

Charles Spurgeon: Preaching Through Adversity

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[Adapted from a paper delivered at the Bethlehem Conference for Pastors, January 31, 1995.]

A Personal Introduction

Charles Haddon Spurgeon died January 31, 1892 at the age of 57. He had preached 38 years at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London. His life is filled with instruction for Christians, especially for pastors.

Everyone faces adversity and must find ways to persevere through the oppressing moments of life. Everyone must get up and make breakfast, and wash clothes, and go to work, and pay bills, and discipline children and generally keep life going when the heart is breaking.

But it is different with pastors-not totally different, but different. The heart is the instrument of our vocation. Spurgeon said, "Ours is more than mental work-it is heart work, the labour of our inmost soul."[\[1\]](#) So when our heart is breaking we must labor with a broken instrument. Preaching is our main work. And preaching is heart work, not just mental work. So the question for us is not just, "How do I keep on *living* when the marriage is blank, when a child has run away, when the finances don't reach, and when pews are bare and friends have forsaken me?" No, the question for us is much more than, "How do I keep on *living*?" It is, "How do I keep on *preaching*?" It's one thing to *survive* adversity; it is something very different to keep on preaching, Sunday after Sunday, month after month, when the heart is overwhelmed.

Spurgeon said to the students of his pastors' college, "One crushing stroke has sometimes laid the minister very low. The brother most relied upon becomes a traitor....Ten years of toil do not take so much life out of us as we lose in a few hours by Ahithophel the traitor, or Demas the apostate."[\[2\]](#) The question for the pastor is not merely, "How do you *live* through unremitting criticism and distrust and accusation and abandonment?" For pastors, the question is also, "How do you *preach* through it?" How does the preacher do heart work when the heart is under siege and ready to fall? For the last year that has been perhaps the uppermost question of my life. Inevitably, it will at some point be a foremost question in the mind of every pastor. I remember a phone conversation with the wife of a faithful, godly pastor. Her husband was under so much criticism and accusation that she

found it hard to go to church. She marveled that he could preach the previous Sunday morning.

Preaching great and glorious truth in an atmosphere that is not great and glorious is an immense difficulty. To be reminded week in and week out that many people regard your preaching of the glory of the grace of God as hypocrisy pushes a preacher not just into the hills of introspection, but sometimes to the precipice of self-extinction.

By that I do not mean suicide. I mean something more complex. I mean the deranging inability to know any longer who you are. What begins as a searching introspection for the sake of holiness and humility gradually becomes, for various reasons, a carnival of mirrors in your soul: you look in one and you're short and fat; you look in another and you're tall and skinny; you look in another and you're upside down. Then the horrible feeling begins to break over you that you don't know who you are any more. The center is not holding. And if the center doesn't hold-if there is no fixed and solid "I" able to relate to the fixed and solid "Thou," namely, God, then who will preach next Sunday?

When the apostle Paul said in 1 Cor. 15:10, "By the grace of God, I am what I am," he was saying something utterly essential for the survival of preachers in adversity. If, by grace, the identity of the "I"-the "I" created by Christ and united to Christ, but still a human "I"-if that center does not hold, there will be no more authentic preaching, for there will be no more authentic preacher, but only a collection of echoes.

O, how fortunate we modern pastors are, that we are not the first to face these things! I thank God for the healing history of the power of God in the lives of saints. For the sake of survival every pastor should *live in other centuries with other saints*.

I have turned to Charles Spurgeon in these days for help, and I have not been disappointed. My purpose in this article is to show how Spurgeon's life and ministry can encourage pastors to keep on preaching through adversity.

Why Spurgeon?

There are 7 characteristics that qualify Spurgeon as a helpful guide to preachers who need strength to preach through adversity.

1st, He Was a Preacher

First, because Spurgeon was preeminently a preacher. He preached over 600 times before he was 20 years old. His sermons sold about 25,000 copies a week and were translated into 20 languages. The collected sermons fill 63 volumes equivalent to the 27 volume ninth edition of *Encyclopedia*

Britannica, and "stands as the largest set of books by a single author in the history of Christianity."[\[3\]](#)

In the words of his son, Charles, "There was no one who could preach like my father. In inexhaustible variety, witty wisdom, vigorous proclamation, loving entreaty, and lucid teaching, with a multitude of other qualities, he must, at least in my opinion, ever be regarded as the prince of preachers."[\[4\]](#) Spurgeon was a preacher.

