

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 85

Charles Haddon Spurgeon The World's First Mega Church

We are going to spend a couple of classes on the Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon. After all, he was the preacher of the world's first "Mega-church." At the young age of 19, Spurgeon began preaching at the New Park Street Church in London with a membership of only 232 (actually a large church for "dissenters"¹ in England at the time). Spurgeon pastored that church for 38 years until his death. When Spurgeon died, the church membership was 5,311! So many wanted to go to the church to hear Spurgeon that Spurgeon asked church members to skip services a few times so that visitors and newcomers could find a seat. In 1879, one service was so crowded that Spurgeon had the members leave *before* church started because so many newcomers were outside wanting in for his sermon. Once the members left, those waiting were so many that the church filled to capacity immediately.²

What made for the numerical success of the New Park Street Church? Today, we live in the age of Mega-churches and many studies are done to understand why so many are attracted to these churches. Frequent media reports call mega-churches "religion-light," "Disney-Jesus," and "self-help saviors."³ Many of these mega churches reach their size by using a "non-church" message. Samuel Kobia, head of the World Council of Churches was quoted as saying that the mega-church movement was dangerously shallow, "It has no depth, in most cases, theologically speaking, and has no appeal for any commitment."⁴

With this in mind, I suggest we study Spurgeon carefully. The study will show that New Park Street grew for different reasons. This trail blazing church certainly had a preacher with flash and popular appeal, but his sermons were not driven by personality and presentation alone. In fact, the sermons were "taken down" and published, selling 25,000 copies each week, something that cannot be accounted

¹ Dissenters were those who did not belong to the Church of England. See lessons 66 & 67.

² Eric W. Hayden, who preached at Spurgeon's Church in the 20th century, details these and many other interesting facts. By the 20th century, the church was called the "Metropolitan Tabernacle." For more material, read any number of Hayden's books on Spurgeon including *Searchlight on Spurgeon* (Pilgrim 1973) or Hayden's article in *Christian History*, Issue 29 (Vol. X, No. 1).

³ Sydney Morning Herald, Feb. 23, 2006.

⁴ Sydney Morning Herald, Feb. 23, 2006.

for by personal presence and presentation. Spurgeon's sermons are all still available for sale in a 63-volume set.⁵

Our study will show that Spurgeon's success was due to the hand of God on his life and ministry, the use he made of incredible gifts God blessed upon him, his personal integrity in life, and the strong gospel message he preached openly and boldly without any hint of compromise. We will approach the study by looking at Spurgeon's life in a chronological fashion. Next week, we will then consider Spurgeon's approach to preaching and writing a sermon. Finally, we will consider an actual sermon, reading Spurgeon in his own words.

On July 19, 1834 in Kelvedon (Essex) England, Charles Haddon Spurgeon was born, one of 17 children, to John and Eliza Spurgeon. Spurgeon's father and grandfather were both Nonconformist ministers (but not Baptists!). When just one year old, Spurgeon was taken to Stambourne, a small farming town of about 500, to live with his grandparents,⁶ where his 18-year-old Aunt Anne took him under her wing and taught him to walk, talk, and read. Spurgeon stayed with his grandparents until he was about 7 when he moved back home.

This experience is especially interesting in light of one of Spurgeon's ministry priorities in later years. Spurgeon would start a number of orphanages seeking to take care of children regardless of class or religious affiliation. It is clear that Spurgeon grew up with an understanding of the importance of love to those children displaced by circumstances beyond their control.

Spurgeon was always a voracious reader, consuming an average of six books a week as an adult. Spurgeon's earliest memories were of the books given him as a child where he was weaned on *The Pilgrim's Progress* (see lesson 82) and Foxe's *Book of Martyr's* (see lesson 4).⁷ Although Spurgeon was clearly brilliant with a near photographic memory for matters read, his formal education was somewhat average at best. He attended a local school for several years upon his return to living with his parents. Spurgeon also spent some time as a teaching assistant at a

⁵ All of Spurgeon's works are available from Pilgrim Publications, P.O. Box 66, Pasadena, Texas 77501.

