

Church History (64): Charles Haddon Spurgeon: The Early Years

It's my hope to consider the life and ministry of Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) over the next three weeks. We will examine his early years (1850-1865), world-wide ministry (1865-1885), and final years (1885-1892).

I. Charles Haddon Spurgeon: The Early Years

1. *His early life.* Born June 19, 1834, Spurgeon came from a long line of protestant Nonconformists. Both his father and grandfather pastored Congregational churches. He was sent to Stambourne when 14 months old, to live with his grandfather, James Spurgeon. Here Spurgeon acquired a love for books. "One of the bedrooms in the manse led off into a small dark chamber. But this chamber held an old Puritan library, and Charles was probably no more than three when he began pulling volumes out into the light and looking at the illustrations" (Dallimore).¹ "Here I first struck up acquaintance with the martyrs; next, with Bunyan and his 'Pilgrim;' and further on, with the great masters of Scriptural theology, with whom no moderns are worthy to be named in the same day. Out of that darkened room I fetched those old authors when I was yet a youth, and never was I happier than when in their company" (CHS).² While Spurgeon returned to his parents' home when six, he often spent summers with his grandparents at Stambourne. His father worked as a clerk in a coal merchant's office in addition to pastoring. The two duties kept him much engaged and robbed him of time he would have liked to spend with his wife and children. Both his father and grandfather, allowed Spurgeon, as a young child, to remain present when theology was discussed. "I can bear witness that children can understand the Scriptures; for I am sure that, when but a child, I could have discussed many a knotty point of controversial theology, having heard both sides of the question freely stated among my father's circle of friends" (CHS).³ "There can be no doubt that by the time he was nine or ten he was reading and understanding something of such mighty men as John Owen, Richard Sibbes, John Flavel, and Matthew Henry. He was already grasping the meaning of much of their theological argument and was reasoning out the pros and cons within his own mind" (Dallimore).⁴

2. *His conversion.* "In the summer of 1849 Charles entered still another school, this one in the town of Newmarket. Though he had just turned fifteen, he came not merely as a student but also as a part-time teacher" (Dallimore).⁵ "During his school days at Newmarket, Spurgeon began to acquire a new grasp of theology, strangely enough, from an old cook in his school. Mary King, or 'Cook,' as all the students called her, was a good old soul and possessed a perception into the Christian faith. She was a member of the Bethesda Strict Baptist Church" (Drummond).⁶ During holidays, Spurgeon would visit his parents and grandparents. During this time, Spurgeon's conviction of sin increased and deepened. He said of the law: "Day and night God's hand was heavy upon me. I hungered for deliverance, for my soul fainted within me. I feared lest the very skies should fall upon me, and crush my guilty soul. God's law had laid hold upon me, and was showing me my sins. If I slept at night, I dreamed of the bottomless pit; and when I awoke, I seemed to feel the misery I had dreamed. Up to God's house I went; my song was but a sigh. To my chamber I retired, and there, with tears and groans, I offered up my prayer, without a hope and without a refuge, for God's law was flogging me with its ten-throated whip, and then rubbing me with brine afterwards, so that I did shake and quiver with pain and anguish, and my

¹ Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 6

² C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 1:23

³ C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 1:41

⁴ Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 10

⁵ Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 15

⁶ Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers*, 101

soul chose strangling rather than life, for I was exceeding sorrowful."⁷ Elsewhere Spurgeon said: "When I was for many a month in this state, I used to read the Bible through, and the threatenings were all printed in capitals, but the promises were in such small type I could not for a long time make them out: and when I did read them, I did not believe they were mine; but the threatenings were all my own."⁸

