

140th Anniversary Service

⁷*Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.* ⁸*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.* ⁹*Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.*

(Hebrews 13:7-9. ESV)

¹⁷*Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.* (Philippians 3:17. ESV)

So Great An Inlet

November 17th, 2013

Hebrews 13:7-9

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning! We are doing something very different today in honour of our 140th Anniversary as a church. Anniversaries are a time for looking back and looking forward and looking up. It is a time to say as Samuel said:

“Thus far the LORD has helped us.” (1 Samuel 7:12. NKJV)

Anniversaries are a time for remembering so as to worship and anticipate. God doesn’t change. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow and so remembering how he has worked in the past can help us to be thankful in the present and to be prepared for the future. With that in mind we are taking a break from our walk through Ephesians in order to look at the life of one person in our family tree; one who has gone before us. We are commanded to do this in Scripture. Open your Bibles to Hebrews 13:7-9. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

⁷*Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.* ⁸*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.* ⁹*Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.* (Hebrews 13:7-9. ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

According to the Bible, one of the ways that we can protect ourselves from future deceptions is by studying the lives of our previous leaders in order to consider the outcome of their faith.

With that in mind I want to draw your attention this morning to the life of John Bunyan – the first Baptist pastor of note among our English Puritan ancestors. My intention this morning is to briefly walk you through the story of his life and to draw out from that three truths about God and two truths about the Christian's walk of faith. First of all then, let me give you a bit of background about the time and culture of John Bunyan.

Background And Biography:

Our immediate branch of the Protestant Family Tree begins in the 16th Century. The Protestant Reformation in Europe is most commonly associated with the preaching of Martin Luther and John Calvin and Ulric Zwingli. Many English and Scottish clerics and scholars went over to the Continent to study and to learn these new/old doctrines of the Bible. You have to understand that before the 16th century virtually no one had access to the teaching of the Bible. There was no printing press, books were rare and unaffordable. Most priests in the Roman Catholic Church could not read and even if they could read there were no copies of the Bible in the vernacular of the people. The Bible was kept in Latin copy only and it was a crime punishable by death to print the Bible in the language of the people. The printing press changed everything. First Erasmus produced a copy of the New Testament in the original Greek and then from that Luther translated the Bible into German in 1522 and William Tyndale produced an English version 4 years later. Once people could read the Bible for themselves again, nothing would ever be the same.

The Reformation in England was prematurely aborted. The Anglican Church was really the Catholic Church of England under the control of the English Monarch and so a group of English Reformers arose who wanted to complete what Luther, Calvin and Tyndale began. They wanted a full scale reformation of the church in light of the teachings of recovered Scripture. These people were known as the Puritans. Their main target was not so much the theology of the Anglican Church – the 39 Articles were very much in the spirit of the reformation – rather their target was the worship and the ministry of the church. The Puritans wanted to finish the job of bringing everything in the church under the authority of God's Word.

The English people and nobles were divided on this issue – so divided that there was actually a civil war with the Puritan Parliament on one side and the king and his followers on the other. John Bunyan fought in that war. He was not yet a believer and we don't know how he ended up on the side of the Puritans but he fought in the war that resulted in the eventual execution of Charles I. The Puritan Parliament was briefly in control and the Puritan influence over the English speaking church flourished. However, after the death of their political leader Oliver Cromwell, the country descended into chaos and in 1660 – around the time of Bunyan's conversion – Parliament recalled Charles the II the son of the King they had executed and in 1662 the Puritans were outlawed and officially persecuted. This went on until the Act of Toleration in 1689 when Puritans were granted legal toleration within the realm. This is why our original Baptist Confession is sometimes called “The 1689”. It could not be published until 1689 because anyone who signed it would have been immediately imprisoned or exiled. John Bunyan pastored in those years. He died in 1688 having spent more than 12 of his 28 years as a believer in prison for his faith.

