

Charles Spurgeon

Legacies of Light, Part 11

Isaiah 45:22

Born into a family legacy of pastors, Charles Spurgeon entered the world on June 19, 1834. He would become the most profoundly influential, internationally known pastor for the next nearly 200 years.

Because of economic necessity, Charles was sent for a time to live with his grandparents when he was 2 years of age. When he returned back to his parent's home at the age of 6 to begin formal schooling he was already able to read, having been taught to read the Bible by his godly grandparents.

When Spurgeon returned home, his father, also a pastor continued to exert a godly influence over him. But he speaks more of his mother's influence. Evidently she would gather the children on Sunday evening around the table for scripture reading and prayer. Spurgeon said she would pray like this: "Now Lord, if my children go on in their sins, it will not be from ignorance that they perish. My soul will bear witness against them at the day of judgment if they lay not hold of Christ."

Even though Spurgeon had a godly heritage, he resisted the work of God's Spirit. He wrote, "I must confess that I never would have been saved if I could have helped it. As long as I could, I rebelled and revolted and struggled against God. When He

would have me to pray, I would not pray; and when I heard, and the tear rolled down my cheek, I wiped it away and defied Him to melt my soul. Oh, but long before I began with Christ, He began with me."¹

Spurgeon once said that by the age of 16, the Holy Spirit had been plowing his soul with 10 horses in his team – the ten commandments – and cross plowing it with the gospel.

One Sunday morning the snow was falling so hard that Charles couldn't get to his own church so he wandered into a Primitive Methodist chapel. When he arrived a bit late, he discovered that the pastor wasn't even there and they had a guest speaker – must've been their summer series – only in the winter.

Actually, no one knew where the pastor was and so after some awkward delays, another man stood to preach. He was uneducated and to this day, unnamed.

Spurgeon later recounted the event in detail and I quote, "This man could barely read, yet he preached on the text, "***Look unto Me, and be ye saved.***" He stuck to his text, for he had little else to say. "My dear friends," he said, "this is a very simple text indeed. It says, 'Look.'" Now lookin' don't take a deal of pain. It ain't liftin' your foot or your finger;

it is just, 'Look.' Well, a man needn't go to college to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look. Any man needn't be worth a thousand a year to be able to look. Anyone can look; even a child can look. But then the text says, '**Look unto Me.**' Many of you are lookin' to yourselves, but it's no use lookin' there. You'll never find any comfort in yourselves . . . look to Christ. The text says, '**Look unto Me.**'"

One of Spurgeon's biographers said that after about 10 minutes of such preaching this layman had quite exhausted what he had to say.

But then he noticed young Spurgeon sitting in the back under the balcony; not recognizing him, but noticing his downcast expression, he focused on Spurgeon and cried out, "Young man, you look miserable. And you always will be miserable – miserable in life, and miserable in death – if you don't obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved. Young man, look to Jesus Christ! Look! Look! Look!"

And with that, the sermon was over. But God's invitation from His Word delivered in that simple message penetrated Spurgeon's heart and that day, he looked to Christ alone and was indeed saved. His life was changed forever.ⁱⁱ

The passage by the way is from *Isaiah chapter 45. It's a rich text where God is speaking through His prophet. In verse 22, God invites Israel and anyone else who will listen – verse 20. Gather yourselves and come; draw near together, you fugitives of the nations; they have no knowledge, who carry about their wooden idol and pray to a god who cannot save. 21. Declare and set forth your case; indeed, let them consult together. Who has announced this from of old? Who has long since declared it? Is it not I, the Lord? And there is no other God besides Me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none except Me. (here's the text – in the King James version from which he was preaching) Look unto Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God and there is none other.*

That verse would not only be used by God to call Spurgeon to faith – it would become the life-long passion of Charles Haddon Spurgeon to point everyone in his world to his God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Within a year, Charles was invited to preach at the age of 17 to a handful of villagers who met in a makeshift barn. He agreed. And within 2 years that group of villagers had grown to 400 people.