2nd, He Was a Truth-Driven Preacher

Secondly, Spurgeon was a truth-driven preacher. I am not interested in how preachers deal with adversity if they are not first and foremost guardians and givers of unchanging Biblical truth. If they find their way through adversity by other means than faithfulness to truth, I turn away.

Spurgeon defined the work of the preacher like this: "To know truth as it should be known, to love it as it should be loved, and then to proclaim it in the right spirit, and in its proper proportions."[\[5\]](#) He said to his students, "To be effective preachers you must be sound theologians."[\[6\]](#) He warned that "those who do away with Christian doctrine are, whether they are aware of it or not, the worst enemies of Christian living...[because] the coals of orthodoxy are necessary to the fire of piety."[\[7\]](#)

Two years before he died he said,

Some excellent brethren seem to think more of the *life* than of the *truth*; for when I warn them that the enemy has poisoned the children's bread, they answer "Dear brother, we are sorry to hear it; and, to counteract the evil, we will open the window, and give the children fresh air." Yes, open the window, and give them fresh air, by all means....But, at the same time, this ought you to have done, and not to have left the other undone. Arrest the poisoners, and open the windows, too. While men go on preaching false doctrine, you may talk as much as you will about deepening their spiritual life, but you will fail in it.[\[8\]](#)

Doctrinal truth was at the foundation and superstructure of all Spurgeon's labors.

3rd, He Was a Bible-Believing Preacher

Further, the truth that drove his preaching ministry was Biblical truth, which he believed to be God's truth. He held up his Bible and said,

These words are God's....Thou book of vast authority, thou art a proclamation from the Emperor of Heaven; far be it from me to exercise my reason in contradicting thee....This is the book untainted by any error; but it is pure unalloyed, perfect truth. Why? Because God wrote it.[\[9\]](#)

What a difference where this allegiance holds sway in the hearts of preachers and people. I had lunch with a man recently who bemoaned the atmosphere of his Sunday School class. He characterized it like this: if a person raises a question to discuss, and another reads a relevant Bible verse, the class communicates, "Now we have heard what Jesus thinks, what do you think?"

Where that atmosphere begins to take over the pulpit and the church, defection from truth and weakness in holiness are not far behind.

4th, He Was a Soul-winning Preacher

There was not a week that went by in his mature ministry that souls were not saved through his written sermons.[\[10\]](#) He and his elders were always on the "watch for souls" in the great congregation. "One brother," he said, "has earned for himself the title of my hunting dog, for he is always ready to pick up the wounded birds."[\[11\]](#)

Spurgeon was not exaggerating when he said,

I remember, when I have preached at different times in the country, and sometimes here, that my whole soul has agonized over men, every nerve of my body has been strained and I could have wept my very being out of my eyes and carried my whole frame away in a flood of tears, if I could but win souls.[\[12\]](#)

He was consumed with the glory of God and the salvation of men.

5th, He Was a Calvinistic Preacher

He was my kind of Calvinist. Let me give you a flavor of why his Calvinism drew 5,000 people a week to his church rather than driving them away. He said,

To me, Calvinism means the placing of the eternal God at the head of all things. I look at everything through its relation to God's glory. I see God first, and man far down in the list....Brethren, if we live in sympathy with God, we delight to hear Him say, "I am God, and there is none else."[\[13\]](#)

For Spurgeon, "Puritanism, Protestantism, Calvinism [were simply]...poor names which the world has given to our great and glorious faith, -the doctrine of Paul the apostle, the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."[\[14\]](#)

But he did make distinctions between the full system, which he did embrace, and some central, evangelical doctrines shared by others that bound him together with them-like his favorite, the doctrine of the substitution of Christ for sinners. He said, "Far be it for me to imagine that Zion contains none but

Calvinistic Christians within her walls, or that there are none saved who do not hold our views."[\[15\]](#)

He said, "I am not an outrageous Protestant generally, and I rejoice to confess that I feel sure there are some of God's people even in the Romish Church."[\[16\]](#) He chose a paedobaptist to be the first head of his pastor's college, and did not make that issue a barrier to who preached in his pulpit. His communion was open to all Christians, but he said he "would rather give up his pastorate than admit any man to the church who was not obedient to his Lord's command [of baptism]."[\[17\]](#)

