tragic. Bunyan says he feels like he's being flayed by leaving his family in the lurch—his new wife, whom he married after his first one died, and four children including his eldest, Mary, who was born blind and whom he doted on. But he refused to back down and renounce the gift he'd been given by God to preach his Word, just as the apostles Peter and John did when the Jewish leaders arrested them for doing the same thing in Jerusalem after Pentecost.

Midway through Bunyan's stint behind bars *Grace Abounding* was published. The author was in his late thirties, about a decade

after he emerged victorious (as he would say) through Christ. But this was far from his first book. He'd been writing continually since the details he relates in *Grace Abounding's* main section, which takes up most of the work's forty thousand or so words, which are divided into numbered paragraphs. Bunyan's first publications were theological and polemical treatises aimed at George Fox and the Quakers. But at the same time he was also composing and delivering sermons and reading a lot, though not widely (he does mention Martin Luther's lengthy commentary on Galatians). Most of all he diligently studied and searched the Scriptures, constantly recalling verses to ward off Satan's assaults—similar to the way Jesus countered temptations in the wilderness. Bunyan wields the Bible like a military manual for guerilla warfare.

Bunyan begins his spiritual quest in a very unassuming way. A confluence of small incidents starts it all. He first relates that he was the “chief of sinners” among the youth while growing up. His time in the garrison gave him even more exposure to various vices. But when he was discharged and became a husband, his wife brought two books with her that he used to read on occasion, which she inherited from her father, a godly man: *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* and *The Practice of Piety*. This was the first small chink in the massive wall that separated Bunyan from salvation.

Then one day Bunyan is walking around Bedford and hears three or four women talking, and he's intrigued by their talk of “a new birth,” of God and Christ, of the words and promises in the Bible they'd been refreshed and supported with.

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 amongst their neighbors.

It's interesting how Bunyan is drawn to "such pleasantness of Scripture language." A new man is being born, and a new writer too.

In *Grace Abounding* you see the developing style of the budding master novelist. For instance, how he's able to make abstract windings of the soul tangible. He often uses physical terms to depict how a thought or Bible passage "seized" him, "fell" on him, "darted" into his mind, etc. When Bunyan reads in Romans 8:39 that "nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord," he exclaims: "I thought I could have spoken of his love, and of his mercy to me, even to the very crows that sat upon the plowed lands before me, had they been capable to have understood me." Metaphors abound, and his innate exuberance served him well in the salvation of his soul and the perfection of his art.

Indeed diction plays a key role in *Grace Abounding*. For instance, Bunyan confesses early on how he used to swear with abandon, as his father did. When a woman who isn't exactly a pillar of the community hears him swearing one day, she tells him flatly that she's never heard anyone swear like him, that he was "the ungodliest fellow for swearing that she ever heard in all her life; and that I . . . was able to spoil all the youth in a whole town, if they came but in my company." He's crestfallen, and he resolves to stop swearing. As Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians: "Be not deceived; evil communications corrupt good manners."

Which I can especially relate to, since I was the same way, as was my father. And I was similarly shamed when my wife and I had dinner with a former colleague whom I was friends with when I was about Bunyan's age. The friend's wife recalled one night when their daughter was an infant and her husband and I and some others wound up at their house in the wee hours after a night on the town and she came out on the porch and asked me to stop swearing. It stung since I was now a believer and no

longer swore. I remember how one person I'd known all my life took exception with my curse-free speech and even demanded to know what was going on!

Soon Bunyan starts to read the Bible and to be convicted of his sin. He believes in the gospel, and that the Scriptures are the Word of God. But now he discovers, just as Christian does in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, why so few take the narrow and strait way. His mind and soul explode into a series of firefights and skirmishes with the prince of this world that lead to an epic psychological siege.

Unlike Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the real John Bunyan had no likeminded human companions to confide in—no Faithful, no Hopeful—to ease his doubts and mental writhing except for the occasional counsel of John Gifford, the pastor of Bedford church (and the prototype for Evangelist in the novel). In fact he tells practically no one of the war being waged inside him. Of course he did have the best guide of all, the Holy Spirit, who the Bible says calls those God has chosen and leads them through their sanctification. Nevertheless in *Grace Abounding* Bunyan is often confused, stymied, and can't quite find the definitive scripture to fortify him, though verses that at first seem relevant often pop into his head out of the blue. But the old dragon is usually a move ahead of him, parrying any decisive blow Bunyan might strike.

Yet he's undaunted in the end. He maintains that even these difficulties redounded to his ultimate benefit.

