

Charles Haddon Spurgeon 1834-1892:

The Soul Winner

At the age of seventeen Spurgeon became Pastor of a handful of believers at Waterbeach, in Cambridgeshire, meeting in what had been a dovecote. Within five years he had become the best. . known minister in the Metropolis, judged competent before another two years had passed to conduct a service of National Humiliation (on account of the Indian Mutiny) in the Crystal Palace, when almost 24,000 persons were assembled. His pulpit ministry extended to all lands through the printed sermons which came weekly from the press, and such was the place that he had come to occupy in men's hearts that in his last illness, "for twelve days the attention of the Civilised world was centred in the testimony borne, not only to the servant of God, but to the Gospel he preached, in column after column of almost every newspaper."

Both his father and grandfather were believing ministers of the Gospel. Even as a young lad in Essex he had been an avid reader and had read many of the Puritan works long before he was converted at the age of fifteen.

Conversion

Spurgeon describes his conversion as follows: "Through the Lord's restraining grace, and the holy influence of my early home life, both at my father's and my grandfather's, I was kept from certain outward forms of sin in which others indulged; and, sometimes, when I began to take stock of myself, I really thought I was quite a respectable lad, and might have been half inclined to boast that I was not like other boys, untruthful, dishonest, disobedient, swearing, Sabbath breaking, and so on. But, all of a sudden, I met Moses, carrying in his hand the law of God; and as he looked at me, he seemed to search me through and through with his eyes of fire. He bade me read 'God's Ten Words',—the ten commandments—and as I read them, and remembered what I had been taught about their spiritual meaning as interpreted by the Lord Jesus Christ, they all seemed to join in accusing and condemning me in the sight of the thrice-holy Jehovah. Then, like Daniel, "my comeliness was turned in me into corruption, and I retained no strength;" and I understood what Paul meant

when he wrote, "Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God."

For years he remained under deep conviction of sin until one Sunday morning in January 1850 a snow storm forced him to cut short his intended journey and turn in to a Primitive Methodist chapel in Colchester. "The minister did not come that morning; he was snowed up, I suppose. At last, a very thin looking man, a shoemaker, or tailor, or something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach. . . . He was obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason that he had little else to say. The text was, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth."

When he had managed to spin out ten minutes or so, he was at the end of his tether. Then he looked at me under the gallery, and I daresay, with so few present, he knew me to be a stranger. 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, and miserable in death—if you don't obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved." 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." I saw at once the way of salvation . . . I had been waiting to do fifty things, but when I heard that word, "Look!" What a charming word it seemed to me! Oh! I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away. There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun; and I could have risen that instant, and sung with the most enthusiastic of them, of the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith which looks alone to HIM . . .

E'er since by faith I saw the stream
Thy flowing wounds supply
Redeeming love has been my theme
And shall be till I die

Beginning to Serve the Lord

In that day when I surrendered myself to my Saviour, I gave Him my body, my soul, my spirit; I gave him all I had, and all I shall have for time and eternity. I gave him all my talents, my powers, my faculties, my eyes, my ears, my limbs, my emotions, my judgement, my whole manhood, and all that came of it, whatever fresh capacity or new capability I might be endowed with.

The very first service which my youthful heart rendered to Christ was the placing of tracts in envelopes, and then sealing them up, that I might send them. . . . I might have done nothing for Christ if I had not been encouraged by finding myself able to do a little. Then I sought to do something more, and from that

something more, and I do not doubt that many servants of God have been led on to higher and nobler labours for their Lord, because they began to serve Him in the right spirit and manner. . . . I used to write texts on little scraps of paper, and drop them anywhere, that some poor creatures might pick them up, and receive them as messages of mercy to their souls. I could scarcely content myself even for five minutes without trying to do something for Christ. If I walked along the street, I must have a few tracts with me; if I went into a railway carriage, I must drop a tract out of the window[!]; if I had a moment's leisure, I must be upon my knees or at my Bible; if I were in company, I must turn the subject of conversation to Christ, that I might serve my Master. It may be that, in the young dawn of my Christian life, I did imprudent things in order to serve the cause of Christ, but I Still say, give me back that time again, with all its imprudence and with all its hastiness, if I may but have the same love to my Master, the same overwhelming influence in my spirit, making me obey my Lord's commands because it was a pleasure to me to do anything to serve my God.