His first words in the Metropolitan Tabernacle, the place he built to preach in for thirty years:

I would propose that the subject of the ministry in this house, as long as this platform shall stand and as long as this house shall be frequented by worshippers, shall be the person of Jesus Christ. I am never ashamed to avow myself a Calvinist; I do not hesitate to take the name of Baptist; but if I am asked what is my creed, I reply, "It is Jesus Christ."[\[18\]](#)

But he believed that Calvinism honored that Christ most fully because it was most true. And he preached it explicitly, and tried to work it into the minds of his people, because he said, "Calvinism has in it a conservative force which helps to hold men to vital truth."[\[19\]](#)

Therefore, he was open and unashamed: "People come to me for one thing...I preach to them a Calvinist creed and a Puritan morality. That is what they want and that is what they get. If they want anything else they must go elsewhere."[\[20\]](#)

6th, He Was a Hard-Working Preacher

Sixthly, I do not look to soft and leisurely men to instruct me how to endure adversity. If the main answer is, "Take it easy," I look for another teacher. Take a glimpse of this man's capacity for work:

No one living knows the toil and care I have to bear....I have to look after the Orphanage, have charge of a church with four thousand members, sometimes there are marriages and burials to be undertaken, there is the weekly sermon to be revised, *The Sword and the Trowel* to be edited, and besides all that, a weekly average of five hundred letters to be answered. This, however, is only half my duty, for there are innumerable churches established by friends, with the affairs of which I am closely connected, to say nothing of the cases of difficulty which are constantly being referred to me.[\[21\]](#)

At his 50th birthday a list of 66 organizations was read that he founded and conducted. Lord Shaftesbury was there and said, "This list of associations, instituted by his genius, and superintended by his care, were more than enough to occupy the minds and hearts of fifty ordinary men." [22]

He typically read six substantial books a week and could remember what he read and where to find it. [23] He produced more than 140 books of his own-books like *The Treasury of David*, which was twenty years in the making, and *Morning and Evening*, and *Commenting on Commentaries*, and *John Ploughman's Talk*, and *Our Own Hymnbook*. [24]

He often worked 18 hours in a day. The missionary, David Livingstone, asked him once, "How do you manage to do two men's work in a single day?" Spurgeon replied, "You have forgotten there are two of us." [25] I think he meant the presence of Christ's energizing power that we read about in Colossians 1:29. Paul says, "I labor, striving according to *His power, which mightily works within me*." "There are two of us."

Spurgeon's attitude toward sacrificial labor would not be acceptable today where the primacy of "wellness" seems to hold sway. He said,

If by excessive labour, we die before reaching the average age of man, worn out in the Master's service, then glory be to God, we shall have so much less of earth and so much more of Heaven! [26]

It is our duty and our privilege to exhaust our lives for Jesus. We are not to be living specimens of men in fine preservation, but living *sacrifices*, whose lot is to be consumed. [27]

Behind this radical view point were some deep Biblical convictions that come through the apostle Paul's teaching. One of these convictions Spurgeon expressed like this:

We can only produce life in others by the wear and tear of our own being. This is a natural and spiritual law,-that fruit can only come to the seed by its spending and be spent even to self-exhaustion. [28]

The apostle Paul said, "If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation" (2 Cor. 1:6). "Death works in us, but life in you" (2 Cor. 4:12).

And he said that his own sufferings were the completion of Christ's sufferings for the sake of the church (Col. 1:24).

Another Biblical conviction behind Spurgeon's radical view of pastoral zeal is expressed like this:

Satisfaction with results will be the [death] knell of progress. No man is good who thinks that he cannot be better. He has no holiness who thinks that he is holy enough.[\[29\]](#)

In other words, he was driven with a passion never to be satisfied with the measure of his holiness or the extent of his service (cf. Phil. 3:12). The year he turned 40 he delivered a message to his pastors' conference with the one-word title, "Forward!"[\[30\]](#) In it he said,

In every minister's life there should be traces of stern labour. Brethren, do something; *do something*; DO SOMETHING. While Committees waste their time over resolutions, do something. While Societies and Unions are making constitutions, let us win souls. Too often we discuss, and discuss, and discuss, while Satan only laughs in his sleeve....Get to work and quit yourselves like men.[\[31\]](#)

I think the word "indefatigable" was created for people like Charles Spurgeon.

