

Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners:  
John Bunyan's Quest for Assurance of Salvation

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John Bunyan was born in the village of Elstow, near Bedford, in 1628. It was a humble family about which little is known. His father was a tinker, a lowly but respectable occupation. Though his father was illiterate, he had the presence of mind to send his son to grammar school. While still a boy he was pulled out of school either out of economic necessity or the negative influence of school-mates. He was then apprenticed to his father and became a tinker himself. At age sixteen he became a soldier. Not much is known about his military career.

In 1647, he returned to Elstow and married. The name of his first wife is unknown.

In 1651, he came under the influence of Baptist minister and Calvinist, John Gifford. He had a profound influence on Bunyan, intellectually as well as spiritually. From 1660 to 1672, he was imprisoned. Much of the time was spent in writing. He wrote nine books during that period, not the least of which was Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners (1666), allegorized in his most famous work, The Pilgrim's Progress (1678).

It is worthy of note that Bunyan was not university trained. He was either candid or sensitive about this; perhaps both. "But yet notwithstanding this meanness and inconsiderableness of my parents, it pleased God to put it into their hearts to put me to school, to learn both to read and write; the which I also attained...though to my shame I confess, I did soon lose that little I learned..." He also remarked that he "never advanced 'to Aristotle or Plato.'" Perhaps this galvanized him to be scrupulously careful in his exegesis. A perusal of his works will make the point.

Later on in his ministry, in 1675, he could confidently assert that his writings were rigorously rooted biblical truth and not extracted from other theologians. "I have not writ at a venture, nor borrowed my Doctrine from Libraries. I depend on the sayings of no man: I found it in the Scriptures of Truth, among the true sayings of God." This is mostly true. His theology is Calvinistic and he basically follows the well-developed double covenant scheme which obviously was not original with him. We will concede him the point, however. The tinker's disciplined exegesis, imaginative creativity and profound simplicity unadorned by the vestments of erudite scholasticism produced a clarity in understanding the Gospel as well as offering fresh insights into the Christian life that commend his writings to prince and pauper alike.

Bunyan's struggle for assurance of salvation is best depicted in *Grace Abounding*. In the preface he relates how he "lay so long at Sinai to see the fire, and the cloud, and the darkness, that I might fear the Lord all the days of my life upon earth, and tell of his wondrous works to my children." Against the oft repeated verdict against Puritanism as being excessively introspective, let the opposite point be made here. Would that more of God's people who speak so much of grace, love and mercy be able to relate some personal narrative about lingering at Mt. Sinai as a prerequisite to approaching Mt. Calvary.

Bunyan's spiritual pilgrimage seems to have gone through five stages: The conscience suppressed. The conscience stirred. The conscience quickened. The conscience tormented and, lastly, the conscience released. We will examine these stages to determine whether we might find in them some Scriptural light on the matter of assurance of salvation or whether Bunyan's narratives are little more than artifacts of a tortured but ignorant soul needing additional light from Scripture.

From childhood, Bunyan had few equals in swearing, cursing, lying and blaspheming. Yet those younger years were laced with fearful dreams of judgment and hell-fire. The dreams abated as he entered his adolescent years during which time he delighted in all manner of vice and ungodliness. He was a ringleader among his peers. He did not want to know God and despised those who, in his observation, seemed to have a genuine relationship with Christ.

In a retrospective glance, he deemed it only a miracle of grace that prevented the stroke of eternal justice. On two different occasions he narrowly escaped drowning. He once recklessly played with a poisonous snake, plucked out its fangs with his bare hands without any harm to himself. When he was a soldier someone requested to take his place in a particular battle, to which Bunyan consented. The soldier was killed while standing guard. These events, however, did not stir him to any inclinations towards God.

