

A Summary of John Piper’s “To Live Upon God that Is Invisible: Suffering and Service in the Life of John Bunyan”

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The phrase—“to live upon God that is invisible” in the title came from John Bunyan’s (1628-1688) own mouth. He said that after reading 2 Corinthians 1:9: “But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead.” Here Bunyan realized that if ever he would suffer rightly, he must first consider himself dead to anything precious to him in this world which includes his very own loved ones; and second, he must *live upon God that is invisible*, which means for him to endure sufferings he must focus on things that have eternal value. Such a realization became Bunyan’s passion throughout his life. With God’s help, after Bunyan became a believer, he had endeavored to serve the invisible God faithfully even in the midst of his sufferings. This attitude is what John Piper wants to promote among Christians, especially among pastors.

In his study of Bunyan, Piper becomes more and more convinced that suffering is a normal and God-ordained means of sanctifying grace. What Piper does in his paper is first show the tremendous sufferings that Bunyan went through; and second, explain how God used these sufferings for the good of Bunyan. So, let us look at first Bunyan’s sufferings and then the benefits or blessings that these sufferings brought to his life.

Bunyan’s Sufferings

John Bunyan was born in England in November 1628 during the reign of King Charles I, who opposed the Puritans’ desire to reform or purify the Church of England. In 1649 the King was beheaded by the Parliament under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell, a staunch supporter of the Puritans. Cromwell would then become Lord Protector of the newly established Commonwealth of England.

Under Cromwell the Puritans such as Bunyan enjoyed religious freedom. But when Cromwell died in 1658 and when Charles II, son of King Charles I, regained and restored the monarchy in 1660, the Puritans started suffering persecution again. For example, in 1660 Bunyan was imprisoned for preaching without a license from the state. And because of his constant refusal to stop preaching, his imprisonment was prolonged for a period of nearly twelve years. Yet even inside the jail Bunyan continued to proclaim the gospel and write books (*The Pilgrim’s Progress* being one of them).

Piper rightly observes that Bunyan’s suffering really began when he was a teenager. At the age of fifteen, Bunyan lost his mother and sister. Within a month his father remarried, a reason suggested by some for Bunyan probably joining the Parliamentary Army. When he turned around 21 he married a young poor woman who bore him four children, the eldest being blind. That one of his children was blind intensified the pain that Bunyan experienced during his

imprisonment. Added to this pain was the premature death of his wife in 1658, leaving the four children motherless.

In 1659 Bunyan married Elizabeth, a virtuous and courageous woman, who would give him two more children. As mentioned earlier, in 1660, the year after his second marriage, Bunyan was again imprisoned for preaching without a license. This meant that his wife had to take care of all their children by herself while he was in prison. Bunyan was firm in his conviction that he would continue preaching Christ, even if it meant being away from his family. But Piper says that Bunyan “was sometime tormented that he might not be making the right decision in regard to his family.”

We have to understand though that Bunyan was occasionally allowed to visit his family from jail. In 1672 King Charles II issued the Declaration of Indulgences, which resulted in Bunyan’s release. That same year Bunyan was licensed to be the pastor of the nonconformist congregation in Bedford. But few years later Bunyan was again arrested and put to jail from 1675 to 1676. Some scholars believed that it was during this period that he penned *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Upon his release, he went back to his church in Bedford to resume his pastoral work. He remained there until his death in 1688.

Benefits of Bunyan’s Sufferings

Having looked at Bunyan’s suffering, Piper shows how God used this suffering for Bunyan’s advantage. Piper lists at least five benefits that are self-explanatory:

First, *Bunyan’s suffering confirmed him in his calling as a writer, especially for the afflicted church*. Unknown to many, the uneducated Bunyan wrote sixty books. Some of these books were penned inside the prison. What drove Bunyan to write this much? Piper gives one factor: for Bunyan, his “writings were an extension of his pastoral ministry mainly to his flock in Bedford who lived in constant danger of harassment and prison.”

Second, *Bunyan’s suffering deepened his love for his flock and gave his pastoral labor the fragrance of eternity*. We clearly see this truth, Piper says, in Bunyan’s book—*Christian Behavior*—which he wrote while he was in prison. Listen to Bunyan’s concluding words:

Thus have I, in a few words, written to you before I die, a word to provoke you to faith and holiness, because I desire that you may have the life that is laid up for all them that believe in the Lord Jesus, and love one another, when I am deceased.

Third, *Bunyan’s suffering opened his understanding to the truth that the Christian life is hard and that following Jesus means having the wind in your face*. In his commentary on John 15:2, Bunyan notes: “It is the will of God, that they that go to heaven should go thither hardly or with difficulty. The righteous shall scarcely be saved. That is, they shall, but yet with great difficulty, that it may be the sweeter.”

Fourth, *Bunyan's suffering strengthened his assurance that God is sovereign over all the afflictions of his people and will bring them safely home.* Through his suffering, Bunyan appreciated more God's sovereignty. That God is in control of everything gave Bunyan comfort to face his suffering with peace.

And fifth, *Bunyan's suffering deepened in him a confidence in the Bible as the Word of God and a passion for Bible memory and Biblical exposition as the key to perseverance.* Because of his suffering, Bunyan learned more to put his trust in God's Word. And it was this Holy Book that enabled him through the Spirit of God to continue his pilgrimage as a Christian, husband, father, and pastor. He saturated himself with the Bible in that according to Charles Spurgeon, if you "prick him anywhere... you will find that his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him. He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his soul is full of the Word of God."

In conclusion Piper challenges us to live like Bunyan—"to live upon God who is invisible." This means that as we serve God and suffer for His sake, we need to depend on Him and His Word. And for pastors, this is how they should also help their congregations survive in the midst of suffering.