John Bunyan was born on 28th November 1628 into a very simple family in Elstow, on the outskirts of Bedford. He wrote of his humble beginnings, “My descent was of a low and inconsiderable generation, my father’s house being of that rank that is meanest and most despised of all the families of the land”. His father was a tinker, - he travelled the countryside mending old pots and pans. It was a lifestyle that many associated with the gypsies! John’s education, therefore, was very basic, - almost non-existent. As a youngster he followed his father in the ‘family business’ … mending old pots and pans.

In June 1644, - at the age of sixteen, - his mother died, and in July his sister also. His father married for the third time, and John enlisted in Cromwell’s New Model Army, also known as the Parliamentary Army. This was the period when the Puritans resisted the established Church of England who sought to impose their influence and power. They would not conform to the authority of the corrupted Anglicanism. As a consequence, the English Civil War (1642-51) ensued, which the Parliamentarians (Separatists, Non-conformists) won against King Charles I and King Charles II. After he finished his military service in 1647 Bunyan returned to his former trade, a tinker. During these formative years it was said of him that he was the “ungodliest fellow for swearing they ever heard”. He, himself, boasted, “It was my delight to be taken captive by the devil at his will: being filled with all unrighteousness; that from a child I had but few equals, both for cursing, swearing, lying, and blaspheming the holy name of God”.

When he was about twenty-one he married a young woman and set up home in Elstow. They had four children, - Mary (who was blind), Elizabeth, John and Thomas. He later wrote they were “as poor as poor might be”. However, - in the providence of God, - his father-in-law died and left his daughter (John’s wife) two Puritan books … Arthur Dent’s Plain Man’s Pathway to Heaven and Lewis Bayly’s Practice of Piety, and the content of these two books had a strong influence upon Bunyan.

There followed a battle within his soul, and he became increasingly despondent and fell into mental turmoil. He began a four-year-long spiritual journey that eventually led him to the Lord. He was baptised by immersion and began to follow the teachings of the Puritan Pastor John Gifford. In 1655, Gifford died and John Bunyan began to preach and entered the pastorate in 1657. Even in those days, he was known as a ‘Reformed Baptist’.
However, he wasn’t received well by all! He became a target for slander and libel. He was described as “a witch, a Jesuit, a highwayman”. He was said to have had mistresses and multiple wives. In 1658 he was arrested for preaching without a license. The same year his wife died, and left him with four children, - one of which was blind. However, such was his burden to make Christ known, he continued preaching. Just before he was sent to prison in November 1660, he remarried … and his new wife looked after the children when he was in the county jail in Silver Street, Bedford.

In the same year Charles II was restored to the throne, - the same Charles II who hounded the Covenanters! He sought to once-and-for-all replace Cromwellianism and the Puritans with Anglicanism. … Meeting houses were closed and everyone was required to attend their local parish church. It became punishable by law to “conduct divine service except in accordance with the ritual of the church, or for one not in Episcopal orders to address a congregation”. He no longer had the freedom to preach and he was arrested on 12 November 1660, whilst preaching privately in a little hamlet ten miles south of Bedford.

He was brought before the magistrate and announced that he refused to stop preaching. The judge then sent him to Bedford County Gaol, to consider his situation. After a month, Bunyan reports (in his own account of his imprisonment) that the court clerk visited him, and tried to get him to change his mind. But Bunyan was not for moving. He told the court official in no uncertain terms that God’s law obliged him to preach at any and every opportunity, and he refused to comply.

When he appeared before another judge in January 1661 Bunyan told him, “If you release me today, I will preach tomorrow”. So, he was sent back to prison for another three months for the crimes of “pertinaciously abstaining” from attending mandatory Anglican church services and preaching at “unlawful meetings”.