The latter half of *Grace Abounding's* main section hammers away on a thought that obsesses and threatens to overwhelm the would-be convert—that he has committed an unforgivable sin. He castigates himself and tries desperately to find something in the Scriptures that supports Christ forgiving him. It's a last-ditch all-out offensive by the adversary. Bunyan tumbles headlong into unbelief and blasphemies. All seems to be lost. At times it seems he's about to go mad.

What has Bunyan done? He laments that he has “sold Christ.”

The thing is, Bunyan has committed this sin only in his mind. But as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount in a different context, whoever even *thinks* of having sex with a woman has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

And so when a taunt by Satan prompts him to sell out Christ for the wares and glory of this world (like Vanity Fair), Bunyan resists but then impulsively assents. It reminds me of Paul, who bluntly admits in Romans: “What I would, that I do not; but that I hate, that I do.” In thrall to Satan, Bunyan’s thoughts riddle him like a machine gun—“the wicked suggestion still running in my mind, *sell him, sell him, sell him*, as fast as a man could speak ... *Let him go if he will!* and I thought also that I felt my heart freely consent thereto. O, the diligence of Satan! O, the desperateness of man’s heart!”

Bunyan sounds like a prisoner of war who’s been broken. He holds nothing back from his readers.

He believes he’s like Esau, who as the eldest son of Isaac sold his birthright to his twin brother, Jacob, for a “morsel of meat.” When Esau later sought to receive the final blessing from his dying father, it was too late: “He found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.” Bunyan repeats this verse from Hebrews over and over, like he’s hellbent on destruction.

I found *Grace Abounding* frustrating at times, and I had a vertiginous feeling as if I were about to fall from a tower. The attacks reminded me of my own drawn-out conversion (though I was nearly twice Bunyan’s age). Or I felt like I was getting the bends, like leviathan hooked with a giant barb and reeled to the surface of consciousness with his evil lungs ballooning out of his horrible mouth.

As a mental diary of sorts, *Grace Abounding* has of course attracted the attention of those modern shamans now known as

psychologists. *Psyche* is Greek, of course, for *soul*.

William James, one of the progenitors of academic psychology, pretty much sneers at Bunyan in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The Harvard professor includes *Grace Abounding*—along with Tolstoy's own spiritual autobiography, *A Confession* (Bunyan is in good company) in the section called "The Sick Soul." In fact he goes so far as to say that Bunyan and Tolstoy are "psychopathic," though he assuredly means something much different by the term than how we now use it. But I think it was still meant to disparage them. He condescendingly refers to "poor" Bunyan-like contemporaries who called him "Bishop Bunyan"—and says he finds it hard to follow such "windings of the heart."

What does the easygoing Ivy League sage think is a healthy soul? The proselytizers of New Thought, the precursors of the shams *The Power of Positive Thinking* and more recently *The Secret*. In the section called "The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness" he quotes at length a book called *Menticulture* by Horace Fletcher—the "Great Masticator," the charlatan who claimed that chewing your food until it was liquid was the fountain of youth and a panacea for the body.

But can we expect any different from the prince of pragmatism? James reminds me of Vain-Confidence in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Spiritual quagmires like *Grace Abounding* are anathema to the well-adjusted but deluded specimens he deems desirable, and almost certainly fashioned himself.

That's why Bunyan clawing and scrapping his way through the soul swamps doesn't end in a whirl of exultation the way *The Pilgrim's Progress* does, after Christian crosses the treacherous river as the last obstacle to the Celestial City. By contrast *Grace Abounding* subsides almost with a sigh, which is the relief felt by true believers in this world, who have only respites between trouble. "In the world ye shall have tribulation," Jesus promises his disciples.

And sure enough Bunyan did—lengthy imprisonment, false accusations of adultery, an illness that killed him after he rode fifty miles in the rain to help reconcile a father and son (a fitting death for the former prodigal).

All in all *Grace Abounding* is written from the depths of a righteous man. It depicts true religious experience, that is, the only true redemption of a person's soul after it leaves this world. At the end of *Grace Abounding's* preface Bunyan issues a defiant challenge to the readers of his blow-by-blow born-again chronicle: "He that liketh it, let him receive it; and he that does not, let him produce a better."

Said with the hard-won assurance of a veteran fighter of the supernatural wars with the holy scars to prove it. And not only was Bunyan himself victorious through Christ, but his narrative accounts of that epic struggle must have helped keep countless Christian recruits from becoming infernal carnage themselves.

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