Marriage seemed to mollify his behavior somewhat. He married a woman from a godly family, poor like Bunyan. Her only dowry was two early seventeenth century books: The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven by Arthur Dent and The Practice of Piety by Lewis Bayly. Bunyan admits that they stirred some interest in religion but "didn't reach his heart." He began to live an outwardly religious life while retaining his wicked habits. During this time, it is of curious interest to note that he had an almost superstitious reverence for the outward pomp, forms and vestments of the Anglican Church.

Interestingly, his conscience began to stir on hearing a sermon on sabbath breaking. That same day, says Bunyan, (presumably on the Sabbath) while at a game of cat [tipcat] a voice from heaven came into his soul. "Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to heaven, or have thy sins and go to hell?" Here the question is raised, does God speak to us independently of his Word? Bunyan was neither a mystic nor an enthusiast. He nevertheless records a number of these "vivid impressions" from the Lord. As one examines the overall portfolio of these incidents in his life, it becomes obvious that his subjective experiences were tied to the objective Word of God. His controversies with the Quakers and the Ranters would also make the point. This experience brought an intense conviction of sin to the point of despair. Bunyan considered the possibility that it was too late for him. He might just as well go on sinning.

Sin brought no satisfaction. He began to take an interest in Bible reading and endeavored to some outward reformation in his life. He tried to keep the commandments but would invariably break one of them. This stirred his conscience, provoked a certain remorse together with a promise to do better. The cycle was oft repeated. His neighbors were impressed but, says Bunyan, ". . . I knew not Christ, nor grace, nor faith, nor hope. . ."

Bunyan's conscience was quickened upon overhearing a conversation of three or four women who were sitting at a doorway. They talked about a new birth, the work of God in their hearts, how they were convinced of their sin and how God visited their souls. Bunyan was impressed with their joy. His soul was deeply trouble as he realized that this idea of a new birth was not part of his experience. He realized that he did not have, but wanted, what these women had. He wanted the assurance, the evidence that belonged to a godly man. He was convinced that this was the only blessed state to be in. Was this Bunyan's conversion? It certainly marks a turning point in his life from which there was no turning back. He continued to seek the company of these women because he had been "greatly affected with their words." The more he went amongst them, the more he questioned his own condition. Two things began to change in his mind: (1) a tenderness of heart having come under conviction by means of the Scriptures they were asserting; (2) a newfound disposition to meditate on these same Scriptures. "By these things my mind was now so turned, that it lay like a horse leech at the vein (Proverbs 30:15) yea, it was so fixed on eternity, and on the things about the kingdom of heaven."

There was evidence of change in his life. He quit his friend in town, "a most wicked creature for cursing and swearing and whoring, I now shook him off and forsook his company." It is worth noting at this point that, in his theological writings, Bunyan does not appeal to a demonstrable change in a person's life as an evidence of true conversion. One can speak

eloquently of the Gospel and still be void of life. Some may exhibit a changed life but only for a season (II Peter 2:20). From this point, for about a year's time, there would come seasons of tortuous ebb and flow of doubt and assurance, despair and hope. From this point forward it should be noted that Bunyan sought for assurance in the Word of God even if it meant unwittingly misapplying it along the way. He says in The Doctrine of Law and Grace Unfolded, that he was "through grace kept close with God, in some measure, in prayer and the rest of the ordinances."

He was desperate for assurance of salvation. He began to grope for some way to affirm that he possessed saving faith because he was convinced that he was lost without it. Perhaps seeking and procuring a miracle would be that confirmation. While walking along the road after a rain he noticed the puddles in the horse pads. In the spirit of Gideon, the horse pads will be dry and the dry places around them, puddles. Nothing. He began to despair. We may be amused at this extraordinary pietism but rest assured, Bunyan wasn't!

He was tormented in his conscience with only brief periods of comfort. He wondered if he was of the elect or if perhaps the age of grace had passed. Satan exploited this doubt by suggesting that if he were not of the elect, he might as well return to his old way of life. By this time Bunyan was too terrified of judgment and hell to ever return to his old ways. He loved the idea of election and effectual calling but was afraid he wasn't numbered among them. He is by no means alone in this anxiety.

