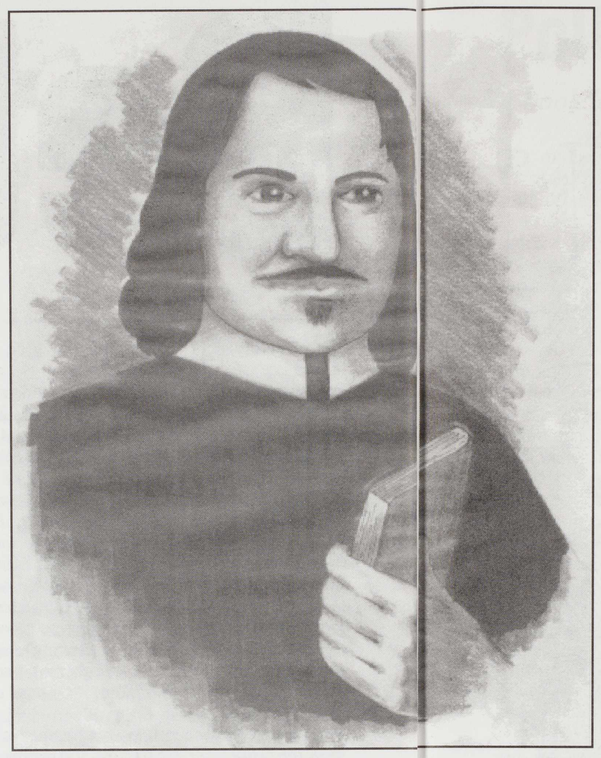
JOHN BUNYAN

Paying the High Price for High Laws

by Curtis Blair



If you were to ask Christians today what book, other than the Bible, has sold the most copies in publishing history, probably few would know that the answer is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Yet, it's true. Even though the story has seen lamentable decline in popularity during the past fifty years, most literature historians agree that this classic allegory of salvation and the Christian life has been the number one best seller of all time.[1]

First published in 1678, the book met with immediate success throughout England, France, and New England, and by 1692, its publishers were shipping out 100,000 copies in one year — an incredible feat for that time. *Pilgrim's Progress* has been translated into over 100 languages and of the English editions, one scholar has said that their number "defies calculation."[2]

Ask today's Christians about John Bunyan and many may not recognize the name, let alone be aware that his famous literary work was written from the confines of a prison cell in which he spent twelve years. Yet, Christians should know about John Bunyan, especially in a day when governmental restrictions to our freedoms are ever looming on the horizon. Some of those who sense this the most in recent times are those who have been denied the freedom to obey God in His command to rescue the weak and the needy from the hands of the wicked, to "rescue those being put to death." Like Bunyan, they are being shut up in prisons across the nation for an act of obedience to God — for a belief in Higher Laws.

I think it was my mother who first introduced me to John Bunyan and the main character of his book, a traveling pilgrim named "Christian." At the breakfast table, my two brothers and I had to sit for an extra ten minutes each morning as our mother led the devotional time. Despite the fact that we usually wanted to gather our books, pack our lunch, and be off to school with our friends, our presence was expected. Sometimes we would spend a month or two reading through one of the gospels, or reading from the Proverbs on little flashcards Mom had made, but I remember one particular time, perhaps I was about nine, when she introduced us to the story of *Pilgrim's Progress*.

In addition, I recall that we were given a lesson or two on the story of Bunyan's life. She hadn't failed to recognize the significant relationship between the author's life and the book which, in an epic fantasy of pilgrimage, looks at the hardships, failures, joys, and eventual victory of the Christian life — themes which Bunyan often drew from his own life's experience.

Our lives were greatly enriched by our mother's faithfulness in teaching us about God's Word and godly living. Little did any of us know during those mornings as we sat around the table that we would live to see the day, in our own country, when thousands of Christians would be jailed on a routine basis for reasons similar to those of John Bunyan. Nor do I think that my mother had any inkling that her talks on Bunyan would eventually play a part in influencing her son to follow Bunyan's example nearly two decades later. Thank the Lord for godly mothers.