7th, He Was a Maligned and Suffering Preacher

The seventh reason that qualifies Spurgeon for this type of study is the fact that he knew the whole range of adversity that most preachers suffer-and a lot more. This point deserves some elaboration.

Spurgeon knew the everyday, homegrown variety of frustration and disappointment which every pastor experiences from luke-warm church members.

You know what one cold-hearted man can do, if he gets at you on Sunday morning with a lump of ice, and freezes you with the information that Mrs. Smith and all her family are offended, and their pew is vacant. You did not want to know of that lady's protest just before entering the pulpit, and it does not help you.[\[32\]](#)

Perhaps even worse are those occasions when frustration is provoked after the service.

What terrible blankets some professors are! Their remarks after a sermon are enough to stagger you....You have been pleading as for life or death and they have been calculating how many seconds the sermon occupied, and grudging you the odd five minutes beyond the usual hour.[\[33\]](#)

It is worse still, Spurgeon says, if the calculating observer is one of your deacons.

`Thou shalt not yoke the ox and the ass together' was a merciful precept: but when a laborious, ox-like minister comes to be yoked to a deacon who is not another ox, it becomes hard work to plough.[\[34\]](#)

In addition to common disappointments, Spurgeon also experienced the extraordinary calamities that come once in a lifetime.

On October 19, 1856 he preached for the first time in the Music Hall of the Royal Surrey Gardens because his own church would not hold the people. The 10,000 seating capacity was far exceeded as the crowds pressed in. Someone shouted, "Fire!" and there was great panic in parts of the building. Seven people were killed in the stampede and scores were injured. Spurgeon was 22 years old and was overcome by this calamity. He said later, "Perhaps never soul went so near the burning furnace of insanity, and yet came away unharmed." But not all agreed he was unharmed. The specter brooded over him for years and one close friend and biographer said, "I cannot but think, from what I saw, that his comparatively early death might be in some measure due to the furnace of mental suffering he endured on and after that fearful night."[\[35\]](#)

Spurgeon also knew the adversity of family pain. He had married Susannah Thomson January 8 in the same year of the calamity at Surrey Gardens. His only two children, twin sons, were born the day after the calamity on October 20. Susannah was never able to have more children. In 1865 (nine years later), when she was 33 years old she became a virtual invalid and seldom heard her husband preach for the next 27 years till his death. Some kind of rare cervical operation was attempted in 1869 by James Simpson, the father of modern gynecology, but to no avail.[\[36\]](#) So to Spurgeon's other burdens were added a sickly wife and the inability to have more children, though his own mother had given birth to seventeen.

He also knew unbelievable physical pain. Spurgeon suffered from gout, rheumatism and Bright's disease (inflammation of the kidneys). His first attack of gout came in 1869 at the age of 35. It became progressively worse so that "approximately one third of the last twenty-two years of his ministry was spent out of the Tabernacle pulpit, either suffering, or convalescing, or taking precautions against the return of the illness."[\[37\]](#) In a letter to a friend he wrote, "Lucian says, 'I thought a cobra had bitten me, and filled my veins with poison; but it was worse,-it was gout.' That was written from experience, I know."[\[38\]](#)

For over half his ministry Spurgeon dealt with ever increasingly recurrent pain in his joints that cut him down from the pulpit and from his labors again and again. The diseases finally took his life at age 57 while he was convalescing in Mentone, France.

On top of the physical suffering Spurgeon had to endure a life time of public ridicule and slander, sometimes of the most vicious kind. In April 1855 the *Essex Standard* carried an article with these words:

His style is that of the vulgar colloquial, varied by rant....All the most solemn mysteries of our holy religion are by him rudely, roughly and impiously handled. Common sense is outraged and decency disgusted. His rantings are interspersed with coarse anecdotes.[\[39\]](#)

The Sheffield and Rotherham *Independent* said,

He is a nine days' wonder-a comet that has suddenly shot across the religious atmosphere. He has gone up like a rocket and ere long will come down like a stick.[\[40\]](#)