Without any formal education, although Spurgeon clearly had a photographic mind and was a voracious reader – devouring a half-dozen books a week and a library that included more than 12,000 volumes – he loved to preach.

At the age of 19 he was invited to preach in London at the well-known, but dying New Park Street Chapel. It had a auditorium that sat more than 1,200 people and a long history of pastors who were brilliant and biblical.

The church had been enveloped by the developing city of London and had become –as we would call it – an inner city church; but it had no inner city outreach and no pastor/teacher delivering the truth of God's word.

Spurgeon actually thought their invitation was a mistake and he even attempted to decline. Why would an uneducated country boy be wanted in the city?

But this once vibrant church had heard about this country, uneducated boy who spoke with passion and color and truth and they kept inviting him.

Eventually Charles accepted the invitation and arrived to preach. When he spoke that Sunday, less than 200 people were there.

History records that his clothing didn't fit him, his hair didn't lie down obediently and he simply didn't fit the London city scene. His father had already told him he was making a mistake to go – he was probably right.

A teenage girl in the congregation that Sunday happened to recall how Spurgeon's appearance was terribly odd and distracting – if not comical. She wrote in her diary – and I quote – about his long,

badly trimmed hair, oversized black satin coat and his [mismatched] blue handkerchief with white spots, which he graphically described [as an illustration] in his sermon, calling all the more attention to it. He awakened in me feelings of amusement.”ⁱⁱⁱ

He awakened more than that, because within two years she would marry him. Her name was Susannah and she probably picked out his handkerchiefs from then on!

By the time he had turned 20, Charles accepted the call to become their pastor, the church began to explode with growth. Within one year the congregation had outgrown their auditorium and the people decided to build a new one.

While that church building was under construction, the congregation rented a Hall to meet in – which was considered scandalous because churches weren’t supposed to meet in public buildings – it was unheard of. But Spurgeon didn’t care – he’d spent 3 years preaching in a barn!

A year later they moved into their new church building which was immediately filled to capacity and once again, the congregation rented facilities while another church building was constructed.

By now, the name of Charles Spurgeon was a household name. His dramatic style of preaching – with hand gestures, which were quite unusual in this day – and tonal inflections, also unusual – word pictures and stories and humor, created an incredible buzz all around London.

Especially his humor . . . humor in the pulpit was uncalled for and extremely out of line in these days.

In fact, on one occasion a wealthy woman came up to him and informed him that he was using far too much humor in the pulpit – to which he responded, “Madam, you have no idea how much I’m holding back.”

Spurgeon would later write, “There is nothing spiritual about gloom and despair. Jesus did not say, “Blessed are the gloomy Christians; and it seems to me that some preachers appear to have their neckties twisted around their souls.”^{iv}

Pastors all around London divided over their opinion of young Spurgeon. Some called him a glory hound; others called him the Boy Actor.

No matter . . . just about everybody wanted to hear him preach.

His theology was entirely biblically driven. He had already upset his family legacy by becoming a Baptist, refusing to sprinkle infants and his father and grandfather had done for decades. He would later write, “Although I love and revere them (father and grandfather), there is no reason why I should imitate them.”^v

And he wasn’t about to mince words or back away from what we called earlier, difficult doctrines. He preached and held high the sovereignty of God, the election of the saints and a final judgment.

Once when he was asked, he said that he preferred to think of himself as a mere Christian. He went on, ‘I am never ashamed to avow myself a Calvinist; I do not hesitate to take the name of Baptist, but if I am asked what is my creed, I reply, “It is [simply] Jesus Christ.

On March 1861 the church moved into their newly-built Metropolitan Tabernacle in London. It seated 5,600 people, did not include a pipe organ or any other instrument, because as Charles believed, anything but the voice was a distraction.

Early on in their courtship, Susannah knew that Spurgeon belonged to God first and foremost.

