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opening extract from

Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners

written by

John Bunyan

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GRACE
ABOUNDING TO
THE CHIEF OF SINNERS
OR,
A BRIEF RELATION OF THE
EXCEEDING MERCY OF GOD IN CHRIST,
TO HIS POOR SERVANT
JOHN BUNYAN



1. In this my relation of the merciful working of God upon my soul, it will not be amiss, if in the first place I do in a few words give you a hint of my pedigree, and manner of bringing up; that thereby the goodness and bounty of God towards me, may be the more advanced and magnified before the sons of men.

2. For my descent then, it was, as is well known by many, of a low and inconsiderable generation; my father's house being of that rank that is meanest, and most despised of all the families in the land.[1] Wherefore I have not here, as others, to boast of noble blood, or of a high-born state according to the flesh: though all things considered, I magnify the heavenly Majesty, for that by this door he brought me into this world, to partake of the grace and life that is in Christ by the gospel.

3. But yet notwithstanding the meanness and inconsiderableness of my parents, it pleased God to put it into their heart, to put me to school,[2] to learn both to read and write; the which I also attained, according to the rate of other poor men's children, though to my shame I confess, I did soon lose that little I learned, and that even almost utterly, and that long before the Lord did work his gracious work of conversion upon my soul.

4. As for my own natural life, for the time that I was without God in the world, it was, indeed, *according to the course of this world*, and *the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience* (Eph. 2:2, 3): it was my delight to be taken captive by the devil *at his will* (II Tim. 2:26), being filled with

all unrighteousness; the which did also so strongly work, and put forth itself, both in my heart and life, and that from a child, that I had but few equals, (especially considering my years, which were tender, being few) both for cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the holy name of God.

5. Yea, so settled and rooted was I in these things, that they became as a second nature to me; the which, as I also have with soberness considered since, did so offend the Lord, that even in my childhood he did scare and affright me with fearful dreams, and did terrify me with dreadful visions. For often, after I had spent this and the other day in sin, I have in my bed been greatly afflicted, while asleep, with the apprehensions of devils, and wicked spirits, who still, as I then thought, laboured to draw me away with them; of which I could never be rid.

6. Also I should at these years be greatly afflicted and troubled with the thoughts of the day of judgement, and that both night and day, and should tremble at the thoughts of the fearful torments of hell-fire; still fearing that it would be my lot to be found at last amongst those devils and hellish fiends, who are there bound down with the chains and bonds of eternal darkness.

7. These things, I say, when I was but a child, about nine or ten years old, did so distress my soul, that when in the midst of my many sports and childish vanities, amidst my vain companions, I was often much cast down and afflicted in my mind therewith; yet could I not let go my sins: yea, I was so overcome with despair of life and heaven, that then I should often wish, either that there had been no hell, or that I had been a devil; supposing they were only tormentors; that if it must needs be, that I indeed went thither, I might be rather a tormentor, than tormented myself.

8. A while after, these terrible dreams did leave me, which also I soon forgot; for my pleasures did quickly cut off the remembrance of them, as if they had never been: wherefore with more greediness, according to the strength of nature, I did still let loose the reins to my lusts, and delighted in all transgression against the law of God: so that until I came to the state of marriage, I was the very ring-leader of all the youth that kept me company, into all manner of vice and ungodliness.

9. Yea, such prevalency had the lusts and fruits of the flesh, in this poor soul of mine, that had not a miracle of precious grace prevented, I had not only perished by the stroke of eternal justice, but had also laid myself open even to the stroke of those laws, which bring some to disgrace and open shame before the face of the world.

10. In these days the thoughts of religion was very grievous to me; I could neither endure it myself, nor that any other should: so that when I have but seen some read in those books that concerned Christian piety, it would be as it were a prison to me. *Then I said unto God, Depart from me,*

for I desire not the knowledge of thy ways (Job 21:14, 15). I was now void of all good consideration; heaven and hell were both out of sight and mind, and as for saving and damning, they were least in my thoughts. *O Lord, thou knowest my life, and my ways were not hid from thee.*[3]

11. Yet this I well remember, that though I could myself sin with the greatest delight and ease, and also take pleasure in the vileness of my companions; yet even then, if I have at any time seen wicked things by those that professed goodness, it would make my spirit tremble. As once above all the rest, when I was in my height of vanity, yet hearing one to swear that was reckoned for a religious man, it had so great a stroke upon my spirit, as it made my heart to ache.