His wife kept a bulging scrapbook of such criticisms from the years 1855-56. Some of it was easy to brush off. Most of it wasn't. In 1857 he wrote:

Down on my knees have I often fallen, with the hot sweat rising from my brow under some fresh slander poured upon me; in an agony of grief my heart has been well-nigh broken.[\[41\]](#)

His fellow ministers criticized from the right and from the left. Across town, from the left, Joseph Parker wrote,

Mr. Spurgeon was absolutely destitute of intellectual benevolence. If men saw as he did they were orthodox; if they saw things in some other way they were heterodox, pestilent and unfit to lead the minds of students or inquirers. Mr. Spurgeon's was a superlative egotism; not the shilly-shallying, timid, half-disguised egotism that cuts off its own head, but the full-grown, over-powering, sublime egotism that takes the chief seat as if by right. The only colors which Mr. Spurgeon recognized were black and white.[\[42\]](#)

And from the right James Wells, the hyper-Calvinist, wrote, "I have-most solemnly have-my doubts as to the Divine reality of his conversion."[\[43\]](#)

All the embattlements of his life came to climax in the Downgrade Controversy as Spurgeon fought unsuccessfully for the doctrinal integrity of

the Baptist Union. In October 1887 he withdrew from the Union. And the following January he was officially and publicly censured by a vote of the Union for his manner of protest.[\[44\]](#)

Eight years earlier he had said,

Men cannot say anything worse of me than they have said. I have been belied from head to foot, and misrepresented to the last degree. My good looks are gone, and none can damage me much now.[\[45\]](#)

He gives an example of the kinds of distortions and misrepresentations that were typical in the Downgrade Controversy:

The doctrine of eternal punishment has been scarcely raised by me in this controversy; but the `modern thought' advocates continue to hold it up on all occasions, all the while turning the wrong side of it outwards.[\[46\]](#)

But even though he usually sounded rough and ready, the pain was overwhelming and deadly. In May of 1891 eight months before he died he said to a friend, "Good-bye; you will never see me again. This fight is killing me."[\[47\]](#)

The final adversity to be considered was the result of all the others-Spurgeon's recurrent battles with depression.

It is not easy to imagine the omni-competent, eloquent, brilliant, full-of-energy Spurgeon weeping like a baby for no reason that he could think of. In 1858, at age 24, it happened for the first time. He said, "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."[\[48\]](#)

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[\[49\]](#)

He saw his depression as his "worst feature." "Despondency," he said, "is not a virtue; I believe it is a vice. I am heartily ashamed of myself for falling into it, but I am sure there is no remedy for it like a holy faith in God."[\[50\]](#)

How Did Spurgeon Do It?

In spite of all these sufferings and persecutions, Spurgeon endured to the end, and was able to preach mightily until his last sermon at the Tabernacle on June 7, 1891. So the question which begs to be asked in studying this man's life and work is, "How did he persevere and preach through this adversity?"

O, how many strategies of grace abound in the life of Spurgeon! Those selected for this article are very limited and personal. The scope of this man's warfare, and the wisdom of his strategies were immense. Consider first the issue of despondency and depression. If this one can be conquered, all the other forms of adversity that feed into it will be nullified in their killing effect.

Belief that God is Sovereign Over Depression

Spurgeon saw his depression as the design of God for the good of his ministry and the glory of Christ. What comes through again and again is his unwavering belief in the sovereignty of God in all his afflictions. More than anything else, this kept him from caving in to the adversities of his life. He said,

It would be a very sharp and trying experience to me to think that I have an affliction which God never sent me, that the bitter cup was never filled by his hand, that my trials were never measured out by him, nor sent to me by his arrangement of their weight and quantity.[\[51\]](#)

This is exactly the opposite strategy of modern thought, even much evangelical thought, that recoils from the implications of infinity. If God is God, He not only knows what is coming, but He knows it because He designs it. For Spurgeon this view of God was not primarily an argument for debate, it was a means of survival.