In fact, their early pre-marital days found Spurgeon correcting sermon manuscripts while Susannah sat, she would later write, “Learning how to be quiet.”^{vi}

Once when they engaged, Spurgeon completely forgot she was with him and left her behind at a church function; she rushed home to her mother in tears.^{vii}

All in all, they had a wonderful marriage – though incredibly busy and constantly interrupted.

Early in their marriage, Susannah bore twin sons and they would grow up to love Christ and His church. Eventually, after Spurgeon’s death, his son Thomas took his place as the pastor of the church

and Charles, Jr. took charge of the orphanage their father had founded.

By the age of 33, Susannah suffered physical difficulties. From a variety of reports, it seems he had a rare cervical operation performed by James Simpson, the father of modern gynecology, but to no avail. She became a virtual invalid and for the next 27 years, he seldom heard her husband preach to the thousands of people who packed the sanctuary every week.

In fact, the church grew so much that Spurgeon on one occasion asked all the congregation not even to come to church the following Sunday to allow for newcomers who might not be Christians – so they could hear the gospel.

On another occasion, he simply asked the congregation to dismiss so that those outside could have their seats. They did, and the building filled up again immediately.

At the end of his ministry he would see 14,500 people baptized and his church had a standing, active membership of 5,300.^{viii}

In the midst of it all, Spurgeon suffered his own physical issues. He suffered from severe gout, swelling in his joints, rheumatism and inflammation of the kidneys that brought him intense pain. In fact, from the age of 35, until he died at the age of 57 he would spend one third of his time out of the pulpit recovering from his ailments.

Still he worked 18 hours a day, producing more than 140 books of his own.

When his missionary friend, David Livingstone asked him, “Charles, how do you manage to do two men’s work in a single day?” Spurgeon replied, “You have forgotten there are two of us.” He loved the verse from Paul to the Colossians, ***“I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.” (Colossians 1:29)***

Charles once wrote, “If by excessive labor, we die before reaching the average age of man, worn out in the Master’s service, then glory be to God, we shall have so much less of earth and so much more of heaven. It is our duty and our privilege to exhaust

our lives for Jesus. We are not to be living specimens of men in the fine preservation, but living sacrifices, whose lot is to be consumed.”

Not exactly the most popular way of thinking these days – certainly not in the ministry.

Early on in his ministry, Charles founded a school for pastors. He wanted men to get the training he’d never received.

And in this enterprise, his straightforward approach to ministry, along with his blunt humor, became legendary.

For example, on one occasion a search committee wrote to Spurgeon asking for a minister from among his student body – they presented the job description and the salary they would pay; Spurgeon wrote back to them that the salary was so small – and I quote from his letter, “the only individual I know who could live on such a salary as you are offering is the angel Gabriel. He wouldn’t need cash or clothing; he could just come down from heaven on Sunday and go back up that night; so I advise you to invite Gabriel to be your pastor.”^{ix}

On another occasion, a letter arrived from a pastoral search committee – they wrote to Spurgeon asking if Spurgeon would send them a student who could come and fill their auditorium. Spurgeon replied they didn’t have any students that large. But, that he would send a student who would capably fill the pulpit.

Spurgeon personally interviewed every prospective student – he was looking for what he called the clear evidence of the call of God on their lives. In fact, Spurgeon would turn down so many applicants that he earned the nickname, Parson Slayer.

He simply felt concern for protecting the church from unqualified, ungifted, and even ungodly men.

Like the time, a young man came to apply for entrance; Spurgeon writes, and I quote, “His face could have served as the title-page to a volume on pride and conceit. He sent word to me that he must see me at once – without any appointment. His audacity admitted him; and when he was before me,

he said, “Sir, I want to enter your College and wish to enter it at once.”

He informed me that as to his preaching, he could produce the highest testimonials, but hardly thought they would be needed, as a personal interview with me would convince me of his ability at once.

His surprise was great when I said, “Sir, I am obliged to tell you that I cannot accept your application.” “Why not?” “Well, I will tell you plainly; you are so dreadfully clever that I could not insult you by receiving you into our student body, where we have nothing but rather ordinary students – you would have to condescend too much in joining us.”

