

# Charles Haddon (C. H.) Spurgeon

## “The Prince of Preachers”

by Pastor Scott Estell

### **Early Childhood**

Charles Haddon (C. H.) Spurgeon was born in Kelvedon, Essex, England on June 19, 1834 to Mr. and Mrs. John Spurgeon. Though not a career minister, John Spurgeon did spend 16 years pastoring a church. Because John and his wife were too poor to sufficiently care for their son, Charles spent much of his childhood being raised by his grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. James Spurgeon, in the town of Stambourne, Essex, England. James, who pastored in Stambourne for over 50 years, had a great influence upon his grandson’s life (testimony to the impact a godly grandparent can make!).

### **Conversion and Baptism**

Like so many of the most monumental men in church history, Charles Spurgeon was saved as a teenager. On Sunday morning, January 6, 1850, he was compelled by the wintry weather to change church plans, thereby being led, in one of the greatest providential turns in church history, to the Artillery Street Primitive Methodist Chapel in Colchester, Essex, England. So severe was the weather that day that the minister was unable to make it, so one of the laymen preached to the approximately dozen or so in attendance (testimony to the impact a godly layman can make!). His text was Isaiah 45:22: “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.” In the midst of his sermon, the man looked directly at Spurgeon and exclaimed: “Young man, you look very 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! You have nothin’ to do but to look and live.”<sup>1</sup> At that moment, the light of the glorious gospel of Christ shined into the spiritually-blind eyes of the fifteen year-old Spurgeon (2 Cor 4:4 and 6). In the words of the new convert: “I saw at once the way of salvation ... There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun ... I can testify that the joy of that day was utterly indescribable.”<sup>2</sup>

Because Spurgeon’s family was Congregationalist, Charles was “baptized” as a baby. However, due to his personal study of Scripture following his conversion, he came to the conviction that he needed to be baptized as a believer by immersion.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, he

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<sup>1</sup>C.H. Spurgeon *Autobiography*, 1:88.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 1:88-89.

<sup>3</sup>Spurgeon wrote: “Having been brought up among Congregationalists, I had never looked at the matter [of baptism] in my life. I had thought myself to have been baptized as an infant; and so, when I was confronted with the question, ‘What is required of persons to be baptized?’ and I found that repentance and faith were required, I said to myself, ‘Then I have not been baptized; that infant sprinkling of mine was a mistake; and please God that I ever have repentance and faith, I will be properly baptized’” (Ibid., 1:38).

sought out a Baptist minister, who baptized him on May 3, 1850, after Spurgeon made a two-three hour, eight-mile trek by foot to the place of baptism. Spurgeon would be a Baptist the rest of his life.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Teenage Pastor***

One of the many things for which Spurgeon is renowned is the fact that he entered the ministry at such a young age, even though he lacked formal theological training, a lack he compensated for by diligent study.<sup>5</sup> At the tender age of seventeen in October of 1851, he became the pastor of a Baptist church (Waterbeach Chapel) in London. So mightily did he minister the Word there that a few years later he was offered the opportunity to pastor one of the most legendary churches in England, London's New Park Street Chapel.<sup>6</sup> After agonizing greatly over the decision, he accepted the call to New Park Street (renamed the Metropolitan Tabernacle in 1861) and began his ministry there at the age of nineteen on April 28, 1854. He would spend the rest of his 38 years leading this flock, a church of about two hundred when he arrived and over 5,000 when he died.

### ***Marriage and Family***

One of the many thousands saved under Spurgeon's ministry was a young lady named Susannah Thompson, whom Charles married on January 8, 1856 (and whom he affectionately called "wifey"). The Lord blessed the Spurgeons with twin sons, Charles and Thomas, born on September 20 of that same year, both of whom eventually became Baptist pastors themselves.