Our afflictions are the health regimen of an infinitely wise Physician. He told his students,

I dare say the greatest earthly blessing that God can give to any of us is health, *with the exception of sickness*....If some men, that I know of could only be favoured with a month of rheumatism, it would, by God's grace mellow them marvelously.[\[52\]](#)

He meant this mainly for himself. Though he dreaded suffering and would willingly avoid it, he said,

I am afraid that all the grace that I have got 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.[\[53\]](#)

He saw three specific purposes of God in his struggle with depression. The first is that it functioned like the apostle Paul's thorn to keep him humble lest he be lifted up in himself. He said the Lord's work is summed up in these words:

`Not by might nor by power but by my Spirit, saith the Lord.' Instruments shall be used, but their intrinsic weakness shall be clearly manifested; there shall be no division of the glory, no diminishing of the honor due to the Great Worker....Those who are honoured of their Lord in public have usually to endure a secret chastening, or to carry a peculiar cross, lest by any means they exalt themselves, and fall into the snare of the devil.[\[54\]](#)

The second purpose of God in his despondency was the unexpected power it gave to his ministry:

One Sabbath morning, I preached from the text, `My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?' and though I did not say so, yet I preached my own experience. I heard my own chains clank while I tried to preach to my fellow-prisoners in the dark; but I could not tell why I was brought into such an awful horror of darkness, for which I condemned myself. On the following Monday evening, a man came to see me who bore all the marks of despair upon his countenance. His hair seemed to stand up right, and his eyes were ready to start from their sockets. He said to me, after a little parleying, "I never before, in my life, heard any man speak who seemed to know my heart. Mine is a terrible case; but on Sunday morning you painted me to the life, and preached as if you had been inside my soul." By God's grace I saved that man from suicide, and led him into gospel light and liberty; but I know I could not have done it if I had not myself been confined in the dungeon in which he lay. I tell you the story, brethren, because you sometimes may not understand your own experience, and the perfect people may condemn you for having it; but what know they of God's servants? You and I have to suffer much for the sake of the people of our charge....You may be in Egyptian darkness, and you may wonder why such a horror chills your marrow; but you may be altogether in the pursuit of your calling, and be led of the Spirit to a position of sympathy with desponding minds.[\[55\]](#)

The third design of his depression was what he called a prophetic signal for the future. This has given me much encouragement in my own situation.

This depression comes over me whenever the Lord is preparing a larger blessing for my ministry; the cloud is black before it breaks, and overshadows before it yields its deluge of mercy. Depression has now become to me as a prophet in rough clothing, a John the Baptist, heralding the nearer coming of my Lord's richer benison.[\[56\]](#)

I would say with Spurgeon that in the darkest hours it is the sovereign goodness of God that has given me the strength to go on-the granite promise that He rules over my circumstances and means it for good no matter what anyone else means.

Proper Use of Rest and Nature

Very practically Spurgeon supplements his theological survival strategy with God's natural means of survival-the use of rest and nature. For all his talk about spending and being spent, he counsels us to rest, take a day off and open ourselves to the healing powers God has put in the world of nature. "Our Sabbath is our day of toil," he said, "and if we do not rest upon some other day we shall break down."[\[57\]](#) Eric Hayden reminds us that Spurgeon "kept , when possible, Wednesday as his day of rest."[\[58\]](#) More than that Spurgeon said to his students,

It is wisdom to take occasional furlough. In the long run, we shall do more by sometimes doing less. On, on, on for ever, without recreation may suit spirits emancipated from this

"heavy clay", but while we are in this tabernacle, we must every now and then cry halt, and serve the Lord by holy inaction and consecrated leisure. Let no tender conscience doubt the lawfulness of going out of harness for a while.[\[59\]](#)

I can testify that the four extra weeks that the church gave me last summer were crucial weeks in breathing a different spiritual air.

And when we take time away from the press of duty, Spurgeon recommends that we breathe country air and let the beauty of nature do its appointed work. He confesses that "sedentary habits have tendency to create despondency...especially in the months of fog." Then he counsels, "A mouthful of sea air, or a stiff walk in the wind's face would not give grace to the soul, but it would yield oxygen to the body, which is next best."[\[60\]](#) I must speak a personal word to younger ministers. I am finishing my 15th year at Bethlehem and I just celebrated by 49th birthday. I have watched

my body and my soul with some care over these years and noticed some changes. They are partly owing to changing circumstances, but much is owing to a changing constitution. One, I cannot eat as much without gaining unhelpful weight. My body does not metabolize the same way it used to.