“Well then” he said, “you ought to at least allow me to show my preaching abilities – select any text you like, or suggest any subject you please, and here in this very room, I will preach upon it.” Spurgeon responded, “Oh, I cannot, for I feel myself unworthy of the privilege.”

You can imagine how Spurgeon was constantly being demanded upon – he would start more than 60 different ministries under his supervision.

Thankfully he had a photographic memory and remembered everything he’d read in books and commentaries and the scriptures he studied.

On Saturday night he would begin working on his Sunday morning sermon. Not a good idea unless you have a photographic memory and you’ve been reading voraciously throughout the week.

Spurgeon was actually a textual preacher – he would expound on one verse or two and wring everything possible from that text. The next Sunday he might be in a different book entirely.

Sometimes on Saturday night he just couldn’t seem to locate the text – and he’d call in desperation to Susannah, whom he affectionately called “Susie” or ‘Wifey.’

Wifey, he’d say, “Come help me.” And Susannah took great joy in bringing her Bible into his study and reading to him several passages or texts that had special meaning to her own heart and suddenly, Spurgeon would seize on one of her verses

and say, “That’s the one.” And within a few hours, he would have a sermon prepared.

The following Monday he would edit the sermon transcript and it would be sent to newspapers around the world, read by millions of people.

Let me add this – on one particular Saturday night, Spurgeon lay in bed, literally preaching in is sleep; clearly asleep yet talking plainly. Susannah got paper and pen and actually took notes; and when Spurgeon awakened, she handed him what he had unconsciously preached that night – he took one look at those notes, immediately discarded the sermon he had prepared and preached from those notes that Sunday morning.

Can you imagine? I’ve told my wife *not* to write down what I say in my sleep.

One particular Saturday night, Spurgeon had to deal with yet another interruption . . . this one from a proud religious leader who came calling. A distinguished religious leader from the community appeared at his door and told the housekeeper that he wanted some time with Mr. Spurgeon. She came and told him about the visitor – to which Spurgeon responded that he was busy studying for his sermon and couldn’t be interrupted.

The housekeeper went back and told the dignified visitor the answer – to which he became angry and offended.

He demanded that she return to Spurgeon’s study and announce that he must have misunderstood. Tell Mr. Spurgeon that the Master’s servant is here to see him. To which Spurgeon sent back his reply, “I am presently occupied with the Master and have no time for His servant.”

As you can well imagine, Spurgeon’s ministry was often clouded with controversy.

Most often it was related to doctrine. Once Spurgeon preached a message condemning infant sprinkling and it caused an incredible uproar throughout London and beyond.

Eventually, American newspaper editors actually began editing his sermons to take out all of his attacks against slavery.

Spurgeon simply wasn't interested in the majority opinion of the day.

But some of the controversies were of his own making.

In fact, two of the most famous pastors in the Victorian era in England were Charles Spurgeon and Joseph Parker. Spurgeon of course preached to some 10,000 in two Sunday services; Parker's congregation was second in size only to Spurgeon's.

Early in their ministries they fellowshiped often and even exchanged pulpits. But unfortunately, they had a disagreement.

Spurgeon accused Joseph Parker of being an unspiritual pastor because he often attended the theater where plays and operas were performed. Parker fired back, criticizing the fact that Spurgeon was a poor example because he smoked cigars, both in private and in public. Both considered one another to be misled and misleading in their example.

Their words became sharp. Their disagreement was such news that reports of it were carried in the London newspapers. Two great men of the faith, broke fellowship with one another and their friendship would never be the same.^x

On another occasion, an innocent conversation made it into the newspapers when his friend D. L. Moody, America's most famous pastor/evangelist, was visiting Spurgeon. Moody was actually preaching in Spurgeon's pulpit that weekend. They evidently sparred later and it was widely reported that Moody asked Spurgeon when was he going to give up those awful cigars? And Spurgeon pointed a finger into Moody's considerable midsection and said, "When you get rid of this."