⁶ Understandable when you think of how many children his parents were having! Eric Hayden writes it was "Owing to hardship" that Spurgeon went to live with his grandparents when just 2 ½ years old. Hayden, Eric *The Unforgettable Spurgeon* (Emerald House Group 1997) p. 11.

⁷ Admittedly, many parents would not necessarily consider Foxe's book childhood fare with its often blunt descriptions of horrible deaths to God's saints, but Spurgeon would later in life recommend it as "the perfect Christmas gift for a child." Kruppa, Patricia, *The Life and Times of Charles H. Spurgeon*, *Christian History* at 9.

local school. But Spurgeon never received formal training from any ministerial school or divinity program.

On January 6, 1850, Spurgeon left his home at the age of 15 on a snowy Sunday morning to walk to church services. At this time, by outward appearances, Spurgeon was a great kid on the right track! He had received baptism as an infant in his Christian home. He read his Bible and prayed daily, tried hard to live a Christian life, and he had already written a Christian book on issues of Catholicism. Still, in Spurgeon's words, he was "unhappy," "full of sorrow," and believing that he was going to Hell. "I was condemned, undone, destroyed – lost, helpless, hopeless—I thought Hell was before me... I prayed, but found no answer of peace."⁸

The Sunday walk to church was most difficult because of the snowstorm's intensity, causing Spurgeon to duck down a side street. On Artillery Street, Spurgeon found a primitive Methodist Church in service. Spurgeon went in to get out of the cold snow. The church's minister had not made it through the snow, so "At last, a very thin-looking man, a shoemaker, or tailor, or something of that sort, went up to preach."⁹ The preacher did not impress Spurgeon (Spurgeon said he was, in fact, quite "stupid"), but the sermon text did! The preacher used Isaiah 45:22, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is none else."

In his autobiography, Spurgeon wrote,

He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter. There was, I thought, a glimpse of hope for me in that text. The preacher began thus: -- "My dear friends, this is a very simple text indeed. It says, 'Look.' Now lookin' don't take a deal of pains. It ain't lifetin' 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. A man needn't be worth a thousand a year to be able to look. Anyone can look; even a child can look....

Then he looked at me ... Just fixing his eyes on me, as if he knew all my heart, he said, "Young man, you look very miserable." Well I did; but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made from the pulpit on my personal appearance before. However, it was a good blow, struck right home. He continued, "and you always will be miserable – miserable in life,

⁸ C. H. Spurgeon, *Farm Sermons* (Pilgrim Publications 1989) p. 236.

⁹ C. H. Spurgeon's *Autobiography* (Pilgrim Publication reprinting 1992) p. 105.

and miserable in death, -- if you don't obey my text... Then, lifting up his hands, he shouted, as only a Primitive Methodist could do, "Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothin' to do but to look and live."¹⁰

Then I had this vision -- not a vision to my eyes, but to my heart. I saw what a Savior Christ was.... Now I can never tell you how it was, but I no sooner saw whom I was to believe than I understood what it was to believe, and I did believe in one moment.¹¹

Upon his return home, Spurgeon's mother noticed a difference in his appearance and disposition immediately. Spurgeon began to work through the Bible to more clearly understand his experience and what God would have of him. During these few months after his "conversion," Spurgeon decided through personal study that he needed to be baptized as a believer. In May, Spurgeon was baptized¹² (with parental permission) and joined a Baptist Church. This was not necessarily the most pleasing course of events to his family. In his autobiography, Spurgeon wrote, "My mother said to me, one day, 'Ah, Charles! I often prayed to the Lord to make you a Christian, but I never asked that you might become a Baptist.' I could not resist the temptation to reply, 'Ah, mother! The Lord has answered your prayer with his usual bounty, and given you exceedingly abundantly above what you asked or thought.'"¹³

That same year, Spurgeon moved to Cambridge, but not to attend school!¹⁴ It was in and around Cambridge that Spurgeon began preaching, at the early age of 16. In 1851, Spurgeon became the preacher at the Waterbeach Baptist Chapel. Although Spurgeon was young, and seemed even younger in appearance, his sermons were strong and mature. Spurgeon had read a number of Puritan books

¹⁰ *Autobiography* at 106.

¹¹ Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, (Pilgrim Publication 1995 printing) Vol. 41 p. 104.