John Bunyan was a tinker who lived in the village of Bedford, England during the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell and the reign of Charles II. John, who was converted to Christ through the witness of his wife, began a preaching ministry within the town of Bedford and surrounding communities in the mid-1650's. His ministry coincided (or perhaps clashed) with the rigid policies of Charles II who ascended to the throne in 1660. For England, these became years of strict government control over all church and religious activity with laws requiring all persons to conform to the doctrine and practice of the state church, the Church of England, and even attend its services. The years prior had seen much political and social turmoil and thus England was trying to regain its stability and secure unity within its borders. Non-conformist religious groups were feared as a potential threat to the nation's cohesiveness, and this not without reason. Some religious factions had indeed been involved in previous uprisings, but on the whole, the law (a part of the Stuart Restoration of 1660) affected well-meaning Christians who gathered together for worship and Bible study. Their meetings were illegal and could even incur a sentence of death by hanging for third-time offenders.[3]

Bunyan found himself caught in a conflict between state mandates and his own conscience. As a preacher, he believed his right and responsibility to preach came from God. The Bible bore witness of God's command to preach the gospel and Bunyan felt no human power could put limitations or prohibitions on his obligation to do so. Consequently, he ignored the law and continued his preaching ministry.

His first arrest came in November of 1660 on the charge of conducting an illegal worship service. Initially, he was sentenced to three months, but his continual refusal to comply with court orders led to an imprisonment lasting 12 years. During this time, nearly 2,000 clergymen were forced out of their pulpit ministries because conscience would not allow them to comply with the government's demands. Many among this group refused to stop preaching and consequently began filling up prison cells all across England.[4]

In 1665, the Five Mile Act ordered that no non-conforming minister could come within five miles of a city or incorporated town.[5] (Interestingly similar to court injunctions today forbidding pro-life protesters from occupying space within a specific distance of a women's health clinic.) These harsh laws affected not only those in England, but also in Scotland, its neighbor to the north. In fact, historians record that the persecution of Scotland's Christians was far worse than that of those in England. It was so bad that the years 1684-85 became known as "The Killing Times".[6] Because they refused to acknowledge Charles II as head of the Church, insisting instead that it was Jesus Christ, Scottish believers suffered brutality at the hands of English troops. The faithful began holding secret worship services in caves, and some who were caught were hanged and drowned. Today, the tombs of beheaded martyrs can still be found in Scotland with inscriptions decrying the injustice of the times.[7]

During his years in jail, Bunyan's wife, Elizabeth, was a loyal advocate for her husband as she regularly went before judges and magistrates to plead for his release. On the whole, most were unsympathetic to her cause. Once, while appearing before Justice Twysden of Bedford, the judge went into an angry tirade and exclaimed that John Bunyan was *a servant of the devil*.[8] It wasn't until 1672, under a new religious freedom law signed by Charles II, that Bunyan was finally released and the couple was reunited.[9] Though a joyous occasion, it was marred by the sadness of returning home to only four of his six children. After his first arrest, Elizabeth had given birth prematurely; the couple lost the baby due to what Bunyan would later say was stress from the circumstances.[10] As well, Bunyan's young daughter Mary, blind from birth, became ill and died at the age of 12 before he was able to finish his term.

Today, we have the court transcript from his hearing, a document which was discovered among the thousands of records known as the Breedford Papers. Though at the time his was just another of the endless petty cases filing through the court room each week, history proved that these records represent a 20 minute conversation which lead to events having a profound impact upon the western world for centuries to come. The following are excerpts:

Proceedings, being a true account of the trial of John Bunyan, Tinker, of Bedfordshire. His Lordship, Judge Wingate presiding at the Courthouse in Bedfordshire on October 3, in the year of our Lord, 1660... All parties in place, and the witnesses having been sworn, the trial proceeds.