### ***Interesting Anecdotes***

#### ***The Sermon in His Sleep***

One Saturday night (April 12, 1856), Spurgeon went to sleep distraught because he was unsettled as to what to preach from his text for the next day, Psalm 110:3. During the night, his wife awoke to the sound of him preaching. When she realized that he was

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<sup>4</sup>Spurgeon's mother once said to him, "Ah, Charles! I often prayed the Lord to make you a Christian, but I never asked that you might become a Baptist." With the wit for which he was renowned, he replied, "Ah, mother! The Lord has answered your prayer with His usual bounty, and given you exceeding abundantly above what you asked or thought" (Ibid., 1:45). The young Spurgeon fully understood the gravity of his decision, writing: "Therefore I left my relations, and became what I am to-day, a Baptist ... I would rather belong to the same denomination as my father ... but I must let God be above my parents" (Ibid., 1:145-146).

<sup>5</sup>His natural genius certainly helped. "[Spurgeon] would sit down to five or six large books, and master them at one sitting ... He took in the contents almost at a glance, reading by sentences as others read by words, and his memory never failed him as to what he read" (*C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography*, 2:345-346). "At the time of his death Spurgeon had a library of 12,000 books and it is said 'he could have fetched almost any one of them in the dark.' Similarly, we read that 'Mr. Spurgeon at one time as he sat on his platform, could name every one of his five thousand members'" (Ian Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon*, p. 33).

<sup>6</sup>This church had been pastored by some of the most renowned English preachers of all time, such as Benjamin Keach (36 years), John Gill (51 years), and John Rippon (63 years).

preaching, albeit asleep, on this very text, she listened attentively and shared with him in the morning as much of the sermon as she could recollect.<sup>7</sup>

#### *The Conversion of the Crystal Palace Janitor*

On October 7, 1857 Spurgeon, the “prime minister” of England, was called upon to deliver a sermon to a crowd approaching 25,000 at the Crystal Palace on “Fast Day,” a day of national mourning over an uprising in India, at that time still an English colony. On the day before, Spurgeon went to the Palace to test the acoustics. Thinking he was in an empty venue, he bellowed the words of John 1:29, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” Unbeknownst to Spurgeon was the fact that the venue was not empty. A janitor who heard the utterance was convicted by it and consequently converted.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Triumphs**

B. H. Carroll once said of Charles Spurgeon: “Never since Paul died has so much work and so much success been crowded into so small a space of time.”

#### *The New Park Street Chapel/Metropolitan Tabernacle*

Mention has already been made of the growth Spurgeon’s church experienced under his ministry (from 200 to over 5,000). Nearly 14,500 were baptized and added to his church during the almost four decades he ministered there (nearly 400/year). Approximately a thousand were converted in 1857 alone.

#### *Other Ministries*

A myriad of ministries were started by Spurgeon’s church, the most significant of which were the Pastor’s College (today known as “Spurgeon’s College”), the Stockwell Orphanage (still in existence, as well), and the Tabernacle Colportage Association, which distributed books to poor ministers.

#### *Writings*

Undoubtedly due to his writings, particularly the publication of his sermons<sup>9</sup>, “Spurgeon has probably been the most widely read and best known preacher in the world” (Gerald Priest). The 63-volume set of his sermons (over 3,500 in all), *The New Park Street Pulpit* and *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, is the largest set of books by one author in church history. Some of Spurgeon’s other publications (over 140 in all in, published in dozens of languages) include his magnum opus, a seven-volume commentary on the Psalms, entitled *The Treasury of David*, as well as *Lectures to My Students*, a compilation of the Friday afternoon lectures he delivered to the “preacher boys” in the Pastor’s College. Today there are over three hundred million copies of his sermons and books in print. For 27 years, he also edited a magazine called *The Sword and the Trowel* (based on Neh 4:17-18), battling and building through the printed page.

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<sup>7</sup>C. H. Spurgeon *Autobiography*, 1:419-420.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 1:534.

<sup>9</sup>See C. H. Spurgeon *Autobiography*, 2:359 for two extraordinary instances whereby God used these printed sermons to save the lost.

### ***Trials***

Spurgeon's triumphs were all the more remarkable in light of the many trials he faced during his ministry.