I use these examples to remind us all that great men of faith can bicker and argue and even divide over issues far less significant than gospel issues worth defending.

If you read Spurgeon's works – and I recommend you at least read his devotional entitled, Morning and Evening, you will be caught up with the fact that

above everything, Spurgeon was a pastor. He loved people. He loved Christ. He loved Shepherding.

His writings have the ability – still nearly 200 years later – to bring wonderful encouragement to discouraged hearts.

For example, Spurgeon once wrote, "O dear friend, when thy grief presses thee to the dust, worship there. If that spot has come to be thy Gethsemane, then present there thy strong crying and tears unto thy God. Remember David's words, "Ye people, pour out your hearts – but do not stop there, finish the quotation – "Ye people, pour out your hearts before Him." Turn the vessel upside down; it is a good thing to empty it, for this grief may ferment into something more sour; turn the vessel upside down, and let every drop run out; let it run out before the Lord."^{xi}

Spurgeon also wrote of his own sufferings, and I quote, "The good that I have received from my sorrows, and pains, and griefs, is altogether incalculable . . . affliction is the best bit of furniture in my house. It is the best book in my library."

Spurgeon's final years were filled with controversy over what came to be called the Down Grade.

Spurgeon charged the pastors in the Baptist Union – a fellowship of pastors he belonged to – with neglecting the gospel and dumbing down doctrine; he attacked their growing accommodation of Charles Darwin's book which had been recently printed; he decried any compromise on God's literal, miraculous, 6 days of creation.

Hundreds of pastors were incensed with his accusations and he was eventually voted out of the Baptist Union.

A few years after being censured by his fellow pastors, he died.

History has vindicated his warnings.

Warnings that are still freshly needed today.

Throughout his ministry and life, Spurgeon never got very far from that verse which arrested his attention and brought salvation to his soul.

He had looked to Christ and acceptance by Christ had become his theme throughout his life.

Let me close with words from one of his own sermons;

*How marvelous that we, mortals, sinners, worms,
should be the objects of divine love.
That we are in the accepted by Christ.*

Some Christians feel accepted by their own experience – that is when their spirit is lively, and their hopes bright, they think God accepts them, for they feel so happy, so heavenly minded, so drawn above the earth. But when their souls collapse in the dust, they are the victims of the fear that they are no longer accepted.

Rejoice then, believer in this; you are accepted in the beloved.

Your sins trouble you; but God has cast your sins behind His back and you are accepted in the Righteous One. You have to fight with corruption, and to wrestle with temptation, but you are already accepted in Him who has overcome the powers of evil. The devil tempts you; be of good cheer, he cannot destroy you, for you are already accepted in Him.

You look within and you say, “There is nothing acceptable here in me!” But look at Christ – look at Christ and you will see that everything acceptable in Him.^{xii}

Look to Christ alone.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/24/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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i www.wholesomewords.com – Christian Biography Resources – Spurgeon, p. 1

ii Ibid, p. 2

iii C.H. Spurgeon, Autobiography: Volume 1 (Banner of Truth Reprint, 2005), p. 180

iv R. Kent Hughes, The Sermon on the Mount (Crossway Books, 2001), p. 26

v Susannah Spurgeon & Joseph Harrald, C.H. Spurgeon Autobiography, Volume 1 (Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), p. 145

vi Richard Ellsworth Day, The Shadow of the Broad Brim (Judson Press, 1934), p. 110

vii Susannah Spurgeon & Joseph Harrald, p. 289

viii Ibid, p. 3

ix Susannah Spurgeon & Joseph Harrald, C.H. Spurgeon Autobiography, Volume 2 (Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), p. 162

x Adapted from R. Kent Hughes, Romans (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 263

xi Charles Spurgeon, The Suffering of Man & The Sovereignty of God (Fox River Press, 2001), p. 18

xii Charles H. Spurgeon, Morning and Evening (Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), p. 534