We pause briefly here to observe how this challenges the Arminian assertion that election undermines human responsibility. Quite the contrary is true. One psychological effect of the doctrine of election as it is truly embraced in Biblical context is that it tends to vitiate presumptive grace that would otherwise locate the instrumental cause of one's salvation in a decisive act of the autonomous will. The elect will give due diligence to holiness of life because they take seriously the words of the Apostle Paul, "*In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will*" (Eph. 1:11, ESV). One is not simply chosen as a function of some abstract theological construct but one is chosen *in Christ*. To be chosen *in Christ* will profoundly affect how one lives.

Returning to the immediate subject of Bunyan's troubled conscience, it is to be noted that he had also reached a heightened awareness of sin, being scrupulously sensitive to the smallest transgression. There were intermittent periods of comfort in verses such as Romans 8:38, "*For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, . . .*"; II Corinthians 5:21, "*For he hath made him to be sin for us.*"; and Romans 8:31, "*If God be for us, who can be against us?*" One day while contemplating the wickedness and blasphemy of his heart, the thought came to him from Colossians 1:20, "*having made peace through the blood of his cross,*" he was made to see that "the justice of God and my sinful soul could embrace and kiss each other through his blood." It should be noted that, in his darkest moments, he was nevertheless interacting with the Word of God—the only way to deal with doubt.

Bunyan came under the influence of Luther's commentary on Galatians. He identified with it "as if his book had been written out of my heart." Next to the Bible it was his favorite work. It touched him deeply, ". . . and now I found, as I thought, that I loved Christ dearly; oh! methought my soul cleaved unto Him, my affections cleaved unto Him, I felt love unto Him as hot as fire." It was short lived. The fiercest battle of his personal war was yet to be waged.

The most severe struggle of all was that Bunyan feared that he had committed the unpardonable sin by blaspheming against the Holy Spirit.

I was, at other times, most fiercely assaulted with this temptation, to sell and part with Christ; the wicked suggestion still running in my mind, "Sell Him, sell Him, sell Him, sell Him, sell Him," as fast as a man could speak; against which also, in my mind, as at other times, I answered, "No, no,

not for thousands, thousands, thousands, at least twenty times together.” But at last, after much striving, even until I was almost out of breath, I felt this thought pass through my heart, “Let Him go, if He will!” and I thought also, that I felt my heart freely consent thereto. Oh, the diligence of Satan! Oh, the desperateness of man's heart.

This mental and psychological anguish was typical with Bunyan. "Down I fell, as a bird that is shot from the top of a tree." He did the very thing, in his mind, he was loathe to do. The worst of all human conditions seemed reserved for him.

We interrupt the discussion here to note an important fact in Bunyan's journey. He was, during this time, availing himself of the means of grace: prayer, searching the Scriptures and placing himself under the teaching of Mr. Gifford. It was he who urged his parishioners, including Bunyan, “to cry mightily to God that He would convince us of the reality thereof, and set us down therein, by His own Spirit, in the Holy Word.” Though serious doubts and torments of soul awaited him, assurance was coming to him, brick upon brick, precept upon precept. Mingled with his fears, new insights into the Gospel brought temporary relief such as, faith being a gift of God, no one can say Jesus is Lord but by the Holy Spirit, and a progressively vivid understanding of the person and work of Christ, from his birth to his second coming, after having studied the Gospels.

His comfort did not last. A new assault on his assurance came in the Scripture regarding Esau, "*who for one morsel of meat, sold his birthright; for ye know, how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing he was rejected for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.*" (Hebrews 12:16-17). From this point on, Esau, will be his chief tormenter. There would be brief periods of comfort but they would not last. Esau would frequently return to ply fresh fuel for the tormenting flames. Bunyan began to grow weary of life but was afraid to die. It became more difficult to pray. He compared himself with some of the more notorious biblical malefactors. Was he Judas? Did he have the mark of Cain? Perhaps some comfort could be gleaned from the grosser sins of David, Solomon or Manasseh. Was he worse than Peter? But alas. There seemed to be mercy for everyone but him.