Bunyan was born in 1628. His father was a tinker – essentially a travelling blacksmith who went from town to town repairing pots and pans. Bunyan took on his father's trade and spent long hours walking with his heavy metal tools tied in a sack upon his back – an image no doubt familiar to anyone who has ever read Pilgrim's Progress. Bunyan did not grow up as a believer. He describes himself as a foul mouthed trouble maker as a young man and the leader of a group of local toughs. Bunyan was a large man, an ex-soldier and in his youth inclined towards lust and careless living. In the Providence of God he married a Puritan Christian woman and she came into the marriage with two good books as her dowry. It was through reading those books that Bunyan's spiritual interest was first awakened.

His conversion was long, drawn out and clearly a work of Sovereign Grace from start to finish. One Sunday while playing a game of cat – a precursor of cricket and baseball apparently – he heard a voice from heaven in his soul. He writes:

A voice did suddenly dart from heaven into my soul, which said, ‘*Wilt thou leave thy sins, and go to heaven? Or have thy sins, and go to hell?*’ At this I was put to an exceeding maze; wherefore leaving my cat upon the ground, I looked up into heaven, and was as if I had with the eyes of my understanding, seen the Lord Jesus looking down

upon me, as being very hotly displeased with me, and as if he did severely threaten me with some grievous punishment for these, and other my ungodly practices.¹

Bunyan's conversion began here but it was long and arduous. Even after his conversion he went through extended periods of doubt and depression before finally being granted full assurance of faith. He began preaching about 5 years after he was converted, mostly in very small groups of people meeting in homes or in the open air. He had his first child, Mary, around the time of his conversion. She was blind and her blindness and vulnerability was an on-going source of concern for him particularly during the years when he was in prison. Three other children quickly followed and then in 1658 – 8 years after his conversion, 3 years into his career as a preacher – his wife died. He was a single parent, poor as dirt, with 4 children, one of whom was blind and entirely dependent. He married again the next year to a woman named Elizabeth. He was 31 years old and she was 18 and even in those days that raised a few eyebrows. About a year later he was arrested while preaching to a little group of persecuted Puritan believers and when Elizabeth heard the news of her husband's arrest she went into pre-mature labour and the baby she was carrying died. For the next 12 years Bunyan was in prison while his very young wife struggled to raise his four children on the charity of other Puritans, who were themselves being persecuted and marginalized. Bunyan made laces in prison to help support them but the agony of his situation wore heavy on his mind. He said:

The parting with my wife and poor children hath oft been to me in this place, as the pulling of flesh from my bones... O the thoughts of the hardship I thought my blind one might go under, would break my heart to pieces.... I was as a man pulling down his house upon the head of his wife and children²

He was finally let out of prison in 1672 though he was briefly back in jail for 6 months in 1676. During his years of freedom he served as the Pastor of the Congregational/Baptist church in Bedford and also as a much sought after preacher and leader. He died in 1688 likely of pneumonia having been caught in a rain storm while on a mission of mercy to reconcile a father to his son. His wife Elizabeth died in 1691 “to follow her faithful pilgrim from this world to the other, whither he was gone before her.”³

Over the course of his life, particularly during the years of his imprisonment, Bunyan wrote extensively. He wrote doctrinal works attacking the excesses and errors of the Quakers, he wrote

¹ John Bunyan, Grace Abounding To The Chief Of Sinners (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 11.

² Ibid., 80.

³ David B. Calhoun, Grace Abounding (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 39.

books on Christian ethics and behaviour but he is most famous for writing *The Pilgrim's Progress* – an allegory of the Christian life and journey. Next to the Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress* is believed to have sold more copies than any other book in human history. It has been translated into 200 languages and has been used of God to spread the Gospel all over the world including in Africa and in China. Many of the first Puritan settlers in North America arrived on these shores with two books in their hands; *The Bible* and *Pilgrim's Progress*. It reads very much like a narrative version of Bunyan's own testimony and journey. Bunyan is Christian; the main character in *Pilgrim's Progress* – carrying his heavy burden, being yanked through the Wicket Gate, being blessed by Faithful companions, crossing the Great River and arriving at the Celestial City. As we look at his life, and consider his works I want to draw your attention to three truths about God and two truths about the Christian life. I've selected these particular insights in light of the counsel and concern of Hebrews 13. We do this sort of teaching periodically to remind ourselves of the faith and lifestyle of approved Christian men and women and we do it to protect ourselves against the dangers of present and future deceptions. With that in mind let me suggest that the life and story of John Bunyan reminds us that:

