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Bible Reading in the Marriage of Charles and Susannah Spurgeon

RAY RHODES, JR.

On Sunday evening, March 18, 1855, Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892) looked to his Bible and declared in his sermon: “If these words were written by a man, we might reject them; but O let me think the solemn thought, that this book is God’s handwriting — that these words are God’s!”¹ For Spurgeon it was beyond the pale of sound reasoning for anyone to reject God’s words. He was not alone in those convictions; his wife Susannah (1832–1903) also believed in the divine authorship of Scripture. Reflecting on John 14:27, “Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid,”² Susannah asserted that those “tender words” were words of “Jesus Christ himself, my gracious Lord and Master, who thus speaks, and I shall do well to ponder every weighty sentence

as I listen to his loving voice.”³ For Susannah, the words of Scripture were “the loving voice” of Jesus Christ. Hearing Scripture as the very voice of God formed the foundation of Charles and Susannah’s marriage.

Charles Spurgeon’s views about the Bible and marriage were cultivated in him from childhood by his grandparents and parents. Susannah Thompson was also raised in a Christian home and regularly heard biblical preaching at London’s prominent Baptist congregation, New Park Street Chapel. While attending a special service at the nearby Poultry Chapel, Susannah was converted. She described her conversion as, “the dawning of the true light of my soul.”⁴ Following that experience, however, she fell into a season of spiritual decline.

Shortly after Charles began his London ministry in the spring of 1854, he learned of Susannah’s spiritual struggles, and he took a pastoral interest in her. He provided her with a copy of John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* as an aid to her spiritual growth.⁵ He inscribed the book: “Miss Thompson, with desires for her progress in the blessed pilgrimage.”⁶ Charles and Susannah’s friendship deepened and on August 2, 1854, they were engaged. Susannah “kneled before God and praised and thanked Him ... for His great mercy in giving me the love of so good a man.”⁷

As Charles busied himself with ministry, he also facilitated Susannah’s spiritual growth. One example is evident in his enlistment of her to read from the writings of the Puritan Thomas Brooks and to note salient quotes. Susannah’s findings were compiled for Spurgeon’s book, *Smooth Stones Taken From Ancient Brooks*. Susannah wrote that behind the compilation of *Smooth Stones* is a “sweet love-story” that “hides between the pages.”⁸

Spurgeon also recognized the gift of Susannah to his *own* spiritual development as indicated by his requests for her prayers. He believed that her prayers would promote his “usefulness, and holiness, and happiness.”⁹ Charles and Susannah were married on January 8, 1856 in a wedding ceremony that reflected their deepest convictions, rich in Scripture readings and proclamation.

The New Park Street Chapel was inadequate to hold the crowds who flocked to hear Spurgeon preach. Therefore, until larger more permanent facilities were secured, church leaders leased the nearby Surrey Gardens Music Hall for worship services. At the first service, (October 19, 1856) with thousands crowding the hall, seven people were trampled to death as mischief-makers cried “fire, fire.” A deacon rushed to Spurgeon’s home to deliver the tragic news to Susannah. Later, describing the experience, Susannah wrote: “I wanted to be alone, that I might cry to God in this hour of darkness and death.”¹⁰ Charles was deeply shaken by the tragedy. However, his recovery was precipitated while reflecting on Scripture during a walk with Susannah. Turning to his wife he urged, “Oh, Wifey, I see it all now! Praise the Lord with me.”¹¹ Insightfully, Susannah framed a print of Matthew 5:11 and hung it on their bedroom wall for her husband’s daily reading and encouragement.¹² Susannah’s godliness helped Charles to weather the storm.

Charles Spurgeon’s philosophy of Bible reading provides the reasoning for how he and Susannah employed Scripture intake and prayer in their marriage. Spurgeon believed that the Bible should be read carefully, meditatively, and prayerfully. Though Spurgeon urged his congregation to read the Bible directly he also encouraged the use of study aids to assist in their understanding of Scripture. For Spurgeon, it was of utmost importance to see the relation between every passage and Christ. Spurgeon referred to this as finding the “spiritual meaning of the text.”¹³

On January 31, 1892, at 11:05 p.m., Charles Spurgeon died in his room at the Hotel Beau Rivage in Mentone, France.¹⁴ Susannah, his wife of thirty-six years, was by his bedside. She bowed her head and “thanked the Lord for the precious treasure so long lent to her, and sought, at the throne of grace, strength and guidance for the future.”¹⁵

For Charles and Susannah Spurgeon, Bible intake and prayer characterized the beginning of their marriage and supported them through a lifetime of challenges. Their marriage, grounded in Scripture, faithful in prayer, was, in every way, “a spiritual partnership.”¹⁶

ENDNOTES

- ¹ C.H. Spurgeon. "The Bible." In *The New Park Street Pulpit*, Pilgrim ed. reprint Vol. 1. (Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publications, 1975), 111.
- ² Susannah quoted from The King James Version.
- ³ Susannah Spurgeon and Charles Ray. *Free Grace and Dying Love: Morning Devotions*. (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), 64. Included in the Banner of Truth edition is *The Life of Susannah Spurgeon* by Charles Ray. When citing the second part of the book, it will be noted simply as, *Life*.
- ⁴ C. H. Spurgeon, *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography: Compiled from His Diary, Letters, and Records, by His Wife, and His Private Secretary*, Reprint in 2 vols. (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1992), 2:6.
- ⁵ Bunyan lived from 1628 – 1688. He wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*; published in 1678. Spurgeon's initial reading of *The Pilgrim's Progress* was around age six and he continued to read Bunyan's masterpiece throughout his life, totaling some 100 times before he died.
- ⁶ C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 2:6-7.
- ⁷ C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 2:9.
- ⁸ C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 2:19.
- ⁹ C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 2:26.
- ¹⁰ Charles Ray, *Life*, 164-66.
- ¹¹ Charles Ray, *Life*, 167.
- ¹² Charles Ray, *Life*, 168-9.
- ¹³ This paragraph is deduced from Spurgeon's sermon, "How to Read the Bible" from *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Pilgrim ed. Vol. xxv. (Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publications, 1980), 625-636.
- ¹⁴ Spurgeon often retreated to this hotel in Mentone seeking physical recovery and rest.
- ¹⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 4:371.
- ¹⁶ Ernest W. Bacon, *Spurgeon: Heir of the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1968), 45.