Two passages in Hebrews amplified his woes. "*For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, . . . if they shall fall away to renew them unto repentance*" (Hebrews 6:4-6) and, "*For if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins*" (Hebrews 10:26-27). Was his faith self-deception? Was there any promise or encouragement in the Bible for him? Had he cut himself off because of his transgressions?

At long last a new ray of light broke into his soul. "Didst ever refuse to be justified by the blood of Christ? And withal, my whole life and profession past, was in a moment, opened to me, wherein I was made to see that designedly I had not." The Word of God then came to him, "*See that ye refuse not him that speaketh.*" (Hebrews 12:25) Once again, Bunyan's hopes were raised that God's grace had not abandoned him. "This made a strange seizure upon my spirit, it brought light with it and commanded a silence in my heart of all those tumultuous thoughts that before did use,...to roar and bellow, and make a hideous noise within me." Alas, this new found hope lasted only for days when doubts began to rise once more. Hopes were dashed. Despair set in again.

Even Christ felt sorry for him (!) because there was nothing He could do because he had sinned beyond that for which He died. The Hebrews passage regarding Esau once again shot at him, "*He found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.*" Bunyan was in the Slough of Despond. "I did liken myself, in this condition, unto the case of a child that was fallen into a mill-pit, who, though it could make some shifts to scabble and spraul in the water, yet

because it could find neither hold for hand nor foot, therefore at last it must die in that condition." This lasted for about two and one-half years.

Was this the lot of the Puritan, to revel in mental anguish, to inhabit the morose and moribund regions of the soul? Perhaps it was a tendency in Bunyan but for him the Gospel must be apprehended by something more awesome than simple illumination. If God's grace would abound to the sinner, the darkness of the soul cannot be illuminated by a candle but must be shattered by lightning accompanied by thunder, that is, by the Word of God. For him, these were necessary stages in his quest for assurance.

At this point, Bunyan is still despondent but he begins to fight back. The Tempter continued in his attempts to convince him that he was beyond the reach of the blood of Christ and the mercy of God and it was, therefore, no use praying. Bunyan determines to pray anyway. He takes what appears to be a small but nevertheless significant step. In spite of the doubts, if there is a choice between believing the Devil or Christ, he will opt for the latter. What is there to lose? He realized six months later that this was indeed an act of faith. It was a turning point.

His daily life continued to alternate between peace and conflict. Like a pair of scales, the sufficiency of grace, on the one hand, versus the plight of Esau, on the other, would alternately weigh on his mind. He fought back with prayer. He also began to personalize the Word of God by owning it for himself. "My grace is sufficient for thee." "Oh, methought that every word was a mighty word unto me, as *my* and *grace*, and *sufficient* and *for thee*." As always, there was Esau waiting in the shadows to pull him down but its impact began to diminish. Peace and joy began to prevail.

New assurances from Scripture began to brighten his soul. He saw that the word of the law must give place to the word of life and grace. Calvary is more glorious than Sinai. Moses and Elias must disappear, leaving Christ alone. He would develop this idea more fully in his second treatise on prayer, "*The Throne of Grace*<sup>1</sup>". Within the Ark of the Covenant is the law. Above the ark (that is, on top of it) is the mercy seat, the place where God meets with His people. Therefore, grace is above the law. If the Gospel is typified in the ceremonial law then Bunyan is going to exploit those types as only he can. New assurances came. Bunyan presses harder though Esau would still bring him distress. The doubts did not stop all at once. Rather, their frequency and intensity diminished as one who let go of the church bell rope but it continued to ring for a period of time.