12. But God did not utterly leave me, but followed me still, not now with convictions, but judgements, yet such as were mixed with mercy. For once I fell into a creek of the sea, and hardly escaped drowning: another time I fell out of a boat into Bedford river,[4] but mercy yet preserved me alive: besides, another time being in the field, with one of my companions, it chanced that an adder passed over the highway, so I having a stick in mine hand, struck her over the back; and having stounded[5] her, I forced open her mouth with my stick, and plucked her sting out with my fingers, by which act had not God been merciful to me, I might by my desperateness have brought myself to mine end.

13. This also have I taken notice of with thanksgiving; when I was a soldier,[6] I with others were drawn out to go to such a place to besiege it; but when I was just ready to go, one of the company desired to go in my room, to which, when I had consented, he took my place; and coming to the siege, as he stood sentinel, he was shot into the head with a musket bullet and died.

14. Here, as I said, were judgements and mercy, but neither of them did awaken my soul to righteousness, wherefore I sinned still, and grew more and more rebellious against God, and careless of mine own salvation.

15. Presently after this, I changed my condition into a married state; and my mercy was, to light upon a wife whose father was counted godly: this woman and I, though we came together as poor as poor might be, (not having so much household-stuff as a dish or spoon betwixt us both), yet this she had for her part, *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven*,[7] and *The Practice of Piety*,[8] which her father had left her when he died. In these two books, I should sometimes read with her, wherein I also found some things that were somewhat pleasing to me: (but all this while I met with no conviction). She also would be often telling of me what a godly man her father was, and how he would reprove and correct vice, both in his house and amongst his neighbours; what a strict and holy life he lived in his day, both in word and deed.

16. Wherefore these books, with this relation, though they did not reach my heart to awaken it about my sad and sinful state, yet they did beget within me some desires to religion: so that, because I knew no better, I fell in very eagerly with the religion of the times, to wit, to go to church twice a day, and that too with the foremost, and there should very devoutly both say and sing as others did; yet retaining my wicked life: but withal, I was so overrun with the spirit of superstition,[9] that I adored, and that with great devotion, even all things (both the high place, priest, clerk, vestments, service, and what else) belonging to the church; counting all things holy that were therein contained; and especially the priest and clerk most happy, and without doubt greatly blessed, because they were the servants, as I then thought, of God, and were principal in the holy temple, to do his work therein.

17. This conceit[10] grew so strong in little time upon my spirit, that had I but seen a priest, (though never so sordid and debauched in his life) I should find my spirit fall under him, reverence him, and knit unto him; yea, I thought for the love I did bear unto them, (supposing they were the ministers of God) I could have laid down at their feet, and have been trampled upon by them; their name, their garb, and work, did so intoxicate and bewitch me.

18. After I had been thus for some considerable time, another thought came into my mind, and that was, whether we were of the Israelites, or no: for finding in the Scriptures that they were once the peculiar people of God; thought I, if I were one of this race, my soul must needs be happy. Now again I found within me a great longing to be resolved about this question, but could not tell how I should: at last, I asked my father of it, who told me, No, we were not: wherefore then I fell in my spirit, as to the hopes of that, and so remained.

19. But all this while I was not sensible of the danger and evil of sin; I was kept from considering that sin would damn me, what religion soever I followed, unless I was found in Christ: nay, I never thought of him, nor whether there was one or no. Thus man, while blind, doth wander, but wearieth himself with vanity: for he knoweth not the way to the city of God (Eccles. 10:15).

20. But one day (amongst all the sermons our parson made) his subject was to treat of the Sabbath day, and of the evil of breaking that,[11] either with labour, sports, or otherwise: (now I was, notwithstanding my religion, one that took much delight in all manner of vice, and especially that was the day that I did solace myself therewith). Wherefore I fell in my conscience under his sermon, thinking and believing that he made that sermon on purpose to show me my evil-doing; and at that time I felt what

guilt was, though never before, that I can remember; but then I was for the present greatly loaden therewith, and so went home when the sermon was ended, with a great burden on my spirit.