Another is that I am emotionally less resilient when I lose sleep. There were early days when I would work without regard to sleep and feel energized and motivated. In the last seven or eight years my threshold for despondency is much lower. For me, adequate sleep is not a matter of staying healthy. It is a matter of staying in the ministry. It is irrational that my future should look bleaker when I get four or five hours sleep several nights in a row. But that is irrelevant. Those are the facts. And I must live within the limits of facts. I commend sufficient sleep to you, for the sake of your proper assessment of God and his promises.

Spurgeon was right when he said,

The condition of your body must be attended to...a little more...common sense would be a great gain to some who are ultra spiritual, and attribute all their moods of feeling to some supernatural cause when the real reason lies far nearer to hand. Has it not often happened that dyspepsia has been mistaken for backsliding, and bad digestion has been set down as a hard heart? [\[61\]](#)

Prayer and Meditation

Spurgeon consistently nourished his soul by communion with Christ through prayer and meditation. John Owen's book, *Communion with God*, has nourished me again and again when the soul asked, "Can God spread a table in the wilderness?" Spurgeon gave careful attention to his own spiritual life. He warned his students,

Never neglect your spiritual meals, or you will lack stamina and your spirits will sink. Live on the substantial doctrines of grace, and you will outlive and out-work those who delight in the pastry and syllabubs of "modern thought" [\[62\]](#)

One reason Spurgeon was so rich in language, full in doctrinal substance and strong in spirit, in spite of his despondency, physical oppression and his embattlements, is that he was always immersed in a great book-six a week. We cannot match that number. But we can always be walking with some great "see-er" of God. I walked with Owen most of last year on and off little by little and felt myself strengthened by a great grasp of God's reality.

Spurgeon demonstrates that the key in all good reading of theology is utterly real fellowship with Christ.

Above all, feed the flame with intimate fellowship with Christ. No man was ever cold in heart who lived with Jesus on such terms as John and Mary did of old....I never met with a half-hearted preacher who was much in communion with the Lord Jesus. [63]

In many ways Spurgeon was a child in his communion with God. He did not speak in complex terms about anything too strange or mystical. In fact, his prayer life seems more business-like than contemplative.

When I pray, I like to go to God just as I go to a bank clerk when I have a cheque to be cashed. I walk in, put the cheque down on the counter, and the clerk gives me my money, I take it up, and go about my business. I do not know that I ever stopped in a bank five minutes to talk with the clerks; when I have received my change I go away and attend to other matters. That is how I like to pray; but there is a way of praying that seems like lounging near the mercy seat as though one had no particular reason for being found there. [64]

This may not be entirely exemplary. It may dishonor the Lord to treat him like a bank clerk rather than like a mountain spring. But it would be a mistake to think that Spurgeon's business-like praying was anything other than childlike communion with his Father. The most touching description I have read of his communion with God comes from 1871 when he was in terrible pain with gout.

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.[65]

If we are going to preach through adversity we will have to live in communion with God on such intimate terms-speaking to him our needs and our pain, and feeding on the grace of his promises and the revelations of God's glory.

Meditation on Eternity

Spurgeon rekindled the zeal and passion to preach by fixing his eyes on eternity rather than the immediate price of faithfulness. The apostle Paul saw that the outer nature was wasting away. What kept him going was the abiding assurance that this momentary affliction was working for him an eternal weight of glory. Therefore he looked to the things that are eternal (2 Cor. 4:16-18). So did Spurgeon.

O brethren, (he said to his pastors' conference) we shall soon have to die! We look each other in the face to-day in health, but there will come a day when others will look down upon our pallid countenances as we lie in our coffins....It will matter little to us who shall gaze upon us then, but it will matter eternally how we have discharged our work during our lifetime. [\[66\]](#)

When our hearts grow faint and our zeal wavers for the task of preaching he calls us to

Meditate with deep solemnity upon the fate of the lost sinner....Shun all views of future punishment which would make it appear less terrible, and so take off the edge of your anxiety to save immortals from the quenchless flame....Think much also of the bliss of the sinner saved, and like holy Baxter derive rich arguments for earnestness from "the saints' everlasting rest"...There will be no fear of your being lethargic if you are continually familiar with eternal realities. [\[67\]](#)

Spurgeon took the long view when it came to his own persecution. In the Downgrade controversy he said,

Posterity must be considered. I do not look so much at what is to happen to-day, for these things relate to eternity. For my part, I am quite willing to be eaten of dogs for the next fifty years; but the more distant future shall vindicate me. I have dealt honestly before the living God. My brother, do the same. [\[68\]](#)

To keep on preaching in storm of adversity, you must look well beyond the crisis and feelings of the hour. You must look to what history will make of your faithfulness and most of all to what God will make of it at the last day.