At long last his conscience was released. As one who climbs back on the horse that threw him, Bunyan, wanted desperately to know that his present peace was not ephemeral. He approached, with trepidation, those scriptures that had been most troublesome to him. Hebrews 6 was one such passage. He had fallen but not fallen away. He had not denied the Gospel of the remission of sins by Christ. He had put Christ to shame by his sin but not to *open* shame. Moreover he was not shut up to spiritual blindness, hardness and impenitence. It was indeed difficult to come to Christ with a contrite spirit but come he did. Hebrews 10 had been another troubling passage. He had sinned willfully but not to the extent of publically repudiating Christ and his law (vs. 28). He did not despise dissuasions from sin or persuasions to holiness of life.

What about his nemesis, Esau? This too, was resolved. Jacob's twin brother despised the birthright *not* the blessing. The birthright, says Bunyan, is regeneration. Esau did not want to walk with God. He despised the way of life characteristic of the regenerate state. These insights agreed with other Scriptures which added further to his encouragement and comfort.

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<sup>1</sup> Bunyan, John, Prayer, Carlisle, Banner of Truth, 1662, repr. 1991.

What about that initial wicked thought that sent him reeling, "Let Christ go if He will"? If, mused Bunyan, he would have simply believed God in the beginning and not tempted Him as he did by this thought, he would have been spared much of the misery he endured. On the other hand, this anguish of soul was a necessary prerequisite to embracing the mercy and grace of God, by having first passed through the dread and terror of the being, glory and holiness of God.

The thunder was gone, writes Bunyan but some drops remain "that now again would fall on me." At this time there came another important means of assurance, the righteousness of Christ imputed to us. It was yet another religious experience. One day while walking in a field there came to his mind the thought, "Thy righteousness is in heaven." The impression continued. He saw Christ at God's right hand. "There, I say, is my righteousness; so that wherever I was or whatever I was a-doing, God could not day of me. He wants [lacks] my righteousness, for that was just before Him." This was the capstone in his quest for assurance. The chains had fallen off his legs, he was loosed from the shackles of temptations to doubt his salvation. It was not this experience alone that brought him peace but it was a monumental step in his quest for assurance.

We must not be misled into thinking that Bunyan was relying solely on inner experience. It is important to note here that he resolved these conflicts not with introspective rationalization but in the Scriptures.

By this temptation I was made to see more into the nature of the promises than ever I was before; for I lying now trembling under the mighty hand of God, continually torn and rent by the thunderings of His justice; this made me, with careful heart and watchful eye, with great seriousness, to turn over every leaf, and with much diligence, mixed with trembling, to consider every sentence [of Scripture], together with its natural force and latitude.

Indeed, it could be argued that all along he had used the Scriptures to assuage his doubt, even though it appeared to bring him but little comfort. Even in his most despondent condition, he was nevertheless on the right path. In retrospect, his protracted ordeal was an indication that he was, in fact, regenerate. Christian had left the City of Destruction; he was on the right road, his burden still on his back notwithstanding. Far too many professed believers in our present day have bypassed the wicket gate. Like Hypocrisy and Formalist they have opted for the time-honored, well-tread shortcut of climbing over the wall to trespass their way to the Celestial City.

Given the fact that Bunyan's experiences were unique to him and cannot be replicated, do we simply dismiss them as overwrought quirks of a melancholy temperament? Is there any Scriptural analog to his troubled conscience? The Roman Catholic would say no, there is not. Assurance undermines diligence. But surely this position is the fruit of semi-Pelagianism whereby the outcome of one's spiritual state is indeterminate.