His First Sermon

Within a year of his conversion one of the Preacher's Association in Cambridge spoke with Spurgeon . . . "to ask me to go over to Teversham the next evening, for a young man was to preach there who was not much used to services, and very likely would be glad of company . . . I set off . . . with a gentleman some few years my senior. We talked of good things, and at last I expressed my hope that he would feel the presence of God while preaching. He seemed to start, and assured me that he had never preached in his life, and could not attempt such a thing: he was looking to his young friend, Mr. Spurgeon, for that . . . I walked along quietly, lifting up my soul to God, and it seemed to me that I could surely tell a few poor cottagers of the sweetness and love of Jesus, for I felt them in my own soul. Praying for Divine help, I resolved to make the attempt. My text should be, "Unto you therefore which believe He is precious." (1 Peter 2:7) and I would trust the Lord to open my mouth in honour of His dear Son. It seemed a great risk and a serious trial, but depending upon the power of the Holy Ghost, I would at least tell out the story of the cross, and not allow the people to go home without a word.

We entered the low-pitched room of the thatched cottage, where a few simple-minded farm-labourers and their wives were gathered together; we sang, and prayed, and read the Scriptures, and then came my first sermon . . .

To my own delight, I had not broken down, nor stopped short in the middle, nor been destitute of ideas, and the desired haven was in view. I made a finish, and took up the hymn book, but to my astonishment, an aged voice cried out, "Bless you dear heart, how old are you?" My very solemn reply was, "You must wait till the service is over before making such enquiries.

The Young Soul-Winner at Waterbeach

Spurgeon was only 17 years old when he became pastor of a small chapel in Waterbeach near Cambridge.

"There went into that village a lad, who had no great scholarship, but who was earnest in seeking the souls of men. He began to preach there, and it pleased God to turn the whole place upside down. In a short time, the little thatched chapel was crammed, the biggest vagabonds of the village were weeping floods of tears, and those who had been the curse of the parish became its blessing. Where there had been robberies and villainies of every kind, all round the neighbourhood, there were none, because the men who used to do mischief were themselves in the house of God, rejoicing to hear of Jesus crucified." By a strange providence his plan to undertake formal Bible-school training never saw fruition. He continued in his rural situation, his salary was £45 a year and he was thrown upon the generosity of the people because it was not enough to keep him. One reminiscence of those early days has a peculiarly modern ring about it. "In my first pastorate, I had often to battle with Antinomians—that is people who held that because they believed themselves to be elect, they might live as they liked . . . I knew one man, who stood on the table of a public-house, and held a glass of gin in his hand, declaring all the while that he is one of the Lord's chosen people. They kicked him out of the public house, and when I heard of it, I felt that it served him right. Even those ungodly men said that they did not want any such 'elect' people there. There is no one who can live in sin—drinking, swearing, lying, and so on—who can truly declare that he is one of the Lord's chosen people"

The Call to London

Church officers of the well known New Park Street Chapel, London heard about the "boy preacher from the Fens." Spurgeon's father recalled a conversation soon after his son had accepted the call. "Your son will never last in London six months; he has no education." His own reply was, "You are terribly mistaken, he has the best education that can possibly be had; God has been his teacher, and he has had earthly teachers too." He was twenty years old. Two weeks after his London ministry commenced one man made a remarkable prophecy: "That young man will live to be the greatest preacher of this or any other age. He will bring more souls to Christ than any man who ever proclaimed the gospel, not excepting the apostle Paul. His name will be known everywhere, and his sermons will be translated into many of the languages of the world"

The Long Pastorate (1854-92)

The church later changed its name and venue, but Spurgeon remained its

pastor for 38 years, until his death. His phenomenal success, as the prophecy proved so accurately, saw delight displayed by many, but cruel criticism and bitter by others. A humble faith sustained him in the face of fulsome praise, glaring publicity and also wicked slanders. His wife, Susannah, whom he married in 1856, was to prove an ideal, loving and spiritual partner through his most demanding of ministries.

