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# Charles Haddon Spurgeon on Depression

By Mitchel Pierce

“I know, perhaps as well as anyone, what depression means, and what it is to feel myself sinking lower and lower. Yet at the worst, when I reach the lowest depths, I have an inward peace which no pain or depression can in the least disturb. Trusting in Jesus Christ my Savior, there is still a blessed quietness in the deep caverns of my soul, though upon the surface, a rough tempest may be raging, and there may be little apparent calm.”

– C.H. Spurgeon<sup>1</sup>

Charles Haddon Spurgeon was one of the most influential Christian figures of his time, and his influence still continues to this day. Born third in a line of preachers, Spurgeon recalls that it was not until he was fifteen years old that he finally devoted his life to Christ. The very next day, he returned to school proclaiming Christ’s work in him. Thus began the boy’s long career of spreading the gospel. At seventeen, he accepted his first call as preacher. By twenty, he had preached over 600 times. By the end of his life he had preached to an estimated 10,000,000 people. Despite having no formal education, he is the most prolific author in Christian history at 139 books written, with 63 volumes of published sermons.<sup>2</sup> Throughout all of his successes, Spurgeon knew the pain of depression, despair and heartbreak more than most, yet nonetheless he was able to use his hardships to further spread the Kingdom of God.

His pain began five years before his conversion, at a mere ten years old. “The justice of God, like a ploughshare, tore my spirit,” Spurgeon recalls. “I was condemned, undone, destroyed—lost, helpless, hopeless—I thought hell was before me. . . . I prayed, but found no answer of peace. It was long with me thus.”<sup>3</sup> No pain would compare to the spiritual despair he felt before encountering Christ. Nonetheless, Spurgeon would go on to experience innumerable hardships, all adding to the burden of depression which he would continue to fight for the rest of his life.

One of his largest sources of depression was the trauma of Surrey Hall. On October 19, 1856, Spurgeon preached to a crowd of about twenty-two thousand in a building with a capacity of twelve thousand. While Spurgeon was in prayer, several people falsely shouted “Fire! The galleries are giving



*Charles Haddon Spurgeon by Alexander Melville; oil on canvas, 1885; NPG 2641*  
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<sup>1</sup> Tom Carter, *2200 Quotations from the Writings of Charles H. Spurgeon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1988), 52.

<sup>2</sup> Eric W. Hayden 1991, "Did You Know?" *Christian History* 29, no. 1 (1991), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Darrel W. Amundsen, "The Anguish and Agonies of Charles Spurgeon," *Christian History* 29, no. 1 (1991), 2.

way!” In the commotion, seven people were killed, with twenty-eight others seriously injured. The anguished Spurgeon had to be carried from the pulpit and spent several days at a friend’s house in deep depression. Spurgeon would later say, “I was pressed beyond measure and out of bounds with an enormous weight of misery. The tumult, the panic, the deaths, were day and night before me, and made life a burden.”<sup>4</sup> Spurgeon’s close friend later went on to speculate that his early death must have been in-part due to the mental suffering that the Surrey Hall Tragedy began.<sup>5</sup>

The second greatest source of suffering in Spurgeon’s life was his physical ailments. In 1868 Spurgeon’s wife Susannah became an invalid, unable to leave the house without assistance. She also would not be able to have children further than their twin sons Charles and Thomas.<sup>6</sup> Eventually, his own body would begin to fail. In 1879 he first began suffering from gout at age thirty-five. For the rest of his life he would become bed-ridden for months each year. On the disease, Spurgeon remarked,

“When I was racked some months ago with pain, to an extreme degree, so that I could no longer bear it without crying out, I asked all to go from the room, and leave me alone; and then I had nothing I could say to God but this, ‘Thou art my Father, and I am thy child; and thou, as a Father, art tender and full of mercy. I could not bear to see my child suffer as thou makest me suffer, and if I saw him tormented as I am now, I would do what I could to help him, and put my arms under him to sustain him. Wilt thou hide thy face from me, my Father? Wilt thou still lay on a heavy hand, and not give me a smile from thy countenance?’ . . . so I pleaded, and I ventured to say, when I was quiet, and they came back who watched me: ‘I shall never have such pain again from this moment, for God has heard my prayer.’ I bless God that ease came and the racking pain never returned.”<sup>7</sup>

His pain from the disease continued as the time went on. Spurgeon’s times of recuperation and resting due to the illness would become more and more frequent. It was at this time that he began to regularly visit Mentone in southern France to recover.