Reminders About The Identity And Character of God From The Life Of John Bunyan:

1. God is a God who seeks and saves sinners

Bunyan was thoroughly reformed in his theology. He was heavily influenced by Luther's Commentary on Galatians calling it the most important book in his life after the Bible. He believed in election and the Sovereign initiative of a gracious and forgiving God. That belief comes through loud and clear in the way he tells the story of his conversion. I read to you already concerning his infamous game of cat and the voice that broke into his mind calling him to repent and be saved. Bunyan understood that as Divine initiative. He wasn't looking for God that day – in fact he was actively breaking the Sabbath and thumbing his nose at God, enjoying his life of sin until GOD SPOKE. This is how the story of *Pilgrim's Progress* begins as well. Christian is lost and steeped in sin. He is living in the City of Destruction and he is carrying a heavy burden of sin until God SPEAKS. God sends an Evangelist who points him in the direction of salvation. In Bunyan's allegory Evangelist APPEARS and hands Christian a scroll that says: "Flee from the wrath to come". He then points in the direction of the wicket gate and tells him:

Follow the light and it will bring you to the gate. When you knock, the gatekeeper will tell you what to do from there.⁴

For Bunyan conversion begins with the call and initiative of God; it is also completed and consummated by the will of God. In Pilgrim's Progress he describes Christian's passage through the narrow gate this way:

Goodwill opened the narrow gate and yanked Christian inside.⁵

According to Bunyan, salvation is a gracious work of a Sovereign God from start to finish.

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9. ESV)

Secondly, the life and story of John Bunyan reminds us that:

2. God is a God who speaks to men and women in and through the Scriptures

Here again Bunyan's life contains useful resources for our challenges today. In our day I believe we are witnessing a two pronged assault on the partnership of the Word and the Spirit in the church. On the one side are those who want to elevate spiritual experience in such a way as to diminish and replace the unique authority and sufficiency of the Word of God. These folks are always saying: "God gave me a word" or "I received fresh revelation" or "God told me to do such and such". They are elevating their impressions and thoughts to the level of Scripture; they are making decisions and giving counsel and even determining doctrine on the basis of dreams, visions and impressions. In many charismatic churches what you have is a functionally open canon that effectively denies the sufficiency of the Bible. On the other side we have an attack from those reacting to the excesses of charismania. These folks are retreating and basically saying: "God wrote a book, if you need anything read it. Everything you will experience of God is in the book." They are seeking to imprison the Spirit of God in the Book. But the Word of God is living and active – it is the Sword of the Spirit! The one side would exile the Spirit and

⁴ John Bunyan, Pilgrim's Progress (U.S.A.: Barbour Publishing, 2010), 9.

⁵ John Bunyan, Pilgrim's Progress (U.S.A.: Barbour Publishing, 2010), 17.

the other side would exile the Word. Enter the usefulness of John Bunyan. John Bunyan is the kind of charismatic I want to be and he is the kind of charismatic I want our church to be.

