



Raining Hard, Too Hard

‘No!’ John couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He sat on his bed sobbing with his head buried in his hands. ‘Why did she have to die?’ He was only fifteen years old and his mother had become ill just a few days earlier.

Tears began streaming down his father’s quivering cheeks. ‘I don’t know. I’m sorry, John. I am sure that God loves—’

‘God does not love! He would not let her life end like this.’

‘You mustn’t say that,’ Margaret gently responded. ‘She is now with Him in heaven.’ John’s sister always had a way of softening his anger.

Still crying, John jumped up and ran outside. It was beginning to rain, but he didn’t care.

He knew the place where his mother would be buried—the old Elstow churchyard. He had passed by it many times on the way to school or while playing with his friends. But this time would be different. No laughing or romping, just tears and a quiet respect of death.

Only a few friends attended the funeral. It was a cool morning and the fog rested heavy on the churchyard. Christopher Hall, the vicar of Elstow



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Church, gave a warm eulogy and told those present not to mourn like those without hope, but to trust in the resurrection from the dead because Christ Jesus died and was raised to new life.

But John's little world was too shaken to accept it. 'Why would God allow Jesus to suffer and die? Does God not love His own Son?'

Sparks flew as Thomas Bunyan hammered the red-hot plough spike on the anvil. 'Almost finished,' he said with a feeling of accomplishment. He wiped the sweat from his brow and looked over at John who was quietly stacking a pile of freshly-chopped wood near the furnace. 'When you are finished with that, you can start on Mr Roberts' pot.'

John didn't say anything. It had only been a week since his mother's death and he was not in the mood to talk.

'Did you hear me, son?'

'Yes sir,' John replied, still concentrating on the wood pile.

The hot June afternoon sun beamed through the door of the shop, which made standing near the even hotter furnace almost unbearable. John and his father were tinkers, which meant that they worked with metal—repairing tools, crafting pots and welding various parts together.

Even when John was seven years old, he would pick up his father's hammer and pound pieces of

metal while his father watched and instructed. There was something about stoking fire, hammering metal and getting dirty that made John feel like a man.

As Thomas cooled the plough spike in a trough of water, John reached down and picked up a large pot that had a dent in the side. Mr Roberts had dropped it off earlier and would be back soon to pick it up. 'This should be fairly easy,' he thought to himself. He grabbed the pot with a large scissor-like clamp and thrust it into the glowing furnace. He carefully set the red-hot pot on the horn of the anvil and reared back with his hammer.

'Aim well,' his father warned, stepping back a few feet.

John brought the hammer crashing down, shooting a flare of sparks all over the work area and all over John. 'Woa,' John yelled, jumping back.

His father laughed. 'Well done. Now strike it again.'

Tinkers were not paid well. The Bunyan cottage had only two rooms, an attic and an attached work area off to the side. Neighbours frequently visited the shop to chat and to ask John's father to repair their broken tools.

'One day, you will have your own family to support,' his father said, taking John by the shoulder. 'You are doing well, but keep working. You still have much to learn.'

John glanced down. He felt like he was trapped. 'Why can't I do something different?' he wondered to



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himself. But he knew his father was right. If he was to support a family, he must carry on the family trade.

As daylight faded over the hills, the dark night's air sent a chill through the Bunyan household. John, Margaret, his younger brother William, and father gathered around the dinner table in silence. The absence of mother was difficult to bear and the reality of death was beginning to sink in.

Dinner time was especially difficult. Mother used to cheerfully hum while she cooked, sometimes breaking out into song. But now, the kitchen was still and quiet. Somehow, the joy and the warmth were gone. Although friends had provided the food, it wasn't mother's.



Father had already started eating when he noticed the three children sitting motionless staring at their food.



'Are you not eating tonight?' he asked with frustration, glancing around the table.

No one spoke.

'You should be grateful for the food on your plate. John, why don't you—'

'I'm not hungry!' With that John jumped up from the table and ran outside.

His bare feet felt the ground still warm from the hot summer sun. Stopping, he looked up into the night sky, trying to hold back his tears. 'God, if you're listening, please bring her back.' As he stood there, he was mysteriously comforted. Millions of

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glittering stars filled the sky and the cool evening breeze gave him a sense of peace. But it didn't stop the tears.

He heard some footsteps on the grass behind him. 'John?' a soft voice gently called.

'Oh, hello Margaret,' he said taking a deep breath. John loved his sister. They had grown up playing together. When they were younger, they would build dams in the creek and catch crayfish. But now, she was closer than a playmate.

'Why don't you come back in and eat?'

'I can't. It's not like it used to be.'

'I know, but it's hard on father and he needs us.' They stood motionless—silently looking up at the twinkling bright stars. Orion and the Pleiades were especially clear. It was quiet, too quiet.

'Margaret,' John finally began, still gazing into the night sky. 'Do you think that God really loves us?'