Peace with Himself

For Spurgeon a key to his perseverance in preaching through adversity was that he had settled who he was and would not be paralyzed with external criticism or internal second-guessing. One of the great perils of living under continual criticism is that this is a constant call for you to be other than what

you are. And, in fact, a humble saint always wants to be a better person than he is. But there is a great danger here of losing your bearings in sea of self-doubt; not knowing who you are; not being able to say with Paul, "By the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor. 15:10). Spurgeon felt this danger keenly.

In comparing one ministerial identity with another he reminded other pastors that at the last supper there was a chalice for drinking the wine and there was a basin for washing feet. Then he said,

I protest that I have no choice whether to be the chalice or the basin. Fain would I be whichever the Lord wills so long as He will but use me....So you, my brother, you may be the cup, and I will be the basin; but let the cup be a cup, and the basin a basin, and each one of us just what he is fitted to be. Be yourself, dear brother, for, if you are not yourself, you cannot be anybody else; and so, you see, you must be nobody....Do not be a mere copyist, a borrower a spoiler of other men's notes. Say what God has said to you, and say it in your own way; and when it is so said, plead personally for the Lord's blessing upon it. [\[69\]](#)

And, I would add, plead personally for the Lord's purifying blood upon it too, because not even our best labors are untainted. But the weight of this truth must not paralyze the preacher with fear of man and doubt of self. Eleven years later in 1886 Spurgeon struck the same anvil again:

Friend, be true to your own destiny! One man would make a splendid preacher of downright hard-hitting Saxon: why must he ruin himself by cultivating an ornate style?...Apollos has the gift of eloquence; why must he copy blunt Cephas? Every man in his own order.[\[70\]](#)

Spurgeon illustrates with his own struggle to be responsive to criticism during the Downgrade controversy. For a season he tried to adapt his language to the critics. But there came a time when he had to be what he was.

I have found it utterly impossible to please, let me say or do what I will. One becomes somewhat indifferent when dealing with those whom every word offends. I notice that, when I have measured my words, and weighed my sentences most carefully, I have then offended most; while some of my stronger utterances have passed unnoticed. Therefore, I am comparatively careless as to how my expressions may be received, and only anxious that they may be in themselves just and true."[\[71\]](#)

If you are to survive and go on preaching in an atmosphere of controversy, there must come a point where, having done your best to weigh the claims of your critics and take them to heart, you must now say, "By the grace of God, I am what I am." There must be an end to the deranging second-guessing that threatens to destroy the very soul.

Confidence in Christ's Victory

In the final analysis, the strength to go on preaching in the midst of adversity and setbacks came for Spurgeon from the assured sovereign triumph of Christ. Near the end of his life (1890) in an address to his pastors' conference, he compares adversity and the eclipse of truth to the ebbing tide.

You never met an old salt, down by the sea, who was in trouble because the tide had been ebbing out for hours. No! He waits confidently for the turn of the tide, and it comes in due time. Yonder rock has been uncovered during the last half-hour, and if the sea continues to ebb out for weeks, there will be no water in the English Channel, and the French will walk over from Cherbourg. Nobody talks in that childish way, for such an ebb will never come. Nor will we speak as though the gospel would be routed, and eternal truth driven out of the land. We serve an almighty Master....If our Lord does but stamp His foot, He can win for Himself all the nations of the earth against heathenism, and Mohammedanism, and Agnosticism, and Modern-thought, and every other foul error. Who is he that can harm us if we follow Jesus? How can His cause be defeated? At His will, converts will flock to His truth as numerous as the sands of the sea....Wherefore be of good courage, and go on your way singing [and preaching!]:

The winds of hell have blown
The world its hate hath shown,
Yet it is not o'erthrown.
Hallelujah for the Cross!
Hallelujah It shall never suffer loss!

The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge. [\[72\]](#)