To get the full flavour of this you have to read his autobiography “Grace Abounding To The Chief of Sinners”. He constantly uses phrases in the book like “suddenly this sentence bolted in upon me (p. 37) or “these words did with great power suddenly break in upon me” to describe the ministry of guidance and illumination that the Holy Spirit exercised in his life. Thinking one time shortly before his conversion that because of his sin he could not be accepted he writes:

These words broke in upon my mind, *compel them to come in, that my house may be filled, and yet there is room* (Luke 14:22,23). These words, but especially them, *and yet there is room*, were sweet words to me; for truly I thought that by them I saw that there was place enough in heaven for me.⁶

Another time he speaks of hearing a loud voice, like an alarm speaking to him and warning him about impending temptations from the devil:

Now about a week or fortnight after this, I was much followed by this Scripture, *Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you* (Luke 22:31), and so sometimes it would sound so loud within me, yea, and as it were call so strongly after me, that once above all the rest, I turned my head over my shoulder, thinking verily that some man had behind me called to me, being at a great distance, methought he called so loud...⁷

Later Bunyan was able to discern that this was the Holy Spirit warning him in words of Scripture that the devil sought to tempt him away from his faith. Bunyan took that as a call to prayer and perseverance in the Word.

That is the kind of charismatic I want to be! I believe that the Spirit of God teaches his people in the word and THROUGH THE WORD and that his voice drives them DEEPER IN the word. I believe in guidance and I believe in illumination and I don’t want to lose either of those to the charismatics on the one hand or the hard core cessationists on the other. I’m so thankful that we as Baptists have the ballast of John Bunyan to help us weather this new assault.

Thirdly, the life and story of John Bunyan reminds us that:

3. God is a God who ordains suffering to test, try and display our faith

⁶ John Bunyan, Grace Abounding To The Chief Of Sinners (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 21.

⁷ John Bunyan, Grace Abounding To The Chief Of Sinners (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 26.

Despite the pain and emotional anguish of his imprisonment, Bunyan never doubted that the Lord had ordained it for purposes of God's glory and his good. Writing from prison Bunyan says:

I never had in all my life so great an inlet into the Word of God as now. Those Scriptures that I saw nothing in before were made in this place and state to shine upon me. Jesus Christ also was never more real and apparent than now. Here I have seen him and felt him indeed... I have had sweet sights of the forgiveness of my sins in this place and of my being with Jesus in another world... I have seen that here that I am persuaded I shall never, while in this world, be able to express.⁸

At one point in his imprisonment he had a probation hearing and was told that if he would only agree to stop preaching as an unlicensed minister and conduct himself according to the Anglican Book of Common Prayer he could be released. He flatly refused. The judge, apparently not the sharpest knife in the drawer said to Bunyan:

We know that the Common Prayer Book hath been ever since the Apostle's time and it is lawful to be used in the church.⁹

To which Bunyan replied:

Shew me the place in the epistles, where the Common Prayer Book is written, or one text of Scripture, that commands me to read it, and I will use it.¹⁰

And with that, he was marched back to prison to serve out his sentence. The devil frequently tormented him in his cell with thoughts of his wife and children, particularly his blind daughter Mary. He tempted him often to take a softer stance and seek change more gradually and to conduct himself more humbly. Bunyan records this:

II Corinthians 1:9, was of great use to me, *But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we might not trust in ourselves, but in God that raiseth the dead*: by this Scripture I was made to see that if ever I would suffer rightly, I must first pass a sentence of death upon everything that can properly be called a thing of this life, even to reckon myself, my wife, my children, my health, my enjoyments and all, as dead to me, and myself as dead to them. *He that loveth father or mother, son or daughter, more than me, is not worthy of me* (Matthew 10:37).¹¹

We need the example of men like John Bunyan because the modern day Evangelical Church in North America has forgotten the smell of the prison. We think ourselves entitled to influence and

⁸ John Bunyan, Grace Abounding To The Chief Of Sinners (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 78.

⁹ John Bunyan, The Imprisonment of Mr. Bunyan, ((London: Penguin Books, 1987), 97.

¹⁰ Ibid., 97.

