

Forged from the Wilderness

The Lives of John and Elizabeth Bunyan

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For Thou, O God, hast proved us: Thou hast tried us, as silver is tried. Psalms 66:10



Preface

It can credibly be argued that *The Pilgrim's Progress* is the most influential Christian book ever written by human agency. Until the early part of the twentieth century, most Americans were brought up on the Bible and on John Bunyan's allegorical masterpiece. Not so much in my youth. During my grade school days, I heard of the book from time to time, which I thought must be an account of the progress made by the Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock.

Later on, in the early 1970s, I was serving in Darmstadt, Germany, as a member of the United States Air Force. At the time, I was a zealous, if somewhat neophyte follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. Upon the recommendation of one of my spiritual mentors, I went to the base library one day in search of John Bunyan's book. Twenty minutes later I left the library with *The Pilgrim's Progress* in hand. In rapt anticipation, I raced to my room and began to read.

I had not gotten two paragraphs into the book before it captured me like no other man written book had ever captured me before—and few since. Across three hundred years, I identified with Christian, the main character of the book, whom I soon perceived to be the author himself. I too saw the world as a wilderness, a Vanity Fair, where people obsessed over trivial, transient futility.

I identified with Christian's struggles, his mistakes, his failures, his doubts, his triumphs, his experiences with others—and his hope. I too had known a burden upon my back and an evangelist in my life. There had been an encounter with the cross and the loosing of my burden. I had experienced the Slough of Despond and the Hill Difficulty. I knew some of the people Christian encountered along his path, such as Pliable, Faithful, Hopeful,

Ignorant, and Giant Despair. Thus were sown in me the seeds that one day would culminate in this book, a biographical novel of the life of an ordinary man, and of the woman who helped him to become extraordinary.

I have made every effort to bring to life the England of John Bunyan's day, with its political and religious turmoil, its prominent and commonplace figures, and its major events. I have striven to capture the real John Bunyan—and the real Elizabeth, who became the widower's second wife and the dedicated step-mother of his four children. She was a courageous champion for her husband's freedom from prison, and for the publishing of his works.

I pray that you, dear readers, will find my effort a rich, memorable reading experience. May you become all that God has made you to be.

Chapter One

Little Girl Lost

The wind howled fiercely around her, sending icy sleet that jabbed like tiny needles into her face. Her feet, encased only in thin leather shoes, were numb from the deep snow through which she trudged. She knew that she must find shelter soon. *But where?* She could see nothing but a few feet of the trail ahead in the consuming darkness. *Dear God, help me!*

A dim light appeared, filtering through the dense forest. A narrow clearing looked to go in the direction of the light. Hopefully, she followed it. The trees gradually gave way until she saw that the light emanated from a small wooden house. Across from the house stood a barn. Fearful of visibly intruding upon unknown people, she lifted the latch to the barn and crept inside, closing the door behind her with the inside latch.

If it had appeared dark outside, the inside was totally devoid. At least she was out of the wind and sleet. She groped into the interior, holding her hands before her and shuffling her benumbed feet to avoid unseen dangers.

On what felt like a pile of straw she lay down. Immediately, she took off her shoes and attempted to rub circulation back into her feet. Gradually, the stiffness thawed and feeling began to return. She wound her tunic tightly around her and curled into a ball.

The barn clattered and groaned like an old man as it swayed under the onslaught of the wind. She would remain stationary until morning light, knowing from experience that barns were filled with hazards.

As she lay shivering in the darkness, she pondered her future. As for her past, there was no going back. She wanted only to put as much distance

between herself and her former dwelling as possible—and to do her best to forget what had occurred there.

But where am I to go? she wondered. I am unready to face this harsh world alone. And who will want me? Who has ever truly wanted me?

She tried to pray, but her words fell flat. *If there truly is a God, He most certainly wants nothing to do with me.* Cold and exhausted from her journey, she drifted into a troubled sleep, hoping to find rest and refuge from the torments of her soul.



Her eyes opened to pale beams of light seeping through the gaps in the wooden siding of the barn. In stark contrast to the night before was the calm. Neither did it seem quite so cold.

She rose quickly, knowing that to linger would be imprudent. She was a vagrant, and well she knew it. She made her way to the barn door and raised the inside latch as silently as possible. Cautiously, she peered outside to see if anyone might be watching. A heavy snow was falling. Across the way, perhaps thirty paces distant, was the wooden house. Smoke rising from the chimney told her that at least one of the occupants had risen for the new day.

For a brief moment, she considered knocking on the door for the warmth and food she knew to be inside. Immediately, she squelched the thought. She had already encroached upon a stranger's hospitality and could ask for nothing more. Silently, she latched the door behind her and made for the road, hoping that the falling snow would quickly cover her tracks.

Only when she was on the road and sufficiently away from the property did she pause to survey the scene around her. The skies were a solid, dismal gray. To the left of the road was a wide field, blanketed in snow, surrounded by a zigzagging split rail fence. On the far side of the field was another home, set partially into the forest behind it. Ahead and to her right was thick conifer forest as far as she could see.

She resumed her journey. To where, she did not know. All was silence, but for the sound of her feet. No sound from the heavens. No birds. No movement. No human voices. Nothing but silent stillness and the indiscernible padding of snow upon snow.

With her two hands, she scooped a chunk of snow to quench her thirst. For her gnawing hunger, no remedy was apparent. As she moved, she tried vainly to avoid the snow, not wanting a repeat of her near frost-bitten experience of the night before.

But as the morning wore on, her feet grew increasingly numb. Finally, she stopped and removed her shoes. Again, she attempted to rub life back into her feet. Despair penetrated her soul. She tried again to pray, but heard only inward accusation.

Do I hear something? She cocked her ears northward. Her eyes focused on the road she had already traveled, which disappeared into a curve a quarter of a mile behind her. The sound grew until she discerned the clip-clopping of horses' hooves and the wheels of a wagon.

Hastily she put on her shoes and made for the cover of the woods. She crouched behind a fallen log, her heart racing as the wagon approached. Part of her wanted to return to the road and ask for help. Another part feared that they might be people who would do to her what had already been done—or worse. The wagon came to the place where she had left the road and abruptly stopped.

"Hello," came the kindly voice of a man. "We saw you run into the woods. Don't be afraid. We won't harm you. Do you need help?"

She peered cautiously over the log. On the buckboard, at the nearer side sat a man in common gray clothing, with a broad brimmed hat upon his head. To his left sat a woman, partially obscured, who looked to be his wife. Poking over the cargo area of the wagon were two heads, a young girl and what appeared to be a younger boy. They certainly didn't appear dangerous. Slowly, she stood to her feet.

"Oh John, she's just a girl," said the woman.

"Where are you heading?" asked the man.

"Away."

"Away from where?"

"Away." Slowly the girl ventured into the open.

"Oh, you poor thing," came the voice of the woman. She turned to the older child in the back of the wagon. "Jane, would you please hand me our extra blanket?"

Blanket in hand, she bounded from the buckboard and wrapped it