In the March of 1887, Spurgeon and his church faced an enormous conflict: The Down-Grade Controversy. In his monthly magazine, *The Sword and the Trowel*, Spurgeon published an article speaking out against the progressive liberalism in the Baptist Union. He stated that the Baptist Union was compromising three essential doctrines: the infallibility of the Bible, substitutionary atonement, and the final judgement for those who died outside of Christ. His protest was to no avail: and after a year of conflict, Spurgeon and his church resigned from the Baptist Union. This departure would continue to pain Spurgeon for the rest of his life. Spurgeon would go on to say that in the Controversy he had “suffered the loss of friendships and reputation, and the infliction of pecuniary withdrawals and bitter reproach. . . . But the pain it has cost me none can measure.”<sup>8</sup> Even at the end of his life this pain still ailed the aged Spurgeon. “Goodbye; you will never see me again. This fight is killing me,” Spurgeon wrote to a friend less than a year before his death.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1854), 162.

<sup>5</sup> Amundsen, “Anguish and Agonies” 23.

<sup>6</sup> Richard E. Day, *Shadow of the Broad Brim* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1934). 112.

<sup>7</sup> Amundsen, “Anguish and Agonies,” 24.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Often times, Spurgeon's depression would be influenced by the many tasks that he undertook in his ministry. Between looking over his orphanage, leading a church of four-thousand, the weekly sermon, his magazine *The Sword and the Trowel*, the five hundred weekly letters, and supporting countless church connections, Spurgeon had his hands full.<sup>10</sup> He often worked 18 hours a day, about which explorer and missionary David Livingston once asked "How do you manage to do two men's work in a single day?" Spurgeon replied, "You have forgotten there are two of us" referring to his partnership with Christ.<sup>11</sup> Amidst all of this toil, Spurgeon would say "I cannot yet call myself free from fits of deep depression, which are the result of brain-weariness; but I am having them less frequently, and therefore I hope they will vanish altogether."<sup>12</sup>



*Charles Spurgeon at the age of twenty-three.*

Sometimes Spurgeon's struggle with depression did not have any clear source at all. At just twenty-four, Spurgeon remarked, "My spirits were sunken so low that I could weep by the hour like a child, and yet I knew not what I wept for."<sup>13</sup> Later in his life Spurgeon would go on to say, "Causeless depression cannot be reasoned with, nor can David's harp charm it away by sweet discourings. As well fight with the mist as with this shapeless, undefinable, yet all-beclouding hopelessness ... The iron bolt which so mysteriously fastens the door of hope and holds our spirits in gloomy prison, needs a heavenly hand to push it back."<sup>14</sup>

This "heavenly hand" is exactly what would sustain Spurgeon throughout his depression. Amidst the strife with which he struggled throughout his life he had hope. "The way to stronger faith usually lies along the rough pathway of sorrow," he said. ". . . I am afraid that all the grace that I have got out of my comfortable and easy times and happy hours, might almost lie on a penny. But the good that I have received from my sorrows, and pains, and griefs, is altogether incalculable. . . . Affliction is the best bit of furniture in my house. It is the best book in a minister's library."<sup>15</sup> Behind every fit of depression, every onset of gout, every piercing feeling of despair, he found hope that there was a purpose to his suffering.

Spurgeon was able to find this hope in every situation because his eyes were fixed on the sovereignty of God. "If you drink of the river of affliction near its outfall, it is brackish and offensive to the taste, but if you will trace it to its source, where it rises at the foot of the throne of God, you will find its waters to be sweet and health-giving."<sup>16</sup> During each occurrence of hardship he looked to the Lord, knowing full well that He held the reigns on each and every trial and tribulation that Spurgeon was enduring.