"Personally, I have to bless God for many good books: I thank Him for Dr. Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*; for Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*: for Alleine's *Alarm to Sinners*; and for James's *Anxious Enquirer*; but my gratitude most of all is due to God, not for books, but for the preached Word—and that too addressed to me by a poor, uneducated man, a man who had never received any training for the ministry, and probably will never be heard of in this life, a man engaged in business, no doubt of a humble kind, during the week, but who had just enough of grace to say on the Sabbath, 'Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth'" (CHS).⁹ Spurgeon is referring to a snowy January Sabbath in 1850, when he was redirected to a little Primitive Methodist Chapel. "During December of 1849 there was an outbreak of fever at the Newmarket school. The school was temporarily closed, and Charles went home to be there during the Christmas season" (Dallimore).¹⁰ Because of a storm, Spurgeon was unable to travel the distance to church, so he chose to enter a little country church instead.

I sometimes think I might have been in darkness and despair until now had it not been for the goodness of God in sending a snowstorm, one Sunday morning, while I was going to a certain place of worship. When I could go no further, I turned down a side street, and came to a little Primitive Methodist Chapel. In that chapel there may have been a dozen or fifteen people. I had heard of the Primitive Methodists, how they sang so loudly that they made people's heads ache; but that did not matter to me. I wanted to know how I might be saved, and if they could tell me that, I did not care how much they made my head ache. 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. Now, it is well that preachers should be instructed; but this man was really stupid. He was obligated 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*. 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 liftin' your foot or your finger; it is just, *Look*. Well, a man needn't go to college to look to learn. 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. But then the text says, *Look unto Me*. Ay!' said he, in broad Essex, 'many of ye are lookin' to yourselves, but it's no use lookin' there. You'll never find any comfort in yourselves. Some look to God the Father, No, look to Him by-and-by. Jesus Christ says, *Look unto Me*. Some of ye say, We must wait for the Spirit's workin.' You have no business with that just now. Look to Christ. The text says, *Look unto Me*.' When he had gone to about that length, and 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

⁷ C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 1:79-80

⁸ C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 1:85

⁹ C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 1:104

¹⁰ Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 18

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 dearth—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, 'You 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 know not what else he said—I did not take much notice of it—I was so possessed with that one thought. Like as when the brazen serpent was lifted up, the people only looked and were healed, so it was with me. 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.¹¹

Three weeks later on January 30, 1850, Spurgeon wrote to his father: "Oh, how unprofitable has my past life been! Oh, that I should have been so long time blind to those celestial wonders, which now I can in a measure behold! Who can refrain from speaking of the marvelous love of Jesus which, I hope, has opened mine eyes! Now I see Him, I can firmly trust to Him for my eternal salvation."¹² As by this time Spurgeon had become convinced of believers' baptism, he continued to his father: "From the Scriptures, is it not apparent that, immediately upon receiving the Lord Jesus, it is a part of duty openly to profess Him? I firmly believe and consider that baptism is the command of Christ, and shall not feel quite comfortable if I do not receive it."¹³ Spurgeon wrote his father again on April 6: "As Mr. Cantlow's baptizing season will come round this month, I have humbly to beg your consent, as I will not act against your will, and should very much like to commune next month. I have no doubt of your permission. We are all one in Christ Jesus; forms and ceremonies, I trust, will not make us divided."¹⁴ He wrote on May 1 to his mother: "You, my Mother, have been the great means in God's hand of rendering me what I hope I am. Your kind, warning Sabbath-evening addresses were too deeply settled on my heart to be forgotten. If I have any courage, if I feel prepared to follow my Savior, not only into the water, but should He call me, even unto the fire, I love you as the preacher to my heart of such courage, as my praying, watching Mother. Do you not think it would be a bad beginning were I, knowing it to be my duty to be baptized, to shrink from it? If you are now as happy as I am, I can wish no more than that you may continue so. I am the happiest creature, I think, upon this globe."¹⁵ Thus, Spurgeon was baptized on May 3, 1850. "I never dreamed of entering the Church except by Christ's own way; and I wish that all other believers were led to make a serious point of commencing their visible connection with the Church by the ordinance which symbolizes death to the world, burial with Christ, and resurrection to newness of life. That open stream, the crowded banks, and the solemn plunge, have never faded from my mind; but have often operated as a spur to duty, and a seal of consecration. The outward sign has often served to bring vividly before mind and heart the spiritual meaning, and therefore is it dearly loved, for His sake who both ordained the ordinance and Himself submitted to it."¹⁶