'Of course,' Margaret answered rather puzzled by the question. 'Don't you?'

'I think so. Sometimes, though, I feel like...'

'Like what?'

'Like everything that we've been taught in the Bible is nothing but a way to keep us out of trouble.'

'Well, it sure didn't keep you out of trouble growing up!' They both laughed.

All of the sudden, Margaret's laugh turned into a wheezing cough.

'Are you all right?' John asked.



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‘I’m fine. It is only a little cough coming on. John, now is not the time to be thinking about such things. Mother has just died and I heard that it is not good to doubt in times like these. Besides, she used to always tell us that God has big plans for our lives, remember?’

It was strange how much Margaret was like their mother—gentle, compassionate, full of wisdom. John was glad she was there.

‘Perhaps you are right.’

Just then, they heard a call from the house. ‘John. Margaret. It’s time to get ready for bed.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ she said looking at John. She smiled. ‘Race you back!’



A couple of weeks later, John woke up early one morning. He could see a faint golden sunlight coming through the window and feel a chill in the air. Even in the summer mornings were cool.



He looked over at Margaret sleeping. With so few rooms all the children had to bunk up together in the one bedroom. John was used to hearing strange noises during the night but this morning something wasn’t right. Looking closer, he could see that Margaret’s face was glistening with sweat.

‘Margaret?’ John whispered. He didn’t want to wake up William. ‘Margaret,’ he whispered again a little louder. She did not answer. Springing out of the bed, he ran over to her side. Her forehead burned with fever and he could hear her moaning.

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‘What’s wrong?’ he said frightened. ‘Are you all right?’

She faintly mumbled a few words, but he couldn’t understand her.

With mounting fear, John yelled for his father, but Mr Bunyan was already racing to the bed with a damp rag and a bowl of water. He had heard her moans just before John awoke. John couldn’t help but think that if mother was here she would know what to do.

John stood up, his chin quivering. Margaret looked so pale and helpless.

Her ‘little’ cough had grown worse during the two weeks following their conversation under the stars. Before the day was over, Margaret would join her mother in the Elstow Churchyard. The year was 1644. She was fourteen years old.

The village of Elstow was located about two miles south of the town of Bedford, which was always bustling with traders and merchants. The Bunyan cottage stood only a few yards from the Elstow parish boundary and was almost as close to Bedford as to Elstow church. John would roll a wooden cart loaded with his father’s pots, pans and other metal wares through the streets looking for prospective customers.

One afternoon, as he travelled north from Elstow, he stopped on the bridge overlooking the Great Ouse River. The river began in Northamptonshire and flowed 149 miles to the town of King’s Lynn, running



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straight through the middle of Bedford. As he looked down the row of large oak trees lining its banks he felt a warm breeze blowing across the water. John closed his eyes and recalled the summer days when he and his friends would play in the river.

‘Get moving!’ barked a gruff baritone voice.

Startled, John whirled around. ‘I...I...I’m sorry, sir,’ he stammered.



A massive man with a bushy brown beard and dirty hands trudged by, carrying a large bundle of hay strapped over his shoulder. His type was a common sight during the summer months, which were a time of haymaking and sheep-shearing. Tall grass was cut and spread on the ground to dry. It was then gathered and piled into haystacks to be sold in the market as food for the livestock. The summer market was very different from the spring market when the streets smelled of horse manure used for fertilizer. John liked summer much better because he could take a quick swim off the river’s bank when nobody was looking.

On the north side of the bridge stood St Paul’s—a large stone church with a central tower and tall pointy spire. John had always marvelled at the size of the building. ‘I wonder how long it took to build?’ he thought to himself. On Sundays, he could hear its eight large bells ringing all the way from Elstow. He was always intrigued with the ringing bells and pictured himself secretly climbing up the tower at night and ringing the bells himself. He chuckled, imagining the

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whipping that mother would have given him, had he actually done such a thing.

The church scared John—not so much the building, but what was preached. The pastor of the church in Elstow would describe the great Day of Judgment when the Book of Life would be opened and all who belonged to Christ Jesus—all whose names were written in the Book—would be eternally saved from the fires of hell.

‘I’m never going to be good enough to be saved,’ John thought frowning. He stood gazing up at the church spire for a while.

‘What’s this?’ an older man with greasy grey hair suddenly asked, looking puzzled at a long curved sharp metal object that was hanging from John’s cart.

‘It’s a scythe,’ John answered. He could tell that the man was not well-educated. ‘You attach it to a long wooden pole to cut tall grass or brush.’

The man sniffed. ‘Looks more like some sort of weapon if you ask me.’

‘Well, I’m not asking you, so put it down!’

Astonished at John’s impertinence, the old man threw down the piece of metal. ‘Who do you think you are to speak to me like that?’ he demanded.

‘John Bunyan, sir,’ he replied with a confident smile. For a reason he didn’t understand, John actually enjoyed making strangers mad. He knew it was wrong, but he didn’t care.