21. This, for that instant, did benumb the sinews of my best delights, and did embitter my former pleasures to me: but behold, it lasted not; for before I had well dined, the trouble began to go off my mind, and my heart returned to its old course: but oh how glad was I, that this trouble was gone from me, and that the fire was put out, that I might sin again without control! Wherefore when I had satisfied nature with my food, I shook the sermon out of my mind, and to my old custom of sports and gaming I returned with great delight.

22. But the same day, as I was in the midst of a game of cat,[12] and having struck it one blow from the hole;[13] just as I was about to strike it the second time, 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;[14] wherefore leaving my cat upon the ground, I looked up to 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.

23. I had no sooner thus conceived in my mind, but suddenly this conclusion was fastened on my spirit, (for the former hint did set my sins again before my face) *That I had been a great and grievous sinner, and that it was now too late for me to look after heaven, for Christ would not forgive me, nor pardon my transgressions.* Then I fell to musing upon this also; and while I was thinking on it, and fearing lest it should be so, I felt my heart sink in despair, concluding it was too late; and therefore I resolved in my mind, I would go on in sin: for thought I, if the case be thus, my state is surely miserable; miserable, if I leave my sins; and but miserable, if I follow them: I can but be damned; and if it must be so, I had as good be damned for many sins, as to be damned for few.

24. Thus I stood in the midst of my play, before all that then were present; but yet I told them nothing: but, I say, I having made this conclusion, I returned desperately to my sport again; and I well remember, that presently this kind of despair did so possess my soul, that I was persuaded I could never attain to other comfort than what I should get in sin; for heaven was gone already, so that on that I must not think: wherefore I found within me a great desire to take my fill of sin, still studying what sin was to be committed, that I might taste the sweetness of it; and I made as much haste as I could to fill my belly with its delicates,[15] lest I

should die before I had my desire; for that I feared greatly. In these things, I protest before God, I lie not, neither do I feign this form of speech: these were really, strongly, and with all my heart, my desires; *the good Lord, whose mercy is unsearchable, forgive me my transgressions.*

25. (And I am very confident that this temptation of the devil is more usual amongst poor creatures than many are aware of, even to overrun their spirits with a scurvy and seared frame of heart, and benumbing of conscience: which frame, he stilly and slyly supplieth with such despair, that though not much guilt attendeth the soul, yet they continually have a secret conclusion within them, that there is no hopes for them; *for they have loved sins, therefore after them they will go* (Jer. 2:25; 18:12).)

26. Now therefore I went on in sin with great greediness of mind, still grudging that I could not be so satisfied with it as I would: this did continue with me about a month, or more. But one day as I was standing at a neighbour's shop-window, and there cursing and swearing, and playing the madman after my wonted manner, there sat within the woman of the house, and heard me; who though she also was a very loose and ungodly wretch, yet protested that I swore and cursed at that most fearful rate, that she was made to tremble to hear me: and told me further, *That I was the ungodliest fellow for swearing that ever she heard in all her life; and that I, by thus doing, was able to spoil all the youth in a whole town, if they came but in my company.*

27. At this reproof I was silenced, and put to secret shame; and that too, as I thought, before the God of heaven: wherefore, while I there stood, and hanging down my head, I wished with all my heart that I might be a little child again, that my father might learn me to speak without this wicked way of swearing: for thought I, I am so accustomed to it, that it is but in vain for me to think of a reformation, for I thought it could never be.

28. But how it came to pass I know not, I did from this time forward so leave my swearing, that it was a great wonder to myself to observe it; and whereas before I knew not how to speak unless I put an oath before, and another behind, to make my words have authority, now, I could, without it, speak better, and with more pleasantness than ever I could before; all this while I knew not Jesus Christ, neither did I leave my sports and play.

29. But quickly after this, I fell in company with one poor man, that made profession of religion; who, as I then thought, did talk pleasantly of the Scriptures, and of the matters of religion: wherefore falling into some love and liking to what he said, I betook me to my Bible, and began to take great pleasure in reading, but especially with the historical part

thereof: for, as for Paul's epistles, and scriptures of that nature, I could not away with them, being as yet but ignorant either of the corruptions of my nature, or of the want and worth of Jesus Christ to save me.