3. *His early ministry.* "A few days after his conversion Spurgeon returned to Newmarket and resumed his work in the school there. A woman who had distributed tracts each week to thirty-three

¹¹ C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 1:105-106

¹² Charles Spurgeon, *Letters of Charles Haddon Spurgeon*, 19

¹³ Charles Spurgeon, *Letters of Charles Haddon Spurgeon*, 20

¹⁴ Charles Spurgeon, *Letters of Charles Haddon Spurgeon*, 25

¹⁵ Charles Spurgeon, *Letters of Charles Haddon Spurgeon*, 26

¹⁶ C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 1:153

homes was giving up the task, and with joy he accepted it" (Dallimore).¹⁷ Spurgeon wrote to his mother a few months later: "I have 70 people whom I regularly visit on Saturday. I do not give a tract, and go away; but I sit down, and endeavor to draw their attention to spiritual realities. I have great reason to believe the Lord is working – the people are so kind, and so pleased to see me. I cannot bear to leave them."¹⁸ "Charles left Newmarket for good in August, 1850, and moved to Cambridge to another school. Here he finished his education while working as a tutor. It was also here that he united with the St. Andrew's Street Baptist Church, the first Baptist church he joined" (Drummond).¹⁹ It was here, Spurgeon began to teach the children during Sunday school. "So capable did he prove that he was shortly invited to address the whole school, and this effort was so successful that his task was enlarged to that of doing so each Sunday" (Dallimore).²⁰ During these years, Spurgeon started a daily diary, which recorded his spiritual efforts, struggles, and desires. "Make me Thy faithful servant, O my God; may I honor Thee in my day and generation, and be consecrated for ever to Thy service."²¹ Spurgeon's letters from this time reveal an increased desire for ministry. For example, in a letter to his father, Spurgeon said: "How I long for the time when it may please God, to make me, like you, my Father, a successful preacher of the Gospel. I hope you may one day have cause to rejoice, should you see me, the unworthy instrument of God, preaching to others."²²

It was in St. Andrew's Street Baptist Church, that Spurgeon joined the Lay Preacher's Association. "This society of laymen filled the pulpits of churches in thirteen villages when they were without a pastor. One Saturday morning, Spurgeon was asked to accompany a young man on a Sunday evening. And so, Sunday afternoon, Spurgeon set out for this church with another young man. As they made their way to the service, Spurgeon expressed the hope that his friend would experience God's blessings and presence when he preached. Startled, the other man declared that he had never preached in his life. He said to Charles, 'Never! I was asked to walk with you, and I hope God will bless you in your sermon.' Both were utterly perplexed, but Charles' companion suggested that if he would simply give one of his Sunday School addresses, it would certainly suffice."²³

The small congregation had gathered under a low, pitched roof, little thatched cottage. When the young men arrived, Charles rose to speak and 'got his text on his feet.' His text on that most significant first sermon was 'Unto you that believe He is precious.' The sixteen-year-old lad preached to the praise of Christ. When he finished his sermon, much gratified because he had not actually broken down, he took up the hymnbook to announce a closing hymn. At that moment, an old lady in the congregation cried out, 'Bless your dear heart, how old are you?' Spurgeon, not wishing to divulge his actual age, said, 'You must wait until the service is over before making such inquires. Let us now sing.' When they finished the hymn and the service ended, good conversation and fellowship followed. The old lady put the question to Charles again, 'How old are you?' He said, 'I am under sixty.' 'Yes, and under sixteen,' said the lady. Spurgeon retorted, 'Never mind my age, think of the Lord Jesus Christ and His precious Spirit.'²⁴