¹² Spurgeon's account of the Baptism is given in his *Autobiography* (Pilgrim Publication 1992 reprinting) Vol. 1 at page 151: "I can never forget the 3rd of May, 1850; it was my mother's birthday, and I myself was within a few weeks of being sixteen years of age. I was up early, to have a couple of hours for quiet prayer and dedication to God. Then I had some eight miles to walk, to reach the spot where I was to be immersed in the Triune Name according to the sacred command. What a walk it was! What thoughts and prayers thronged my soul during that morning's journey!" Spurgeon then goes into great detail about the process and sensation of the baptism. The story is both captivating and inspiring.

¹³ *Autobiography* Vol. 1 at 69.

¹⁴ At that time, Cambridge and Oxford were open only to students who were members of the Church of England. Dissenters were not allowed to attend.

and had grasped their message. Using his near photographic memory, Spurgeon called up ideas, messages and scriptures from his studies and the books he had read. Throughout the countryside, people would come to hear Spurgeon, the “boy wonder” preacher! Within two years at Waterbeach, the congregation grew from 40 to 400!

While Spurgeon was speaking at a Sunday School Union, a Mr. George Gould from London heard him and was impressed. Gould went back to his home church in London (the New Park Street Chapel¹⁵) and informed the folks about Spurgeon. New Park Street Chapel invited Spurgeon to come preach on Sunday, December 18, 1853. Using James 1:17 as his text, Spurgeon delivered his first sermon there. The congregation asked Spurgeon to return for three Sundays in January. Afterwards, the congregation asked the young 19 year old Spurgeon to be their new pastor and Spurgeon agreed.

Spurgeon was the hit of London. Those wanting to hear Spurgeon quickly outnumbered the church of slightly more than 200 members. In an effort to reach as many as possible, the church started renting out public facilities that would hold more people.

1856 was a year that saw one of Spurgeon’s greatest highs and one of his worst lows. On the high side, after a lot of effort, and an 18-month courtship, Spurgeon was able to talk the young church member Susannah Thompson into marrying.¹⁶ They honeymooned in Paris and just about a year later had twin boys (both of whom would grow up to be preachers). By all accounts, the Spurgeons had a wonderful marriage. As Kuppa put it, “The marriage was a source of strength and abiding comfort to both. Both suffered periodic illness and invalidism. The trim figures of youth became more ample in middle age, but they remained devoted lovers, each seeking the word or token that would lighten the burden of the other.”¹⁷

That same year, on Sunday night, October 19, Spurgeon was preaching in the big London amusement hall “Royal Surrey Gardens Music Hall.” The hall was filled to capacity of 12,000 people. There were another 10,000 outside. During Spurgeon’s prayer, some people falsely cried out “Fire!” causing the masses to

¹⁵ This was the church where John Gill, likely the most famous of Baptist theologians, had previously preached. Gill had written a commentary on the Bible that is still available today.

¹⁶ Spurgeon started courting Susannah by sending her a copy of *Pilgrim’s Progress* as a gift! Spurgeon first read the book when just 6 years old, but was reported to have read it over 100 times by his death.

¹⁷ Kruppa at 13.

flee for the door. Seven people died and 28 were seriously injured from being trampled down in the confusion.

That was a lot for the 22 year old to handle. Spurgeon was literally carried from the pulpit in despair. For several weeks, depression and despair kept Spurgeon from returning to the pulpit. Spurgeon later would recognize how close the event came to silencing his ministry “forever.” The horror of the event was never lost on Spurgeon. He would refer back to it many times.

One cannot help but wonder if in God’s majestic providence, the events were not used to keep a measure of humility in Spurgeon. For one who was so incredibly successful and adored, Spurgeon never seemed to let his “success” go to his head. Years later, Spurgeon would refer to this time as a young man when his popularity was so massive he was preaching to thousands in these halls. Spurgeon wrote, “My deacons know well enough how, when I first preached in Exeter Hall, there was scarcely ever an occasion, in which they left me alone for ten minutes before the service, but they would find me in a most fearful state of sickness, produced by that tremendous thought of my solemn responsibility.”¹⁸

That is not to say that Spurgeon had no detractors, for he certainly did. The negative write ups in the papers and the critics were numerous. One preacher set himself to preach each Sunday on the errors of Spurgeon’s sermon from the week before. Spurgeon’s speaking style was also a point of ridicule to many. While most preachers were staid and stern, Spurgeon would bring energy and even theater to his sermons. Spurgeon was also roundly criticized for using humor in his sermons. On that point, however, Spurgeon was quick to point out that his critics might be less harsh if they knew how many jokes he thought of making but opted not to.