In early 1664 the Conventicles Act forbade the holding of religious meetings of five or more people outside of the auspices of the Church of England. … Bunyan was again arrested and imprisoned for a further six years … but even in the jail he preached to his fellow-prisoners, - a congregation of about sixty. Altogether he spent about twelve years of his life in prison.
Released in January 1672 he again became pastor of St. John’s and formed an independent church that met in a local barn. In fact, the Lord used him to establish a number of village chapels, and he even served as chaplain to the Lord Mayor of London.

He was no scholar, except of the Scriptures. Yet, he wrote about sixty books and tracts … Of his most well-known publications were his autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666), … also *The Heavenly Footman* (1698) and *The Holy War* (1682), but his most famous work was undoubtedly *Pilgrim’s Progress*, - the first part published in 1678 and the second part in 1684. Much of it derived from his personal experiences, and written in the Bedford jail.

In 1688, - at the age of sixty, - he was called upon to resolve a disagreement between a father and son. As he was travelling from Reading to London he caught a common cold that developed into a fever … and he died on 31st August. He is buried in the cemetery at Bunhill Fields in Holborn, London, across the road from Wesley’s Chapel, along with other great servants of God such as Joseph Hart (the hymn writer and preacher), John Owen, Isaac Watts, and Susanna Wesley.

John Owen wrote about him that he was a powerful preacher and the best known of all the Puritan writers, and that he would gladly exchange all his learning for Bunyan’s power of touching men’s hearts. Bunyan unashamedly preached that salvation was entirely of God’s grace alone. He was unashamedly known as a Calvinist, and he preached faithfully and conscientiously the doctrines of Sovereign grace. This clearly defined his preaching. It is worth reiterating that he was a Baptist. … We need to be honest though, for it is a fact that when he was in prison he allowed his wife to have their children baptised. He was a Baptist though … and he preached faithfully the historic Baptist truths … not deviating from the great doctrines of election and Christ’s redemptive work on the cross to achieve His eternal purposes.

Why should we read this book? We should read this book because it simply speaks of a journey so personal to the believer, and faithfully corroborated by Scripture. As you read it, you will see the Bible coming through very clearly. It describes the experience of a man who was confronted by his need, and how he battled through many dangers and snares until he arrived at the cross. Bunyan described it vividly, “I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up with the cross, his burden loosed from his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do, till it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more”.

Ahead of him lay Vanity Fair, Giant Despair and Doubting Castle, Deadman’s Lane and the Valley of the Shadow. He would meet Simple, Sleep and Presumption, Formalist and Hypocrisy. He would meet Talkative, Facing-both-ways, Two-Tongues, Turn-about, Mr. Valiant and many others … fellow-travellers from the City of Destruction. Many of them had come via the cross and claimed some measure of affinity with the Redeemed … but sadly, many of them were also were counterfeit pilgrims filled with dangerous and deadly presumption. … Just as Bunyan had them in the churches of his day, I believe we continue to meet many of these same people in our modern churches.

The book reminds us that each of us is on the same pilgrim journey travelled by Bunyan. In fact, I’m sure we shall often notice ourselves in the pages of this book. We’ll find him referring to Scripture on every page, and He will be appealing to its wonderful truth and guidance. As Christian persevered and was preserved, he had the blessed hope within his soul, Heb. 4:9 There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. 10 For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his. 11 Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief. Abraham sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God (Heb. 11:9,10).

As we make our way through this book, I trust the Lord will encourage us and speak very definitely through His Word to us. We are not substituting the Scriptures with the writings of a man, - not at all! – but I trust the Holy Spirit will enable us to see through the pictures and allegories of John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress. Yes, nothing less that the Bible is our priority to preach and to study … but I trust as Bunyan wrote in the introduction to Pilgrim’s Progress …

This Book will make a Traveller of thee,
If by its Counsel thou wilt ruled be;
It will direct thee to the Holy Land,
If thou wilt its directions understand:
Yea, it will make the slothful active be;
The blind also delightful things to see.

May we know the Lord’s blessing as we set out on our study together!