

# John Bunyan and the Heavenly City

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John Bunyan is known throughout the world as the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. First published in 1678, and with a Second Part added in 1684, this remarkable book has never been out of print. It was an immediate success with readers, and since the seventeenth century it has appeared in well over 2,000 separate editions, including translations into about 200 languages.

In writing *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan produced something strikingly new and original in English literature. The central character is a man called Christian who sets off on a pilgrimage, leaving the City of Destruction behind him to seek for a Celestial City. His journey is full of struggle, danger and adventure. He has to wade through the Slough of Despond, climb the Hill Difficulty, and traverse the Valley of Humiliation. Later in his journey, he is supported by trusty companions, first Faithful, who is put to death at Vanity Fair, and then Hopeful, with whom he is imprisoned in Doubting Castle. Their pilgrimage ends when, together, they pass over the River of Death and enter the Celestial City. In Part Two, there is an even greater emphasis on human companionship. Here Christian's wife Christiana sets out on pilgrimage, together with her children and a friend called Mercy. Theirs is a more leisurely and less dangerous journey, in which they retrace the route taken by Christian, visiting the scenes of some of his trials and victories. Along the way they are joined by fellow-pilgrims. Some are heroic figures, such as Mr Great-heart, Mr Stand-fast, and Mr Valiant-for-Truth. Others exhibit a range of human frailties, like Mr Ready-to-halt, Mr Feeble-mind, Mr Despondency and his daughter Much-afraid. At the end they all pass over the River one by one and enter in at the gate of the Celestial City.

Although he gives them allegorical names, Bunyan's characters speak and behave and interact with each other like recognizable people. He devises a plot in which events follow one another in an understandable sequence and structure. In its depiction of social interaction, and in the way it encourages the reader to become imaginatively involved in the lives and experiences of the characters, Bunyan's allegory can be seen as a forerunner of the English novel as it developed in the eighteenth century.

By the nineteenth century *The Pilgrim's Progress* had become established as a classic book for children. Its influence was profound, as any reader of nineteenth-century fiction will know. Maggie Tulliver, Adam Bede, Little Nell, Nicholas Nickleby, and Huckleberry Finn all

read *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It acquired a unique status in English religious life, as a devotional text of extraordinary importance. British soldiers in the First World War drew upon memories of reading *The Pilgrim's Progress* in trying to understand and express what was happening to them. A set of verses included in Part Two, 'Who would true valour see, / Let him come hither', is among the best-known hymns in English. The description of the death of Mr Valiant-for-Truth is still read aloud at funerals: 'When the Day that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the River side, into which, as he went, he said *Grave where is thy Victory?* So he passed over, and the Trumpets sounded for him on the other side.'<sup>1</sup>

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My talk this evening is going to focus on the ending of each part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and how the entry of the pilgrims into the Celestial City is depicted. But properly to understand Bunyan's concept of heaven, we need to know something about his life and religious experiences, and about the context within which he wrote his famous book. He was born in 1628 in a little village just outside Bedford, and he lived in Bedford for most of his adult life. While he was still a youth, England was convulsed by a great Civil War between King and Parliament, which ended with the execution of Charles I in 1649 and the establishment of a republic under Oliver Cromwell. Bunyan served for a time in the Parliamentary Army, but as far as we know he didn't see much military action. On his return to Bedford he took up his father's trade as a travelling brazier, or tinker, mending pots and pans. This was a period of intense spiritual and psychological turmoil for him, which he later described in harrowing detail in a spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. As a child he had suffered from nightmares about devils trying to pull him into Hell, and was convinced that he was marked out for damnation. He continued to regard himself as a wicked person, one who blasphemed the name of God. Attending his parish church didn't seem to help, and he found it impossible to reform his life and behaviour.

For several years he was consumed with doubt and despair, but a breakthrough came one day when he overheard some godly women in Bedford talking about their experience of religion and the joy this brought them. They seemed to Bunyan as if they had 'found a new world'. He began to study the Bible intensively, in the hope of finding 'the way to heaven and glory', and as he read and prayed he came to believe that his salvation was secure and that he was indeed a child of God.<sup>2</sup> In 1653 Bunyan joined a group of believers in Bedford who worshipped independently under a pastor they had chosen for themselves. It wasn't long

before he himself began to preach and to write religious books, and he soon established a reputation as an effective communicator and controversialist.