### ***Health***

Likely brought on, at least in part, by the demanding schedule he kept (for example, preaching anywhere from 8 to 12 or 13 times per week), Spurgeon suffered from several physical ailments, among them gout, rheumatism, and Bright's disease (inflammation of the kidneys).<sup>10</sup> He also suffered from bouts of severe depression. In his later years, his poor health increasingly forced him to take sabbaticals, spent in the healthier climate of Mentone, France. His wife also suffered from poor health, eventually becoming an invalid at a relatively young age.

### ***Personal Attacks***

Spurgeon was regularly vilified by the press, and even by fellow preachers (likely due to envy). God turned the former into good by giving Spurgeon greater notoriety, leading to greater crowds coming to hear him preach.

### ***The Surrey Music Hall Tragedy***

The phenomenal growth of the New Park Street church under Spurgeon, along with the multitudes of visitors who regularly came to hear him preach, necessitated the use of bigger facilities. Besides Exeter Hall, another such facility used by New Park Street was the Surrey Music Hall in the Royal Surrey Gardens. The first service ever held there took place on October 19, 1856. The estimated crowd that night was in the neighborhood of ten-twelve thousand. A few minutes into the service, "certain lewd fellows of the baser sort" (Acts 17:5) simultaneously shouted, "Fire!," leading to a panic. In the moments of chaos that ensued, seven people were trampled to death, 28 injured. Spurgeon was so devastated that it was several weeks before he found the strength to resume ministering.<sup>11</sup> The emotional scars he suffered that day would affect him the rest of his life.<sup>12</sup>

### ***The Downgrade<sup>13</sup> Controversy***

Spurgeon was a separatist, a forerunner of the fundamentalists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His separatist spirit was no more clearly seen, and his faith no more severely tested, than during the twilight years of his ministry. Spurgeon was part of the British Baptist Union, whose members were united by a common stance on the doctrine of baptism. In time,

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<sup>10</sup>"From the age of thirty-five, scarcely a year passed without one kind of illness or another laying him low. Approximately one third of the last twenty-two years of his ministry was spent out of the pulpit, either suffering, convalescing, or taking precautions against the return of illness" (Ibid., 2:193-194).

<sup>11</sup>God used the words of Philippians 2:9-11 to restore his soul.

<sup>12</sup>"But he carried the scars of that conflict to his dying day, and never afterwards had he the physical vigour and strength which he possessed before passing through that fierce trial" (C. H. Spurgeon *Autobiography*, 1:424).

<sup>13</sup>This controversy was given this name because fundamental doctrines were on the downgrade.

however, theological liberalism began to infect this body. After an unsuccessful effort to rid the Union of such influence, Spurgeon made the unpopular decision to withdraw from it in October of 1887<sup>14</sup>, a move for which he was censured by the BBU in January of 1888. Many are of the opinion that it was this battle, coupled with his tenuous health, that led to his premature death at the relatively young age of 57. Thus, in spite of the tremendous popularity Spurgeon enjoyed throughout his ministry, at the end of it, he stood virtually alone for truth's sake.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Death***

On January 31, 1892, Charles Haddon Spurgeon met His beloved Savior upon his death in Mentone, France due to kidney failure. Over 100,000 paid tribute to the "prince of preachers" at various memorial services. When his body was laid to rest in early February, the funeral procession stretched for over two miles.

### ***Secrets to His Success***

In studying the life of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, I believe one can identify several reasons why he was so extraordinarily used of God.

### ***His God-Given Abilities***

Mention has already been made (in footnote 5) of Spurgeon's native genius. He was also blessed with a booming voice, ideal for an age devoid of electronic acoustical equipment, which allowed him to preach to thousands on a regular basis. He was also blessed with a wonderful wit<sup>16</sup>, as well as with the rare ability to, in spite of his incredible intelligence, communicate in a way that resonated with the average Londoner.