‘Well, I’ve never—’



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‘Good day,’ John interrupted, picking up the end of the cart and continuing to roll it along St Paul’s square. As John pushed the cart, people could hear its rickety frame and banging pots from some distance—he didn’t have to do much advertising.

He passed by the Bedford schoolhouse which stood on the southwest corner of St Paul’s square. He would occasionally see boys his age running out and wrestling in the street. ‘I wish I still went to school,’ he thought to himself. He had gone to school briefly when he was younger, but his father couldn’t afford to send him beyond grammar school. In spite of this, he learned to read and write—skills he would enjoy and use the rest of his life.



Clouds were beginning to ominously roll over the schoolhouse from the west. If he quickened his pace, he could reach home before the approaching storm. Even in the summer, getting wet could result in fatal illness. He swung the cart around and hurried back toward Elstow.



It felt strange when, a few weeks later, John’s father brought home a woman to marry—‘Ann,’ they called her. She was a warm motherly figure, but certainly not his mother and never would be.

John sat curled up on his bed next to the front window of their home watching the night rain settle into puddles on the street outside. Candles were flickering from the house across the street. It looked as though

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some sort of celebration was going on inside—people were laughing and singing. He stared at the puddles again. There was no celebration in his home.

Lightning raced across the sky. ‘Boom!’ Thunder shook the timbers that supported the walls of the little cottage.

‘How could father get over my mother so quickly?’ he wondered, letting a slow tear splash on his knee. He felt as though his new step-mother was trying to erase the warm memories of his real mother. He felt as though his father didn’t care about him. ‘He could have at least talked to me about getting married before he actually did,’ he thought still staring at the growing puddles.

He remembered Margaret too—his childhood playmate. ‘What’s happening to my family?’ he muttered under his breath.

The rain was coming down hard, too hard. It was pounding John’s little world.

‘No one is going out tonight,’ came a voice from behind him.

Startled, John jerked his head around. His father was holding a five-pronged candlestick. The little flames danced from the draft blowing through the crack around the front door.

John didn’t say anything. He wiped his cheeks with his shirt sleeve and gazed back out the window.

‘Get some sleep,’ his father said, walking away.

‘Will I ever see mother again?’ John asked himself.



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His eyes scanned the dark night sky as if he were trying to find her. He wondered if she was in heaven. Neither of his parents had discussed the Christian faith very much with him. Like most families in Elstow, they attended church, but their daily lives usually did not reflect a deep Christian conviction.

‘Will I go to heaven?’ he wondered, looking again up to the sky.

Suddenly, his eyes felt heavy. It was strange how crying always seemed to make him sleepy. He slowly meandered over to his bed and crawled under the patch-work quilt made by his grandmother years ago. ‘Boom!’ Thunder ripped through John’s dreams like death through his family—



‘Get away!’ John screamed. The fiery red eyes followed him like a hawk. ‘Please, don’t take me to hell!’ As the demon chased him out into the night, he could hear the hoarse breath and summon over his shoulder—‘John, you’re coming with me!’

‘No!’ John screamed. He could feel the demonic presence closing in on him.

The demon didn’t let up. ‘You can’t run. Don’t you understand? This is where you will spend eternity!’

His lungs burning, John stumbled to a stop and slumped over. ‘Get away,’ he cried. ‘Get away... Get away... Get away...’

His own voice startled him awake. Soaked in sweat and gasping for breath, he sat up. ‘Just a dream,’ he whispered to himself as his panic subsided. Thoughts

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of hell-fire would often torment his soul—the burning and the chains.

John feared the great ‘Day of Judgment’ about which his preacher had warned the congregation. He would have frightening dreams and dreadful visions of hell and the day when Jesus would separate His people from the rest. He felt that he was certainly part of the ‘rest.’

The next morning, John walked out into the morning fog, making footprints on the dew-covered ground. Two streams flowed near the Bunyan cottage, which were now overflowing from the night’s violent storm.

He strolled down to one of the streams at the bottom of a gently-sloping hill opposite the street and knelt beside the water. He saw his reflection staring back at him. ‘Not a beautiful sight,’ he thought. He plunged his hands into the water and splashed his face. The coolness on his skin refreshed his spirit, reminding him of when he and Margaret would run to this stream and splash each other until one fell in. ‘It was not that long ago,’ he remembered. Taking a deep breath, he stood up, prepared to face another long day.

With troubled souls and tragedy at home, the summer of 1644 was finally coming to an end. The fields were abundant with vegetables and barley. John was beginning to embrace his new step-mother as part of the family. He still missed his mother and Margaret,



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but found that time is a great healer of grief and pain. All seemed quiet and peaceful. Nevertheless, something lurked beneath the calm. John could hear faint explosions in the distance—cannons and muskets. Parliament was fighting King Charles I and war would soon find its way to his doorstep.