It's important to emphasise the significance of the religious freedom that people like Bunyan enjoyed during this period. During the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell, the legal requirement to attend one's parish church was abolished. For the first time in English history, people were given liberty to establish new religious groupings and to worship freely as their conscience dictated. It was during this period in the 1650s that congregations of Baptists, Quakers, Congregationalists and other religious groups were formed, led by preachers who, like Bunyan, lacked formal ordination or university education.

This period of comparative religious freedom was short-lived. In 1660 following the collapse of the government of Cromwell's son Richard, Charles II was restored to the throne. Although Charles had promised to protect freedom of religion, the Parliament which was elected in 1661 was determined to enforce religious conformity again. England in the seventeenth century was a strongly hierarchical society, in which people were supposed to 'know their place' and remain within it. In the view of the authorities, religious conformity was an essential requirement for political stability. For someone like Bunyan to claim the right to preach was seen as a threat to the whole social and political order. Such fears were not wholly without foundation. In January 1661, a religious group known as the Fifth Monarchy Men staged an armed uprising in the streets of London to overthrow Charles II and establish the reign of King Jesus. Although easily put down, these violent activities lent credence to the widespread belief that Nonconformists were a danger to the state as well as to the established church.

In the early years of the restored monarchy, a series of laws was passed forbidding the holding of religious meetings not conducted according to the liturgy of the Church of England. Offenders were liable to severe fines, imprisonment, and transportation. Bunyan was among the first Nonconformists to be arrested. His trial took place in January 1661 at the Old Swan Inn in Bedford. The charge against him was that he 'devilishly and perniciously abstained from coming to church to hear divine service, and was a common upholder of several unlawful meetings and conventicles, to the great disturbance and distraction of the good subjects of this kingdom, contrary to the laws of our sovereign lord the King'.<sup>3</sup> He was found guilty, and was sentenced to remain in prison for three months, after which time if he did not agree to attend the Church of England and leave off preaching, he would be banished from the realm. In the event, when the three months was up he was simply left in gaol.

And so it came about that John Bunyan would become one of the most famous prisoners of conscience in English history, spending over twelve years in the county gaol in

Bedford. He writes most movingly in *Grace Abounding* of the distress he was causing his family. ‘The parting with my Wife and poor Children hath oft been to me in this place, as the pulling the flesh from my bones . . . I was as a man who was pulling down his house upon the head of his Wife and Children; yet thought I, I must do it, I must do it.’<sup>4</sup> For Bunyan, the issue at stake was a matter of supreme religious conscience: he felt he had to obey God rather than men, and therefore he could not agree to demands that he stop preaching.

Altogether, Bunyan wrote about ten works while in prison. The greatest of these was *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, though by the time it was published, early in 1678, Bunyan was out of prison. He had been released in May 1672, as a result of a royal pardon, and had been elected pastor of the Bedford congregation. He went on to become one of the main leaders and organisers of Nonconformity in Cambridgeshire, Essex and Hertfordshire as well as Bedfordshire. Many accounts of his activities have come down to us. In the early 1680s, for example, he is said to have stayed with Nonconformist friends in Braintree in Essex, where he was given a ‘little quiet chamber upstairs’ to work on one of his books.<sup>5</sup> It is no doubt because of this tradition that there is a John Bunyan School in Braintree, as well as one in Bedford.

Bunyan frequently travelled to London to preach and to deliver manuscripts of his books to printers. He was in close contact with leading Nonconformist ministers whose congregations met in the Halls of some of the great City Companies, and was often invited by them to preach. In 1682, for example, he preached at the famous Pinners’ Hall in Bishopsgate. There are reports of over a thousand people turning up to hear him on week-day mornings, and about three thousand on a Sunday.

As it happened, Bunyan died while on a visit to London. He had travelled there on horseback, and got caught in heavy rain which brought on a fever. He was able to preach what would be his last sermon in Whitechapel, but became seriously ill and died on the thirty-first of August 1688. He was buried at Bunhill Fields in Finsbury, the famous burial ground of the Nonconformists, where Daniel Defoe and William Blake are also buried.

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I come now to the main part of my talk. My interest in exploring Bunyan’s concept of heaven was sparked by a passage near the end of the second part of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, where Great-heart meets Mr Valiant-for-Truth, a fellow-pilgrim, and they have a lengthy conversation. Great-heart introduces Christiana and her four sons, and Valiant-for-Truth is delighted to hear that they are following Christian on pilgrimage. He imagines Christian’s reaction when his family also reach the Celestial City: ‘How Joyful will he be, when he shall

see them [...] enter [...] in at the Gates into the City!’ This remark sets off a curious little discussion about the whole idea of meeting relations in heaven.