On one occasion, after nearly a month of being unable to preach due to illness, Spurgeon taught on 1 Peter 1:6, "Wherein ye greatly rejoice though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptation." He recalls, "this text flashed upon my mind, with its real meaning . . . that sometimes the Christian should not endure his sufferings with a gallant and a joyous heart . . . that

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<sup>10</sup> John Piper, "Charles Spurgeon: Preaching Through Adversity," *Desiring God*, 1995, accessed January 29, 2018. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/charles-spurgeon-preaching-through-adversity>.

<sup>11</sup> Hayden, "Did You Know?," 3.

<sup>12</sup> Christian George, "11 Reasons Spurgeon Was Depressed," *The Spurgeon Center*, 2017, accessed April 29, 2018. <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/blog-entries/11-reasons-spurgeon-was-depressed>.

<sup>13</sup> Piper, "Charles Spurgeon."

<sup>14</sup> Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 163.

<sup>15</sup> Amundsen, "Anguish and Agonies," 25.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

sometimes his spirits should sink within him, and that he should become even as a little child smitten beneath the hand of God.”<sup>17</sup> To Spurgeon, suffering was necessary. In some cases, the purpose is to be humbled and reverent of the Lord.

Spurgeon knew that depression was a part of life. As a minister of the gospel, he was especially susceptible to the attacks of Satan. Throughout his ministry, he found that in his deepest, darkest moments of depression, a larger blessing for his ministry was on the way. As the cliché saying goes, “It is always darkest before the dawn.” Spurgeon would agree from personal experience, likening the depression to John the Baptist, proclaiming that great blessing on its way.<sup>18</sup>

The great joy that Spurgeon found through his suffering was the ability to bless others through the circumstances that he experienced. With his depression and anguish, he was able to comfort others who were going through the same trials. Spurgeon himself said that he would go into the deep a hundred times if but to be able to cheer one downcast soul.<sup>19</sup> In one of his sermons Spurgeon preached,

“I often feel very grateful to God that I have undergone fearful depression. I know the borders of despair and the horrible brink of that gulf of darkness into which my feet have almost gone. But hundreds of times I have been able to give a helpful grip to brethren and sisters who have come into that same condition, which grip I could never have given if I had not known their despondency. So I believe that the darkest and most dreadful experience of a child of God will help him to be a fisher of men if he will but follow Christ.”<sup>20</sup>

His anthem for this comforting comes from the words of Paul himself. 1 Corinthians 1:3-4 says, “Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted by God.” Spurgeon, not lacking in any anguish, found his hope in being able to help those who were also enduring anguish.

Through all of this, the single greatest hope that Charles Spurgeon found was in the Gospel of Christ Jesus. For this reason he was able to endure deep depression from spiritual despair, trauma, physical ailments, controversy, divisions, and toil. In Spurgeon’s own words, “For me there is no joy in life and no hope in death except in that gospel which I have continually expounded here.”<sup>21</sup> In every hardship and turmoil, Spurgeon held onto the hope of the gospel, that the Son of God Jesus Christ walked upon the earth, was crucified, was buried, resurrected, and now lives and pleads for sinners at the right hand of the Father. It is appropriate to end on the closing words of Spurgeon’s final sermon on June 7, 1891,

“He is the most magnanimous of captains. There never was his like among the choicest of princes. He is always to be found in the thickest part of the battle. When the wind blows cold he always takes the bleak side of the hill. The heaviest end of the cross lies ever on his shoulders. If he bids us carry a burden, he carries it also. If there is anything

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>18</sup> Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 160.

<sup>19</sup> Amundsen, “Anguish and Agonies,” 24.

<sup>20</sup> Carter, *2200 Quotations*, 56

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 86.

that is gracious, generous, kind, and tender, yea lavish and superabundant in love, you always find it in him. These forty years and more have I served him, blessed be his name! and I have had nothing but love from him. I would be glad to continue yet another forty years in the same dear service here below if so it pleased him. His service is life, peace, joy. Oh, that you would enter on it at once! God help you to enlist under the banner of Jesus even this day! Amen.”

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