Conversions

"I could tell many stories of the remarkable conversions that were wrought in those early days. Once, when I was in the vestry, an Irishman came to see me. Pat began by making a low bow, and saying, "Now your Reverence, I have come to ax you a question." "Oh!" said I, "Pat, I am not a Reverence; it is not a title I care for; but what is your question, and how is it you have not been to your priest about it?" He said, "I have been to him, but I don't like his answer." "Well, what is your question?" Said he, "God is just; and if God be just, He must punish my sins. I deserve to be punished. If he is a just God, He ought to punish me; yet you say God is merciful, and will forgive sins. I cannot see how that is right; He has no right to do that. He ought to be just, and punish those who deserve it. Tell me how God can be just and yet be merciful." I replied, "That is through the blood of Christ." "yes," said he, "That is what. my priest said, you are very much alike there, but he said a good deal besides, that I did not understand; and that short answer does not satisfy me. I want to know how It is that the blood of Jesus Christ enables God to be just, and yet to be merciful." Then I saw what he wanted to know, and explained the plan of salvation thus: "Now, Pat, suppose you had been killing a man, and the judge had said, "That Irishman must be hanged." He said quickly, "And I should have richly deserved to be hanged." "But Pat, suppose I was very fond of you, can you see any way by which I could save you from being hanged?" "No, sir, I cannot." "Then, suppose I went to the queen, and said, "Please your Majesty, I am very fond of this Irishman; I think the judge was quite right in saying that he must be hanged, but let me be hanged Instead, and you will then carry out the law." Now the Queen could not agree to my proposal; but, suppose she could—and God can, for he has power greater than all kings and queens—and suppose the Queen should have me hanged instead of you, do you think the policeman would take you up afterwards?" He at once said. "No, I should think not; they would not meddle with me; but if they did I should say, "What are you doing? Did not that gentleman condescend to be hung for me? Let me alone; sure you don't want to hang two people for the same thing, do ye?" I replied to the irishman, "Ah, my friend, you have hit It; that is the way whereby we are saved! God must punish sin. Christ said, "My Father, punish Me Instead of the sinner;" and His Father did; God laid on His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, the whole burden of our sins, and all their punishment and chastisement; and now that Christ is punished instead of us, God would not be just if He were to punish any sinner who

believes on the Lord Jesus Christ. If thou believest in Jesus Christ, the well-beloved and only begotten Son of God, thou art saved, and thou mayest go on thy way rejoicing." "Faith," said the man clapping his hands, "That's the gospel. Pat is safe now; with all his sins about him, he'll trust in the Man that died for him, and so he shall be saved."

"From the very early days of my ministry in London, the Lord gave such an abundant blessing upon the proclamation of His truth that whenever I was able to appoint a time for seeing converts and enquirers it was seldom, if ever, that I waited in vain; and usually, so many came, that I was quite overwhelmed with gratitude and Thanksgiving to God. On one occasion, I had a very singular experience, which enabled me to realise the meaning of our Lord's answer to His disciples' question at the well of Sychar, "Hath any man brought Him aught to eat? Jesus saith unto them, "My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work."

Leaving home early in the morning, I went to the chapel, and sat there all day long seeing those who had been brought to Christ by the preaching of the Word. Their stories were so interesting to me that the hours flew by without my noticing how fast they were going. I may have seen some thirty or more persons during the day, one after the other, and I was so delighted with the tales of mercy they had to tell me that I did not know anything about how the time passed. At seven o'clock we had our prayer meeting; I went in, and prayed with the brethren. After that came the church meeting. A little before ten o'clock, I felt faint, and I began to think about what hour I had my dinner, and then for the first time remembered that I had not had any! I never thought of It, I never even felt hungry, because God had made me so glad, and so satisfied with the Divine manna, the heavenly food of success in winning souls."

Tragedy

The church building was incapable of holding all the people thronging to hear Mr Spurgeon. As a consequence, Exeter Hall in the Strand accommodated Spurgeon's hearers on Sunday evenings for two. periods during 1855 and 1856. The music Hall in the Royal Surrey Gardens was erected for popular concerts, but for 3 years (1856-1859) provided a home for the New Park Street congregation and the ever increasing crowds who wished to hear the young preacher. The MUSIC Hall had three galleries and was filled to capacity with some 10,000 present each Sunday.

Satan's kingdom was being assailed and he struck back by means of the great disaster at the music Hall in 1856. Evil men shouting "Fire!" created panic in the auditorium and several people were killed when they were crushed to death as they ran madly down the stairs. For weeks afterwards Spurgeon was in such sorrow and distress that he was quite incapable of preaching and his whole ministry appeared to be finished. However the Lord graciously sustained him, and though scarred by the memory of the tragedy for the rest of his life, he

resumed preaching and indeed for several years the services at the Music Hall continued to be richly blessed by God in the salvation of many souls.