Greath. *Without doubt it will be a Comfort to him; for next to the Joy of seeing himself there, it will be a Joy to meet there his Wife and his Children.*

Valiant. But now you are upon that, pray let me see your Opinion about it. Some make a question whether we shall know one another when we are there.

Greath. *Do they think they shall know themselves then? Or that they shall rejoyce to see themselves in that Bliss? and if they think they shall know and do these; Why not know others, and rejoyce in their Welfare also?*

Again, *Since Relations are our second self, tho that State will be dissolved there, yet why may it not be rationally concluded that we shall be more glad to see them there, th[a]n to see they are wanting?*

Valiant. Well, I perceive whereabouts you are to this [...].<sup>6</sup>

In arguing that husbands and wives will know each other in heaven even though the marriage state is dissolved there, Great-heart is clearly aware of Christ’s declaration in Matthew 22 verse 30 about there being no marriage or giving in marriage in heaven. Valiant-for-Truth seems to be persuaded by Great-heart’s argument that we will meet relations who have died before us when we ourselves get to heaven. But at first sight, it is not clear why he should have raised any question about the matter, since it is a recurrent theme in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Christiana frequently speaks of her expectation that she will see Christian again and indeed it is partly this very belief that prompts her to set out on her own pilgrimage. She tells her sons to ‘pack up’ and set out with her to the ‘Celestial Countrey’, because there ‘we may see your Father, and be with him and his Companions’.<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere in his writings, Bunyan has a good deal to say about heaven. In an early poem, *One Thing is Needful*, he presents heaven as a place where we will see Christ face-to-face, and will meet the saints of all ages, but also as a place where we will renew fellowship with those we loved on earth.

Our friends that lived godly here,  
Shall there be found again,  
The Wife, the Child, and Father dear,  
With others of our train. [...]

Those God did use us to convert,  
We there with joy shall meet,  
And jointly shall with all our heart,  
In [Heaven] each other greet.<sup>8</sup>

In a much later work, *Israel’s Hope Encouraged*, Bunyan lists the delights that await the saints in heaven, and again, the idea of reunion with friends and family is prominent: ‘we

shall see and know, and be with forever, all our Relations, as Wife, Husband, Child, Father, Mother, Brother or Sister, that have died in the Faith'.<sup>9</sup>

These comments across a range of his writings leave no doubt that for Bunyan a key feature of heaven is its humanly social aspect. In the heavenly city we will live for ever in joyous fellowship with our godly friends and family. Why then does Valiant-for-Truth suggest that this idea is a matter of controversy? The answer seems to be that significant changes in thinking about heaven were occurring during the early modern period, and among the central questions being discussed was whether we will recognise other people in heaven, and whether we will be reunited with our friends and family there.

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In an influential book entitled *Heaven: A History*, published in 1988, the historians Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang argue that there have been two distinct models of the Christian heaven. The first is what they call a *theocentric* model of heaven as a place where the blessed will enjoy the sight and presence of God, worshipping and glorifying Him forever. This way of thinking about the life of the saints in heaven became known as the 'Beatific Vision'. McDannell and Lang quote the great medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas as saying that in heaven 'fellowship of friends is not essential to happiness, since the human being has the entire fullness of perfection in God'. The early Protestant reformer John Calvin likewise apparently thought that in heaven the saints would not be speaking to each other, but would be 'wholly intent on beholding God'.<sup>10</sup>

According to McDannell and Lang, this theocentric model of heaven remained dominant up until about the middle of the eighteenth century, when it was replaced by an *anthropocentric* model of heaven as a place where families and friends will be reunited and will enjoy an active communal life together. This new, modern view of heaven was, they say, largely the invention of the Swedish visionary Emanuel Swedenborg, who claimed to have talked to angels and to have seen with his own eyes what life in heaven is like. Swedenborg's anthropocentric concept of heaven placed a radically new focus on human relationships and activities there. In the words of McDannell and Lang, 'social relationships, including the love between man and woman, are seen as fundamental to heavenly life and not in conflict with the divine purpose'.<sup>11</sup> They argue that under the influence of Swedenborg, the expectation of a blissful reunion of spouses, family and friends became central to beliefs about life in heaven, and that this anthropocentric model became the dominant way of thinking about death and the afterlife in the nineteenth century.