We answer in the affirmative that assurance does indeed belong to the Christian life on the basis of divine election, effectual calling, particular atonement, regeneration, the gift of faith, justification and sanctification. It could be argued that the *ordo salutis* demands it. We ask further, does assurance of salvation belong to faith or is it a subjective experience in addition to it? Can one have faith but not have assurance? The question must be handled with a certain amount of delicacy where lines in the discussion might very well be drawn more sharply than the believer's conscious experience. The *Savoy Declaration of Faith* (XVIII.iii) suggests that it does not belong to the essence of faith but this assertion needs clarification. There is an assurance that is closely tied to justifying faith. That is to say that it is an assurance that rests on the object of one's faith. We might call this—objective assurance.

The faith that results in justification is most certainly a radical reorientation in the mind of the believer as that of the creature before his Creator. "And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists [should be rendered, that he is] and that he

*rewards those who seek him*” (Hebrews 11:6). Moreover, in the exercise of true saving faith, one is convinced of his guilt before a holy God and embraces Christ in all that he is in his person and work of redemption. “*This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe*” (Romans 3:22). An evidence of this faith is that one begins to make use of the means of grace. “*So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him*” (Colossians 2:6). There is an assurance that is imbedded within faith itself as this faith looks, not within, but without, as ancient Israel looked to the brazen serpent. It is a confidence in Christ lifted up and in his declaration on the cross, “*It is finished.*”

There is also a “layer” of assurance that accompanies saving faith when the believer owns the message of the Gospel—for himself. In the Gospel, the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ. “*And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit*” (Ephesians 1:13). This mystical union, “*Christ in you the hope of glory*” (Colossians 1:27), is in and of itself an assurance. There is peace with God. “*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God*” (Romans 5:1-2). This *peace with God* is an assurance to the believer, on the basis of Christ’s work, that God is no longer at war with him, “*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned*” (Isaiah 40:1-2). There is confidence in approaching God on the basis of Christ being our high priest. “*Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*” (Hebrews 4:16). There is a living hope based on God having “*caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*” (I Peter 1:3). In each of the foregoing: union with Christ, peace with God, confidence to draw near to him, a living hope, they are, for the most part, derived from the objective realities that are the person and work of Christ. This we are calling objective assurance.

The Puritans were concerned to have both an *historical faith* accompanied with an *experimental* [experiential] faith. To be sure the believer must have an understanding of the precepts of the Gospel (*historical faith*) but the believer must also be able to talk about the work of God’s grace in his life (*experimental faith*). Admittedly, the lines between justifying faith and an accompanying assurance, are difficult to draw. Nevertheless it must be admitted that true saving faith must be attended by some reciprocal certitude on the part of the believer that enables him to proceed in his walk with Christ. It is a faith that is not alone.

We might go so far as to say that in Bunyan’s experience, he unwittingly had this kind of assurance insofar as he did not want to return to his former way of life and was convinced that the Scriptures, along with prayer, contained the answers to his personal doubts. He took seriously the words of Scripture that spoke of self-deception and hardness of heart and he feared to be counted among those in that condition. There were times of spiritual refreshing interspersed with periods of inner turmoil. That he was desperate to resolve this inner conflict and that he was determined not to throw off his faith is evidence of an assurance of the truth of the Gospel.

On the other hand, there is a subjective assurance that does not belong to the essence of faith but is necessarily connected to it as, speaking by way of analogy, sanctification is to justification. Indeed, we hold that this subjective assurance is the flower that issues from the experience of justification, adoption and sanctification. Whereas it is true that it is unevenly and sometimes intermittently experienced in the life of the believer, we are promised that we can know that we know, “*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life*” (I John 5:13). Moreover, we are commanded to seek this

assurance. “Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure” (II Peter 1:10).

We would locate this type of assurance primarily in the work of the Holy Spirit. There is the witness of the Spirit. “The spirit himself bears witness with [συμμαρτυρεῖ] our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:16). The preposition συμ (with) joined to μαρτυρεῖ (witness) suggests a co-witnessing of the Holy Spirit and our spirit together. We are not told exactly how the Spirit does this. A simple explanation might very well be that the Holy Spirit directly confirms with our spirit that we are children of God. Another interpretation is offered here. Biblically speaking, at least two witnesses are necessary to confirm a fact. For the believer, they are the resident Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9) and the regenerate consciousness, or, our spirit. In regeneration, the law of God is written on the heart. Thus it is the Holy Spirit, who resides within the believer, confirming by means of the Word of God written on the heart, that we are children of God. This is a present and continuous reality.