Burden of the Ministry

In one of his sermons at an annual conference of ministers, Spurgeon speaks about that faith in God necessary for godly ministers to bear much hardship and to exercise much self denial and yet to persevere in the Ministry. "My heart rejoices over the many brethren here whom God has made to be winners of souls; and I may add that I am firmly persuaded . . . that the privations they have undergone, and the zeal they have shown in the service of their Lord, though unrewarded by any outward success are a sweet savour unto God. True faith makes a man feel that It is sweet to be a living sacrifice unto God. Only faith could keep us in the ministry, for ours is not a vocation which brings with It golden pay; It is not a calling which men would follow who desire honour and rank . We have all kinds of evils to endure, evils as numerous as those which Paul included in his famous catalogue of trials; and, I may add, we have one peril which he does not mention, namely the perils of church meetings, which are probably worse than perils of robbers. Underpaid and undervalued, without congenial associates, many a rural preacher of the gospel would die of a broken heart did not his faith gird him with strength from on high."

Suffering

As for his views on suffering, they vary greatly from much in modern Christianity that is shallow and sensationalistic. "Undergirding all Spurgeon's experience in suffering was his conviction that his ill-health was God's gift. He gained from illness a wealth of knowledge and sympathy which he could not have gained elsewhere. In the realm of sorrow he was blessed. With his own experience in view he warned his students near the his life against making a mistake over what is a blessing. "In the matter of faith healing, health is set before us as if it were the great thing to be desired above all other things. Is it so? I venture to say that the greatest earthly blessing that God can give to any of us is health, with the exception of sickness. Sickness has frequently been of more use to the saints of God than health has. A sick wife, a newly made grave, poverty, slander, sinking of spirit, might teach us lessons nowhere else to be learned so well. Trials drive us to the realities of religion." The benefits which Spurgeon gained, became, under God's providential hand, the possession of many others. In this connection Charles Spurgeon, Junior, wrote: "I know of no one who could, more sweetly than my dear father, impart comfort to bleeding hearts and sad spirits. As the crushing of the flower causes It to yield its aroma, so he, having endured in the long continued illness of my beloved, mother, and also constant pains in himself, was able to sympathise most tenderly with all sufferers."

Spurgeon himself once gave a striking instance of how his experience had prepared him to help another. in the course of speaking at a Monday evening prayer meeting at the Tabernacle on the personal preparation which a soul-winner may have to go through in order to his greater usefulness, he said, "Some years ago, I was the subject of fearful depression of spirit. Various troublous events had happened to me; I was also unwell, and my heart sank within me. Out of the depths I was forced to cry unto the Lord. Just before I went to Mentone for rest, I suffered greatly in body, but far more in soul, for my spirit was overwhelmed. Under this pressure, I preached a sermon from the words, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" I was as much qualified to preach from that text as ever I expect to be; indeed I hope that few of my brethren could have entered so deeply Into those heartbreaking words. I felt to the full of my measure the horror of a soul forsaken of God. Now that was not a desirable experience. I tremble at the bare idea of passing again through that eclipse of soul; I pray that I may never suffer in that fashion again unless the same result should hang upon It.

That night, after the service, there came into my vestry a man who was as nearly Insane as he could be to be out of an asylum. His eyes seemed ready to start from his head, and he said that he should utterly have despaired if he had not heard that discourse, which had made him feel that there was one man alive who understood his feelings, and could describe his experience. I talked with him, and tried to encourage him, and asked him to come again on Monday night, when I should have a little more time to speak with him. I saw the brother again, and I told him that I thought he was a hopeful patient, and I was glad that the word had been so suited to his case. Apparently he put aside the comfort which I had presented for his acceptance, and yet I had the consciousness upon me that the precious truth which he had heard was at work upon his mind, and that the storm of his soul would soon subside into a deep calm.

Now hear the sequel. Last night, of all the times in the year, when, strange to say, I was preaching from the words, "The Almighty hath vexed my soul," after the service, in walked this selfsame brother who had called on me five years before. This time, he looked as different as noonday from midnight, or as life from death. I said to him, "I am glad to see you, for I have often thought about you and wondered whether you were brought Into perfect peace. " To my enquiries, this brother replied, "Yes, you said I was a hopeful patient, and I am sure you will be glad to know that I have walked in the sunlight from that day till now. Everything is changed and altered with me." Dear friends, as soon as I saw my poor despairing patient the first time, I blessed God that my fearful I experience had prepared me to sympathise with him and guide him; but last night, when I saw him perfectly restored, my heart overflowed with gratitude to God for my former sorrowful feelings. I would go into the deeps a hundred times

to cheer a downcast spirit: it is good for me to have been afflicted that I might know how to speak a word in season to one that is weary.