There is a great deal to be learned from McDannell and Lang's survey of changing ideas about the Christian heaven over some two thousand years. However there are problems with their argument that an anthropocentric model of heaven did not emerge until the middle of the eighteenth century. The historian Peter Marshall has presented a good deal of evidence to show that by the early seventeenth century Protestant divines were already discussing whether we shall know one another in heaven and be re-united there with those we loved on earth.<sup>12</sup> William Perkins, the pre-eminent theologian of this period, thought that 'men in heaven shall knowe each other', though he was reluctant to speculate about the details: 'Whether they shall knowe one another after an earthly manner, as to say, this man was my father, this was mine uncle, this my teacher, &c. the word of god saith nothing: and therefore I will be silent, and we must be content a while to bee ignorant in this point'.<sup>13</sup> Another prominent divine, Robert Bolton was less cautious. He declared that meeting, knowing, and conversing in heaven with 'our old deare Christian friends [...] will mightily please and refresh us with sweetest delight'. Indeed, says Bolton, we will also know and converse with 'strangers, and such as we never knew before; even all the faithfull, which ever were, are, or shall be'.<sup>14</sup> William Ford, in a funeral sermon published in 1616, went even further, depicting in glowing terms the joys of reunion in heaven. 'An infinite number of acquaintance expect us there: our parents, our brethren and sisters, our children, our kindred, our friends [...]; what joy, what comfort will it be to see, to imbrace them.'<sup>15</sup>

By the middle of the seventeenth century, when Bunyan was writing, this consoling idea that in heaven we would be reunited with loved ones who had died before us seems to have become the orthodox Protestant view. We find it expressed in what would become one of the most influential treatments of the afterlife written in this period, Richard Baxter's *The Saints Everlasting Rest*, first published in 1650. Baxter lists by name the patriarchs and prophets, Apostles, Church Fathers, leaders of the Reformation, and Puritan divines he looks forward to meeting in heaven. He also writes with evident emotion of what it will be like to meet his friends again.

I know that Christ is all in all: and that it is the presence of God that maketh Heaven to be Heaven. But yet it much sweeteneth the thoughts of that place to me, to remember that there are such a multitude of my most dear and pretious friends in Christ; with whom I took sweet counsel [...] in the face of whose conversations, there was written the name of Christ; whose sweet and sensible mention of his Excellencies, hath made my heart to burn within me: To think [...] that all these are entered into rest; and we shall surely go to them . . .<sup>16</sup>

In 1653, Christopher Love argued, like Baxter, that 'the knowing of each other in Heaven [...] will wonderfully heighten and greaten the joy of glorified Saints'. Love imagines

the scene ‘when the mother shall say, here is my tender child, that was taken from me by untimely death; when the wife shall say, here is my tender husband, that lay by my side so long; when the people shall say, here is the Minister that converted my soul, and was an instrument to bring me to glory’.<sup>17</sup> It is clear that this way of thinking about heaven appealed strongly to ordinary people. In 1679, for example, a dying woman, Lucy Perrot was sustained by the thought that she was going to heaven, telling her husband that ‘we must part, but we shall, after a little while meet again. [...] Why art thou so sad? [...] we shall meet again, where we shall never part’.<sup>18</sup>

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The evidence I’ve been summarising here suggests that an anthropocentric model of heaven emerged at least a century before the date proposed by McDannell and Lang, and that it was well established by the time Bunyan was writing in the middle of the seventeenth century. Furthermore, I would argue that Bunyan’s depiction of heaven in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is likely to have been much more influential in establishing this way of thinking about heaven than the writings of Swedenborg. McDannell and Lang also seem to me to be making too sharp a distinction between their theocentric and anthropocentric models of heaven. Bunyan would not have seen these as incompatible, as is clear from the way heaven is described at the end of the first part of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. When Christian and Hopeful have crossed the River of Death, Bunyan arranges for two angels to be there to welcome them and escort them up to the Celestial City. The angels tell the pilgrims in some detail what they can expect life to be like in the heavenly city, stressing both the Beatific Vision *and* human fellowship:

you must wear Crowns of Gold, and enjoy the perpetual sight and Visions of the *Holy One*, for there you shall see him as he is. There also you shall serve him continually with praise, with shouting and thanksgiving [...]. There your eyes shall be delighted with seeing, and your ears with hearing, the pleasant voice of the mighty One. There you shall enjoy your friends again, that are got thither before you; and there you shall with joy receive, even every one that follows into the Holy place after you. There also you shall be cloathed with Glory and Majesty, and put into an equipage fit to ride out with the King of Glory.<sup>19</sup>