Closely allied with the witness of the Spirit is the intimacy of sonship. In Romans 8:15, we find the more intimate word for father in the Hebrew/Aramaic word, *Abba*. “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” Moreover this sonship is characterized by love, “God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us” (Romans 5:5). We note further the words of the Apostle John, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (I John 3:1).

We conclude from the foregoing that this mystery of union with Christ, the confirmation and affirmation of the Holy Spirit, the privilege of sonship, the wonder of God’s love, are among the blessings of assurance. They motivate us to the diligent use of the means of grace and to spur us on to a life of holiness. We are to be growing in assurance in the progressive discovery of the wonder and majesty of God’s grace in justification, adoption and sanctification. We are meant to enjoy God.

We ask at this point, wherein lies the cloud covering the sun in our sometimes interrupted experience of assurance? Bunyan admits that he fell into despondency because he neglected the means of grace in times of refreshing after having emerged from a period of trial. He subsequently learned to pray for mercy in the face of temptations that were to come. Recall Christian, climbing the Hill Difficulty, as he lingered too long in slumber at the Pleasant Arbor whereupon the scroll that he was carrying and had brought him comfort in reading it, fell out of his hands. When he discovered his loss, he was desperate to retrieve it and so he had to backtrack to the arbor until he recovered it. In Bunyan’s real life experience, he regretted the time lost and likened it to the lengthening of Israel’s sojourn in the wilderness because of unbelief.

There was a redemptive purpose through all his trials that should not escape our attention. “By this I was made continually to possess in my soul a very wonderful sense both of the being and glory of God.” Regarding the Scriptures, he states, “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.” He was rigorous in resolving his trials and any sense of relief, in the Word of God. Commenting on John 6:37, “Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out,” he says,

Now I began to consider with myself, that God had a bigger mouth to speak with than I had heart to conceive with. I thought also with myself that He spake not His words in haste, or in unadvised heat, but with infinite wisdom and judgment, and in very truth and faithfulness.

It was the means of grace, that of prayer and the Word of God, that brought him through the trials and doubt that he knew were yet to come. They did not cease but he had learned how to

appropriate them for the next trial. “I never saw those heights and depths in grace, and love, and mercy as I saw after this temptation [that the Lord would refuse him].

May Bunyan’s journey instruct us in avoiding the pitfalls of presumption and may we also be forewarned of the scourge of spiritual blindness, dangers which abound through the neglect of the means of grace.

Finally, lest we over subscribe to Bunyan’s experience as a standard by which we would measure our own, we would do well to consider the words of John Newton in his poem, “Perplexity Relieved.”

Uncertain how the way to find which to salvation led,  
I listened long with anxious mind to hear what others said.  
When some of joys and comforts told, I feared that I was wrong;  
For I was stupid, dead and cold, had neither joy nor song.  
The Lord my lab’ring heart relieved and made my burden light;  
Then for a moment I believed, supposing all was right.  
Of fierce temptations others talked, of anguish and dismay,  
Through what distresses they had walked before they found the way.  
Ah! Then I thought my hopes were vain, for I had lived at ease,  
I wished for all my fears again, to make me more like these.  
I had my wish; the Lord disclosed the evils of my heart,  
And left my naked soul exposed to Satan’s fiery dart.  
Alas! “I now must give it up,” I cried in deep despair:  
How could I dream of drawing hope from what I cannot bear.  
Again my Saviour brought me aid and when He set me free,  
“Trust simply on my word,” He said, “And leave the rest to me.”