Humour

It is a sort of tradition of the fathers that it is wrong to laugh on Sundays. The eleventh commandment is, that we are to love one another; and then according to some people, the twelfth is, "Thou shalt pull a long face on Sunday." I must confess that I would rather hear people laugh than I would see them asleep in the house of God; and I would rather get the truth into them through the medium of ridicule than I would have it neglected, or leave people to perish through the lack of reception of the message. I do believe, in my heart, that there may be as much holiness in a laugh as in a cry; and that sometimes, to laugh is the better of the two, for I may weep, and be murmuring, and repining, and thinking all sorts of bitter thoughts against God; while, at another time, I may laugh the laugh of sarcasm against sin, and so evince a holy earnestness in the defence of the truth. I do not know why ridicule is to be given up to Satan as a weapon to be used against us, and not to be employed as a weapon against him. I will venture to affirm that the Reformation owed almost as much to the sense of the ridiculous in human nature as to anything else, and that those humorous squibs and caricatures, that were issued by the friends of Luther, did more to open the eyes of Germany to the abominations of the priesthood than the more solid and ponderous arguments against Romanism. I know no reason why we should not on suitable occasions, try the same style of reasoning. "It is a dangerous weapon," it will be said, "and many men will cut their fingers with it." Well, that is their own lookout; But I do not know why we should be so particular about their cutting their fingers if they can, at the same time, cut the throat of sin, and do serious damage to the great adversary of souls.

His Stand for the Truth

The so-called, "Downgrade Controversy" was occasioned by articles in the 'Sword and the Trowel' in 1887 (the immensely popular magazine he edited), which gave warning of the general defection from Biblical truth which was proceeding in the Nonconformist Churches; the charge was vigorously repelled in many quarters and ignored by the autumn meetings of the Baptist Union. Privately Spurgeon placed evidence of the unbelief of ministers in the Baptist Union before the Secretary of the Union, S. H. Booth, and when it became evident to him that no action would be taken, he withdrew from the Union on October 28, 1887.

"I might not have had such a loathing of the new theology if I had not seen so much of its evil effects. I could tell you of a preacher of unbelief whom I have seen in my own vestry, utterly broken down, driven almost to despair, and

having no rest for the sole of his foot until he came back to simple trust in the atoning sacrifice. If he were speaking to you, he would say, "Cling to your faith, brethren; if you once throw away your shield, you will lay yourself open to imminent dangers and countless wounds; for nothing can protect you but the shield of faith . . . "

His Work

For 38 years he was the pastor of a huge London congregation, he travelled extensively to preach, he was the author of an immense number of books including probably the finest ever commentary on the Psalms and other works covering all aspects of Christian life and service. He established almshouses and an orphanage. From 1865 he began to publish a monthly magazine entitled, "The Sword and the Trowel" and his sermons were published weekly until 1917. He promoted and guided the work of the Colporteurs' Association and Mrs. Spurgeon was actively engaged in running the Book Fund which raised money to buy good Christian literature to supply needy ministers. As a contender for the faith and preacher of the gospel, C H Spurgeon was a colossus.

His Death

Spurgeon died at Mentone in the south of France in 1892, where he often wintered because of his chronic ill-health. His secretary J.W. Harrald immediately sent a telegraphed message to the Tabernacle in London. It read, "Our beloved pastor entered heaven, 11:15 Sunday night." The news became the chief subject of the Monday newspapers in London, and so heavy was the demand for copies that it was soon difficult to find one left for sale anywhere.

In a sermon preached at the Tabernacle, Spurgeon had spoken of his feelings about his funeral; . . . you see my coffin carried to the silent grave, I should like every one of you, whether converted or not, to be constrained to say, "He did earnestly urge us, in plain and simple language, not to put off the consideration of eternal things. He did entreat us to look to Christ. Now he is gone, our blood is not at his door if we perish."

His Message for Us

Here was a man who lived to the full—he was all out for God. It is unlikely that any of us can compare remotely with his God-given brilliance, but we can all ask God for something of his devotion to the Saviour and his love for souls.

His life can be a great encouragement to us. His, like ours, was a time of widespread apostasy and yet he saw revival with thousands being converted while elsewhere many were turning to Romanism or liberal theology.

It is encouraging to recognise that the truths he preached are the ones we

hear so faithfully expounded week by week. His God is our God, and his prayer is our prayer, "Wilt Thou not revive us again: that Thy people may rejoice in Thee?"