In conclusion, I want to consider briefly the wider significance of Bunyan’s representation of heaven in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. For his persecuted fellow-Nonconformists in the late seventeenth century, Bunyan’s depiction of the heavenly city would have offered an inspiring vision of hope. In heaven, if not on earth, their constancy will be rewarded and they will see their persecutors receive justice. At the final Judgement Day

they will sit by the side of Christ himself: ‘when he shall pass Sentence upon all the workers of Iniquity, let them be Angels or Men, you also shall have a voice in that Judgement, because they were his and your Enemies’.<sup>20</sup>

After Bunyan’s lifetime, as it became one of the most widely-read books in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* must have been hugely influential in the development of a popular cultural understanding of heaven as a place where families and friends would meet again. This idea was elaborated and circulated not only in sermons and religious publications but in works of fiction. One of the most popular novels of the nineteenth century in England, Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne*, includes a scene in which a dying boy is assured that he will see his dead mother in heaven, and that he will not have long to wait until his father and sisters join them.<sup>21</sup> In 1868 an American novelist called Elizabeth Stuart Phelps published *The Gates Ajar*. It tells the story of a young woman whose beloved brother has been killed in the American Civil War and who is prostrated by grief that she will never see him again. She is eventually persuaded by her Aunt Winifred that she will be reunited with her brother in heaven: she will once again ‘see the sparkle in his eye, listen to his laughing voice’.<sup>22</sup> *The Gates Ajar* became an astonishing best-seller, exceeded only by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

The idea that death may not be a final separation, and that we might meet again those we love, continues to have a strong pull on our emotions, and perhaps it always will. Its attraction is expressed beautifully, and delicately, in some stanzas from a nineteenth-century poem by John Gibson Lockhart, now better known in the musical setting by Hubert Parry, where it forms one of his five *Songs of Farewell*. It was performed at Parry’s own funeral in 1918.

There is an old belief,  
That on some solemn shore,  
Beyond the sphere of grief  
Dear friends shall meet once more.  
[...]  
That creed I fain would keep  
That hope I’ll ne’er forgo,  
Eternal be the sleep,  
If not to waken so.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> W. R. Owens (ed.), John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Oxford World's Classics edition (Oxford, 2003), p. 288. All quotations are from this edition, cited as *The Pilgrim's Progress*.
- <sup>2</sup> W. R. Owens (ed.), *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, Penguin Classics edition (Harmondsworth, 1987), pp. 14, 16.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94–95.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- <sup>5</sup> Vera Brittain, *In the Steps of John Bunyan* (London, n.d.), pp. 331–332. See also Richard L. Greaves, *John Bunyan and English Nonconformity* (London: Hambledon Press, 1992), pp. 97–98.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Pilgrim's Progress*, p. 273.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- <sup>8</sup> Graham Midgley (ed.), *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 6 (Oxford, 1980), p. 88.
- <sup>9</sup> W. R. Owens (ed.), *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 13 (Oxford, 1994), p. 10.
- <sup>10</sup> Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New York, 1988), pp. 92 (Aquinas), 148 (Calvin).
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.
- <sup>12</sup> Peter Marshall, 'The Company of Heaven: Identity and Sociability in the English Protestant Afterlife, c.1560–1630', *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques*, 26 (2000), 311–33; and *idem*, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 215–220.
- <sup>13</sup> William Perkins, *A Golden Chaine* (Cambridge, 1600), p. 518.
- <sup>14</sup> Robert Bolton, *Mr Boltons Last and Learned Worke of the Foure Last Things* (London, 1632), p. 145.
- <sup>15</sup> William Forde, *A Sermon Preached at Constantinople* (London, 1616), p. 62.
- <sup>16</sup> Richard Baxter, *The Saints Everlasting Rest* (London, 1650), p. 85.
- <sup>17</sup> Christopher Love, *Heavens Glory, Hells Terror* (London, 1653), p. 161.
- <sup>18</sup> Luce Perrot, *An Account of Several Observable Speeches of Mrs Luce Perrot* (London, 1678), pp. 28, 30.
- <sup>19</sup> *The Pilgrim's Progress*, p. 151.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> Ellen Wood, *East Lynne* (1860–1), ed. Elisabeth Jay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 576–89.
- <sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Gates Ajar* (1868), ed. Helen Sootin Smith (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 57.