30. Wherefore I fell to some outward reformation, both in my words and life, and did set the commandments before me for my way to heaven: which commandments I also did strive to keep; and, as I thought, did keep them pretty well sometimes, and then I should have comfort; yet now and then should break one, and so afflict my conscience; but then I should repent, and say I was sorry for it, and promise God to do better next time, and there get help again, for then I thought I pleased God as well as any man in England.

31. Thus I continued about a year, all which time our neighbours did take me to be a very godly man, a new and religious man, and did marvel much to see such a great and famous alteration in my life and manners; and indeed so it was, though yet I knew not Christ, nor grace, nor faith, nor hope; and truly as I have well seen since, had I then died, my state had been most fearful: well, this I say, continued about a twelvemonth, or more.

32. But, I say, my neighbours were amazed at this my great conversion, from prodigious profaneness, to something like a moral life; and, truly, so they well might; for this my conversion was as great, as for Tom of Bethlem[16] to become a sober man. Now, therefore, they began to praise, to commend, and to speak well of me, both to my face, and behind my back. Now, I was, as they said, become godly; now, I was become a right honest man. But O! When I understood that these were their words and opinions of me, it pleased me mighty well: for though, as yet, I was nothing but a poor painted hypocrite, yet I loved to be talked of as one that was truly godly. I was proud of my godliness; and, I did all I did, either to be seen of, or to be well spoken of, by men: well, this I say, continued for about a twelvemonth or more.

33. Now you must know, that before that I had taken much delight in ringing,[17] but my conscience beginning to be tender, I thought that such a practice was but vain, and therefore forced myself to leave it, yet my mind hankered, wherefore I should go to the steeple house, and look on: though I durst not ring. But I thought this did not become religion neither, yet I forced myself and would look on still; but quickly after, I began to think, how, if one of the bells should fall? Then I chose to stand under a main beam that lay overthwart the steeple from side to side, thinking there I might stand sure: but then I should think again, should the bell fall with a swing, it might first hit the wall, and then rebounding upon me, might kill me for all this beam; this made me stand in the steeple door, and now

thought I, I am safe enough, for if a bell should then fall, I can slip out behind these thick walls, and so be preserved notwithstanding.

34. So after this, I would yet go to see them ring, but would not go further than the steeple door; but then it came into my head, how if the steeple itself should fall? And this thought, (it may fall for ought I know) would when I stood and looked on, continually so shake my mind, that I durst not stand at the steeple door any longer, but was forced to fly, for fear it should fall upon my head.

35. Another thing was my dancing; I was a full year before I could quite leave it; but all this while, when I thought I kept this or that commandment, or did by word or deed anything that I thought were good, I had great peace in my conscience, and should think with myself, God cannot choose but be now pleased with me, yea, to relate it in mine own way, I thought no man in England could please God better than I.

36. But poor wretch as I was, I was all this while ignorant of Jesus Christ, and going about to establish my own righteousness, had perished therein had not God in mercy showed me more of my state by nature.

37. But upon a day, the good providence of God did cast me to Bedford, to work on my calling;[18] and in one of the streets of that town, I came where there was three or four poor women sitting at a door in the sun, and talking about the things of God; and being now willing to hear them discourse, I drew near to hear what they said; for I was now a brisk talker[19] also myself in the matters of religion: but now I may say, *I heard, but I understood not*;[20] for they were far above out of my reach, for their talk was about a new birth, the work of God on their hearts, also how they were convinced of their miserable state by nature: they talked how God had visited their souls with his love in the Lord Jesus, and with what words and promises they had been refreshed, comforted, and supported against the temptations of the devil; moreover, they reasoned of the suggestions and temptations of Satan in particular, and told to each other by which they had been afflicted, and how they were borne up under his assaults: they also discoursed of their own wretchedness of heart, of their unbelief, and did contemn, slight, and abhor their own righteousness, as filthy, and insufficient to do them any good.

38. And methought they spake as if joy did make them speak: they spake with such pleasantness of Scripture language, and with such appearance of grace in all they said, that they were to me as if they had found a new world, as if they were people that dwelt alone, and were not to be reckoned amongst their neighbours (Num. 23:9).

39. At this I felt my own heart began to shake, as mistrusting my condition to be naught; for I saw that in all my thoughts about religion