(1) Church in Waterbeach. "Spurgeon was asked to preach one Sunday in October of 1851 at the Baptist church in the village of Waterbeach. Here he was not only urged to return, but after a second Sunday

¹⁷ Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 23

¹⁸ Charles Spurgeon, *Letters of Charles Haddon Spurgeon*, 27

¹⁹ Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers*, 157

²⁰ Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 27

²¹ C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 1:118

²² C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 1:122

²³ Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers*, 160

²⁴ Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers*, 160

he was asked to become the regular pastor. Assured that God had called him into the ministry and knowing the village stood in great of the gospel, despite the fact that he was only seventeen, he accepted the office" (Dallimore).²⁵ "When he went to Waterbeach the congregation numbered about forty, but it grew with great swiftness. People came not only from the village itself but also from the surrounding countryside, till the attendance mounted regularly to four hundred and more. Of course, they could not all get into the little building, but doors and windows were left open, and people stood outside, listening to a preacher such as they had never heard before" (Dallimore).²⁶ Soon after Spurgeon began his ministry in Waterbeach, he was advised to attend Seminary. "Knowing that solid learning is never an encumbrance, and is often a great means of usefulness, I felt inclined to avail myself of the opportunity of attaining it" (CHS).²⁷ As things happen, the president of the Seminary was in Cambridge and desired to discuss the possibility of him studying at the school. Spurgeon recounted the meeting in a letter to his father: "Well, I went to the place of meeting; but, by a very singular occurrence, we missed each other; he waited in the parlor, while I was shown into the drawing-room, and the servant forgot to tell him I had come."²⁸ Spurgeon took the mistake as the providence of God, and never again sought formal education. "I did then and there renounce the offer of formal instruction, determining to remain preaching the Word so long as I had strength to do it" (CHS).²⁹ "While still at Waterbeach, in November of 1853, Spurgeon spoke at an anniversary meeting of the Cambridge Sunday School Union. This meeting, in the normal course of things, would seem to be insignificant. However, it proved a critical, pivotal point in Spurgeon's life. God was about to throw open a marvelous door of service" (Drummond).³⁰

(2) Church in London. Attending the meeting in Cambridge was a deacon of the Baptist Church at Loughton, Essex, who told his friend about Spurgeon. This friend, Thomas Olney, served as a leading deacon in the New Park Street Baptist Church in London. This church had a long history, as Benjamin Keach (1704-1718), John Gill (1720-1771), and John Rippon (1773-1836), all pastored the church. "During the rather brief pastorates after Rippon's sixty-three years, a general decline plagued New Park Street. In a building that seated 1,200, only a handful were gathering to worship in 1853, despite the fact that 300 names were on the church roll. Olney took the leap and wrote the teenage pastor of Waterbeach, inviting him to preach for them in London" (Drummond).³¹ Thus, "on the last Sabbath morning in November, 1853," the invitation arrived in Waterbeach. Spurgeon responded: "Although I have been more than two years minister of a church, which has in that time doubled, yet my last birthday was only my nineteenth. I have hardly ever known what the fear of man means, and have all but uniformly had large congregations, and frequently crowded ones; but if you think my years would unqualify me for your pulpit, then, by all means, I entreat you, do not let me come."³² Spurgeon travelled to London and preached morning (Jas.1:17) and evening (Rev.14:5) on December 18, 1853. Spurgeon returned for three Sundays in January, 1854, and then agreed on a three-month trial period. "In February 1854, at the age of nineteen, Spurgeon entered his ministry in London. He came on three months' trial. But his labor there was to last till his death nearly forty years later. Within a month the chapel was crowded, with the seats filled, the aisles packed, and people sitting in the windows and standing shoulder to shoulder in the Sunday school area. All manner of reports about this ministry spread across London" (Dallimore).³³