¹¹ John Bunyan, Grace Abounding To The Chief Of Sinners (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 79.

prosperity and we have forgotten the sweet assurance and the spiritual power that is only known by those rejected and despised of men. Christians today wilt and fold at the first hint of difficulty. A child becomes sick, a job is lost, a marriage is in trial and all of the sudden God is not good or God is not able – the devil seems Sovereign and faith is abandoned as excess weight in the rapids of unpleasantness. The life of John Bunyan reminds us that God in his Sovereignty ordains our suffering to test, try and display our faith. The prison made John Bunyan. George Whitefield said of Pilgrim’s Progress: “It smells of the prison”. You can’t write like that from the poolside of a Sandal’s Resort. You write like that in prison. You preach like Bunyan did in chains. We need the ballast of men like Bunyan to steady our walk through the coming winds of persecution and trial.

In the few minutes that we have left let me very briefly highlight two helpful insights from Bunyan’s life with respect to the Christian’s walk of faith. By observing the outcome of Bunyan’s life and faith we are reminded that:

Reminders About The Nature Of The Christian Walk From The Life Of John Bunyan:

1. True conversion always involves a decision and a journey

Over the last 60 years we have too often fallen victim to the heresy of decisionism in the Evangelical Church and Bunyan’s life and story provides helpful resources for our recovery. By decisionism I mean this idea that if ever at any point in your life you consciously assent to the essential Christian claims about Christ and indicate that through waiving your hand or signing a pledge card or walking an aisle then you may be assured that you are well and truly saved. We have reduced the doctrine of conversion and regeneration down to the level of momentary decision. Some observers have called this phenomenon the suicide of the Evangelical Church. It produces crowds of nominal and false Christians who become members and effectively shut down the efficient operation and discipline of the church. We have way too often treated momentary decisions as if they were true conversions despite Jesus saying:

²¹“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 7:21. ESV)

In Pilgrim's Progress there is a decision AND a process. The process begins with effectual calling and then there is a journey towards the moment of decision. There is a slough of despond to navigate, there are false turns and seasons of confusion and battles to wage with the devil before arriving at the narrow gate. The gate is decision – the gate is knocking and entering and in Bunyan's theology – it is God yanking us finally through! But after the gate there is a long process of instruction and trial and journey before the granting of assurance – both to oneself and to the church. Bunyan does not go through the gate and directly into the Palace Beautiful which represents the church. There is a long period of testing and journey before he is admitted by Watchful and given food, fellowship and gifts. We would do well to recapture that perspective. There is a narrow gate – but there is also a narrow way.

Lastly, let me suggest that the life of John Bunyan also reminds us that:

2. True liberty and freedom belong to those who assimilate and practice the promises of God

John Bunyan struggled with depression off and on throughout much of his Christian life. Some of that was due to his personality, some of it was due to his circumstances and some of it was due no doubt to the opposition of the evil one. Whatever the cause, he was convinced of the solution. If you have read Pilgrim's Progress then you know the scene where Christian is locked in the dungeon of Doubting Castle or as it is known in some versions "The Castle of Giant Despair". He and his friend Hopeful were locked in a cell where they had been left to die and as they lay despairing, Christian experiences a revelation:

What a fool I've been to lie in this stinking dungeon when I could walk away free! I have a key in my bosom called Promise that is supposed to open any lock.

That is good news, brother (said Hopeful). Pluck it out of your bosom and try.

Christian used his key to unlock the door to the cell, then the door to the castle yard, then the great iron gate to the castle..... The men ran all the way back and found the stile that led to the way again.¹²

The symbolism there is not hard to decipher but if there was any doubt what Bunyan meant it is cleared up by reading his actual autobiography. Speaking of his release from a season of depression and doubt he says:

¹² John Bunyan, Pilgrim's Progress (U.S.A.: Barbour Publishing, 2010), 96-97.

The Scriptures now also were wonderful things unto me; I saw that the truth and verity of them were **the keys of the kingdom of heaven**¹³

In our increasingly therapeutic, over medicated culture we need this reminder. Freedom from despair is not found in a bottle or a pill, it is found in the Promises of Scripture read, believed, memorized and acted upon.

Conclusion:

Brothers and sisters:

⁷Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ⁸Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. ⁹Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them. (Hebrews 13:7-9. ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

¹³ John Bunyan, Grace Abounding To The Chief Of Sinners (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 62.