### ***His Co-Laborers***

Spurgeon would not have been what he was were it not for an army of fellow soldiers who served alongside him, such as his private secretary, Joseph Harrald. Another such soldier was Lavinia Bartlett, who spent sixteen years teaching a Sunday School class for ladies in Spurgeon's church.<sup>17</sup> Under Ms. Bartlett's tutelage, the class grew to 800

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<sup>14</sup>Spurgeon wrote at the time: "Fellowship with known and vital error is participation in sin .... As soon as I saw, or thought I saw, that error had become firmly established, I did not deliberate, but quitted the body at once .... That I might not stultify my testimony I have cut myself clear of those who err from the faith, and even from those who associate with them" (quoted in Rolland McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled: The Failed Strategy of Modern Evangelicalism*, p. 151).

<sup>15</sup>In a sermon during the midst of the controversy, Spurgeon said: "Long ago I ceased to count heads. Truth is usually in the minority in this evil world. I have faith in the Lord Jesus for myself, a faith burned into me as with a hot iron. I thank God, what I believe I shall believe, even if I believe it alone" (Ian Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon*, p. 138).

<sup>16</sup>When criticized by a woman for his excessive use of humor in the pulpit, Spurgeon replied something to the effect that if the woman only knew how much of it he suppressed, she would be commending him for his self-control instead (*C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography*, 2:440). For other examples of his wit in action, see p. 209 of his *Lectures to My Students*, as well as 2:119 and 129-130 of his autobiography.

<sup>17</sup>Interestingly, Ms. Bartlett was asked to teach a different class, but upon arriving at the church the first day, she was misdirected to the class she would go on to teach for so many years, another one of God's great providential turns.

students. It is said that as many as a thousand ladies became members of the church because of her ministry. Spurgeon (tongue-in-cheek, of course) often called her his best deacon.

### *His Message*

When asked on one occasion for the secret to his success, Spurgeon replied, "I can tell you two reasons why I am what I am. My mother and the truth of my message." Spurgeon was committed to the truth of God's Word, particularly the so-called doctrines of grace (the total depravity and inability of man, unconditional election, particular redemption, invincible grace, and the perseverance of the saints). Accordingly, he has been dubbed "the last of the Puritans." Spurgeon's son, Charles said of his dad: "Although my judgment may be deemed very partial, I venture to express the opinion that, since the days of Paul, there has not lived a greater or more powerful exponent of the doctrines of grace ...."<sup>18</sup> Contrary to the oft-repeated, but erroneous charge that the belief that God is sovereign in salvation inhibits evangelistic fervor, Spurgeon was one of the most evangelistic men in church history.

### *Prayer*

"On one of his visits to the Continent Spurgeon met an American minister who said, 'I have long wished to see you, Mr. Spurgeon, and to put one or two simple questions to you. In our country there are many opinions as to the secret of your great influence. Would you be good enough to give me your own point of view?' After a moment's pause, Spurgeon said, 'My people pray for me.'<sup>19</sup> A significant factor in this regard was the weekly Monday night prayer meeting at the church, attended by over a thousand. There was also a weekly Thursday night prayer meeting, a weekly Sunday morning prayer meeting with the leadership, cottage prayer meetings on the weekends, and a week of prayer at the start of each year. When D. L. Moody reminisced about a visit he made to Spurgeon's church several years earlier, he wrote: "What impressed me most was not the praise, though I thought I had never heard such grand congregational singing; it was not Mr. Spurgeon's exposition, fine though it was, nor even his sermon; IT WAS HIS PRAYER. He seemed to have such access to God that he could bring down the power from heaven; that was the great secret of his influence and his success."

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<sup>18</sup>C. H. Spurgeon *Autobiography*, 2:278. For an excellent delineation of Spurgeon's beliefs in this regard, see Ian Murray's *The Forgotten Spurgeon*.

<sup>19</sup>Ian Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon*, p. 36. Spurgeon once wrote in this regard: "The sinew of the minister's strength under God is the supplication of his church. We can do anything and everything if we have a praying people around us. But when our dear friends and fellow helpers cease to pray, the Holy Ghost hastens to depart, and Ichabod is written on the place of assembly."