²⁵ Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 34-35

²⁶ Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 35

²⁷ C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 1:241

²⁸ C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 1:243

²⁹ Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers*, 172

³⁰ Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers*, 173-174

³¹ Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers*, 186

³² C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 1:317

³³ Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 47

Present in the evening service on Spurgeon's first Sunday in London, was a young lady by the name of Susannah Thompson. Her parents were close friends with Thomas Olney, who encouraged them to attend the evening meeting. "Ah! How little I then thought that my eyes looked on him who was to be my life's beloved; how little I dreamed of the honor God was preparing for me in the near future! It is a mercy that our lives are not left for us to plan, but that our Father chooses for us; else might we sometimes turn away from our best blessings, and put from us the choicest and loveliest gifts of His providence. For, if the whole truth be told, I was not at all fascinated by the young orator's eloquence, while his countrified manner and speech excited more regret than reverence." "Those first impressions did not last long. Susie was a close friend of the Olney family, and Spurgeon was often in the Olney home. In this frequent crossing of their paths, she began to see something of his qualities, and he began to be attracted to her. By the time he had been in London merely two and a half months he sent her a gift. It was a copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*, and in it he had written: 'Miss Thompson with desires for her progress in the blessed pilgrimage from C.H. Spurgeon, April 20, 1854'" (Dallimore).³⁴ Their first formal date was on June 10, 1854. "They sat side-by-side, chaperoned, of course. As usual, Charles was reading a book. How Susie like that is unrecorded, but one can imagine. Still, it took a most pleasant turn. The volume, not one of Charles' heavy Puritan works, was surprisingly a book of poetry on love and marriage. He leaned over to Susie and had her read one or two lines: 'Seek a good wife from thy God, for she is the best gift of His providence. Therefore think of her, and pray for her.' Charles then looked at her affectionally and asked in a low, soft voice, 'Do you pray for him who is to be your husband'" (Drummond)?³⁵ They eventually married on January 8, 1856. "The wedding was followed by a ten-day trip to Paris. Susannah had been to France earlier and could now point out to Charles various important sights. Upon returning to London, they settled into married life in a very modest home on New Kent Road" (Dallimore).³⁶

It is the Sabbath, and the day's work is done. The dear preacher has had a light repast, and now rests in his easy chair by a bright fire, while, on a low cushion at his feet, sits his wife, eager to minister in some way to her beloved's comfort. 'Shall I read to you tonight, dear?' she says. 'Will you have a page or two of good George Herbert?' 'Yes, that will be very refreshing, wifey; I shall like that.' So the book is procured, and he chooses a portion which I read slowly and with many pauses, that he may interpret to me the sweet mysteries hidden within the gracious words. I read on and on for an hour or more, till the peace of Heaven flows into our souls, and the tired servant of the King rejoices.

Another Sabbath night, and the scene is somewhat changed in character. The dear Pastor is not only weary, but sorely depressed in spirit. 'Oh, darling!' he says, 'I fear I have not been as faithful in my preaching to-day as I should have been. O Lord, Pardon Thy servant!' "Go, dear,' he continues, 'to the study, and fetch down Baxter's *Reformed Pastor*, and read some of it to me; perhaps that will quicken my sluggish heart.' So I bring the book, and with deep sighs he turns the pages till he finds some such passage as the following: 'Oh, what a charge have we undertaken! And shall we be unfaithful? Have we the stewardship of God's own family, and shall we neglect it?' I read page after page of such solemn pleadings, interrupted now and again by his stifled heart-sobs, till my voice fails from emotion and sympathy, my eyes grow dim, and my tears mingle with his as we weep together—he, from the smittings of a very tender conscience towards God, and I, simply and only because I love him, and want to share his grief.³⁷

³⁴ Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 56

³⁵ Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers*, 226-227

³⁶ Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 59

³⁷ C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 2: 185-186