Spurgeon was a hard worker. Over his life, he was estimated to have preached to 10 million people, often times preaching as much as ten times a week. Spurgeon accomplished this by working as many as 18 hours a day (remember, at this time he averaged reading 6 books each week!). Even in this, though, Spurgeon would credit the Lord with his abilities. When the famous explorer and missionary David Livingston asked Spurgeon how he managed to do the work of two people in a single day, Spurgeon responded, pointing to God and saying, “You have forgotten that there are two of us!”¹⁹

¹⁸ Amundsen, Darrel “The Anguish and Agonies of Charles Spurgeon,” *Christian History* Issue 29, (Vol. 10, No. 1) p. 23.

¹⁹ Hayden at 3.

Often people would approach Spurgeon and urge him to slow down lest he burn out or kill himself (“Do not preach so often; you will kill yourself.”). Spurgeon responded, “O my God! What would Paul have said to such a thing as that?”²⁰ For Spurgeon, he was about the work of God; there was no time to be slow!

Spurgeon’s congregation understood the nature of growth that came with his pastorate and they set about building a new sanctuary. In 1861, the newly named Metropolitan Tabernacle was open and ready to seat nearly 6,000 people. The church went into the building debt free, all construction costs fully covered. With that building, we see the largest Protestant church of the day, the first “mega-church.”

Spurgeon’s life of preaching and writing had its share of pain and difficulty. In 1868, Spurgeon’s wife became an invalid. Spurgeon himself was afflicted with gout, when just 35 years old. Most every year afterwards, there would be periods of weeks (and even months) when Spurgeon was unable to stand and preach. Spurgeon would write about the great mercy when he was able to sleep for a solid hour without waking in pain. In the midst of this suffering, Spurgeon would write that, “The way to stronger faith usually lies along the rough pathway of sorrow.” He would then add that, “Affliction is the best bit of furniture in my house. It is the best book in a minister’s library.”²¹

Notwithstanding their physical adversities, Both Spurgeon and his wife Susannah found ways to work through their infirmities. Susannah decided to start the publishing house that would take Spurgeon’s sermons, put them into form, and print them for sale to the public and for gifting to ministers in need. In this way, Spurgeon was able to gain enough income to provide his preaching services for free.

Spurgeon’s popularity spanned the continents. His published sermons were finding an audience not just in Europe but also in America. There came a time, however, when that changed. Spurgeon spoke strongly on the issue of slavery. Spurgeon with usual bluntness preached, “Wherever slavery exists, it is an awful curse; and the abolition of it is an unspeakable blessing.”²² As a result of these opinions, sections of Spurgeon’s sermons would be excised before publishing in America.

²⁰ Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit (Pilgrim Publication 2006 printing) Vol. 2 p. 180.

²¹ Amundsen at 25.

²² Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit (Pilgrim Publication 1984 printing) Vol. 40 p. 349.

The published sermons also made their way into the hands of seminary students throughout Europe. In the mid-1870's, a Dutch Christian enrolled in a seminary was an avid reader of Spurgeon's sermons. The student would buy copies and would listen to the sermons live when the opportunity availed itself. Later, this student would receive his own measure of fame, although not as a theologian or preacher. This student, artist, and fan of Spurgeon's was named Vincent Van Gogh.²³

Spurgeon often used humor in his sermons, sometimes with a good bite. For example, in Spurgeon's sermon, "Inexcusable Irreverence and Ingratitude," Spurgeon spoke from Romans 1:20-21, "They are without excuse: because that, when they knew God, they neither glorified him not as God, neither were they thankful." Spurgeon discussed agnostics saying:

There must be something very wrong with you when you would rather that there were no God. "Well," says one, "I do not care much whether there is a God or not; I am an agnostic... "Oh!" I said, "that is a Greek word, is it not? And the equivalent Latin word is 'Ignoramus'."²⁴ Somehow, he did not like the Latin nearly as much as the Greek. Oh, dear friends, I could not bear to be an ignoramus or an agnostic about God! I must have a God; I cannot do without him. He is to me as necessary as food to my body, and air to my lungs."²⁵

Spurgeon's health problems got worse with age, and he added Bright's disease (inflammation of the kidneys) as a continual problem starting in the 1870's. By the time Spurgeon was 57, his life was at its end. Spurgeon died on January 31, 1892. Five funeral services were necessary to hold those who wanted to come in honor of Spurgeon. As his funeral procession went through the London streets, hundreds of thousands of Londoners lined the street in honor of the preacher of Christ. A choir of children from Spurgeon's orphanages was set up on a platform to sing as the procession went by, but those children could do no more than cry. That is no wonder when one considers that each year, Spurgeon himself would give a Christmas gift to each of the hundreds of orphans he undertook to care for.

²³ For this and other spiritual insights into Van Gogh, see Erickson, Kathleen, *At Eternity's Gate: The Spiritual Vision of Vincent Van Gogh* (Eerdmans 2003).

²⁴ "Agnostic" comes from the Greek meaning, literally, "not knowing." It references someone who does not know whether there is a God versus an "atheist" who does not believe in a God. "Ignoramus" comes from the Latin and also means, "not knowing," although the word is not typically used in reference to one who does not know whether there is a God!

²⁵ Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, (Pilgrim Publication 1986 printing) Vol. 38 p. 242.

Spurgeon's deeds and sayings are truly the source of hundreds of books, and cannot be fairly condensed into a 45-minute lesson. We have left out the Preacher's college Spurgeon started, the frustrations he experienced in challenging and breaking from the Baptist Union over issues of liberalism. We have also left out some novelties about Spurgeon. For example, Spurgeon, more than any other, removed the title "Reverend" from the Baptist organization preferring the Biblical term "Pastor." Similarly, Spurgeon was never ordained formally based on his reading of scripture (scripture, itself, never speaks of ordination).

We have made references to how Spurgeon's style and sermons impacted audiences in the millions. Next week, our intention is to delve into a fuller understanding of the "how's" of Spurgeon's preaching, including the areas where Spurgeon was considered a Christian innovator among preachers. We will also sample bits of his preaching to get a feel for his message and delivery.

POINTS FOR HOME

This week, we use as our points for home scriptures with brief explanations offered by Spurgeon, in his own words:

1. Acts 26:28, "Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to become a Christian?" To which Spurgeon says, "Almost persuaded to be a Christian is like the man who was almost pardoned, but he was hanged; like the man who was almost rescued, but he was burned in the house. A man that is almost saved is damned."
2. Hosea 8:12, "I have written to him the great things of my law; but they were counted as a strange thing." To which Spurgeon says, "There is dust enough on some of your Bibles to write *damnation* with your fingers!"
3. 1 Chronicles 4:10, "Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, 'Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.'" Unlike the now hugely popular book on the Prayer of Jabez, Spurgeon dared to preach on the same prayer and note that pain, difficulty, and grief sometimes accompanied the Christian walk, hinting that God's agenda may be different than ours! So Spurgeon said, "I have oftentimes looked gratefully back to my sick chamber. I am certain that I never did grow in grace one half so much anywhere as I have upon the bed of pain."

4. 1 Chronicles 22:18, "Is not the Lord your God with you?" To which Spurgeon says, "I do delight in so many of the members not coming to hear me because they are doing the master's work elsewhere! I know that in many churches the main thing is to sit down in a corner pew, and be fed. Well, of course, every creature needs to be fed, from the pig upwards - you must excuse my mentioning that unclean animal, for he is the creature whose principal business it is to feed, and he is not a nice creature at all, and I do not admire Christian people whose one business is to feed and feed. Why, I have heard them even grumble at a sermon that was meant for the conversion of sinners, because they thought there was no food for them in it! They are great receptacles of food; but, dear Christian people, do not any of you live merely to feed - not even on heavenly food; but if God be with you, as you say He is, then get to His work." Amen!