Judge Wingate: *Mr. Bunyan, you stand before this Court accused of persistent and willful transgression of the Conventicle Act, which prohibits all British subjects from absenting themselves from worship in the Church of England, and conducting worship services apart from our Church. You come, presumably, with no legal training, and yet without counsel. I must warn you sir of the gravity of the charge... and the foolhardiness of acting as your own counsel in so serious a matter. Are you cognizant of these facts and do you understand the charge?*

Bunyan: *I am, and I do, M'lord.*

Judge: *...Now, I hold in my hand the depositions of the witnesses against you... These depositions have been read to you, have they not?*

Bunyan: *They have, M'lord.*

Judge: *In that case, then, this Court would be profoundly interested in your response to them.*

Bunyan: *Thank you, M'lord... firstly, the depositions speak the truth. I have never attended services in the Church of England, nor do I intend ever to do so. Secondly, it is no secret that I preach the word of God whenever, wherever, and to whomever He pleases to grant me opportunity to do so... As true as these things are, I must affirm that I neither regret breaking the law, nor repent of having broke it... It is, on its face, an unjust law, a law which honorable men cannot shrink from protesting. In truth, M'lord, it violates an infinitely higher law — the right of every man to seek God in his own way, unhindered by any temporal power.*

Judge: *This court would remind you, sir, that we are not here to debate the merits of the law. We are here to determine if you are, in fact, guilty of violating it.*

Bunyan: *Perhaps, M'lord, that is why you are here, but it is most certainly not why I am here. I am here because you compel me to be here. All I ask is to be left alone to preach and teach as God directs me.*

(At this point, a lengthy discussion ensues between the two on the freedom of religion and then Judge Wingate returns to the charges at hand.)

Judge: *...the evidence I hold in my hand... is sufficient to convict you... I do not wish to send you to prison, Mr. Bunyan. I am aware of the poverty of your family, and I believe you have a daughter who, unfortunately, was born blind. Is this not so?*

Bunyan: *It is, M'lord.*

Judge: *Very well. The decision of the Court is this: ...we shall follow a merciful and compassionate course of action. We shall release him* (Bunyan, the accused) *on the condition that he swear solemnly to discontinue the convening of religious meetings, and that he affix his signature to such an oath prior to quitting the courtroom. That will be all, Mr. Bunyan. I hope not to see you here again. May we hear the next case?*

Bunyan: *M'lord. If I may have another moment of the court's time?... I cannot do what you ask of me, M'lord. I cannot place my signature upon any document in which I promise henceforth not to preach. My calling to preach the gospel is from God... I must continue to preach, and I shall continue to preach.*

Judge: *...I warn you sir, the Court has gone the second mile to be lenient with you, out of concern for your family's difficult straits. Truth to tell, it would appear that the Court's concern for your family far exceeds your own. Do you wish to go to prison?*

Bunyan: *No, M'lord. Few things there are that I would wish less.*

Judge: *Very well, then, Mr. Bunyan. This court will make one further attempt in good faith to accommodate what appears to be strongly held convictions on your part. In his compassion and beneficence, our sovereign, Charles II, has made provision for dissenting preachers to hold some limited meetings. All that is required is that such ministers procure licenses authorizing them to convene these gatherings. The Court will not require you to sign any documents, but will require only your verbal commitment to proceed through proper channels to obtain licenses... Can you comply with this condition, Mr. Bunyan? Before you answer, mark you this: should you refuse, the Court will have no alternative but to sentence you to a prison term. Think, sir, of your poor wife. Think of your poor children, and particularly of your pitiful, sightless little girl. Think of your flock, who can hear you to their hearts' content when you have secured your licenses. Think on these things and give us your answer, sir.*

Bunyan: *M'lord, I appreciate the Court's effort to be — as you have put it — accommodating. But again, I must refuse your terms. I must repeat that it is God who constrains me to preach. These licenses of which you speak, M'lord, are symbols not of right, but of privilege. Implied therein is the principle that a mere man can extend or withhold them according to his whim. I speak not of privileges, but of rights. Privileges granted by men may be denied by men. Rights are granted by God, and can be legitimately denied by no man. I must therefore refuse to comply.*

Judge: *Very well, Mr. Bunyan... you leave us no choice but to commit you to Bedford jail for a period of six years. If you manage to survive, I think that your experience will correct your thinking. If you fail to survive, that will be unfortunate. In any event, I strongly suspect that we have heard the last we shall ever hear from Mr. John Bunyan. Now, may we hear the next case, please.*

And so John Bunyan began his residency at the Bedford jail. It is noteworthy that John was not sentenced so much for his refusal to