

From The Spurgeon Library
The Conversion of C. H. Spurgeon:
A Lecture given at the Artillery Street Evangelical
Church, Colchester, England, July 13, 2018

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The following lecture was given to faculty and students attending the Midwestern Seminary United Kingdom Study Tour during the Summer of 2018. The Artillery Street Evangelical Church in Colchester is the meeting house in which C. H. Spurgeon underwent his conversion and remains a congregation focused on proclaiming the same gospel message now as it was then.

When thinking how best to assess and categorize the life of Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892), a phrase used by the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:3 comes to mind. For the totality of his life as a Christian, Spurgeon had “a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.” His sight was set on Jesus Christ from the moment he “looked” to him in his conversion.

Spurgeon was born June 19, 1834 in Kelvedon, a village just down the road, southwest from Colchester. He was the oldest of 17 children, and his father was an Independent minister who regularly traveled. Thus, from age one to five, Spurgeon lived with his grandparents in Stambourne, another village located to northwest of Colchester.

Spurgeon remained close to his grandparents and his grandfather, also an Independent minister, had a study in his home filled with books. Among those books, Spurgeon discovered Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, the works of the English Puritans, and, a lifelong favorite, Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

¹ This lecture was aided by the research of students studying Spurgeon at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and the Spurgeon Library: Phillip Ort, Brandon Rhea, and Nathan Rose. For more information on the Spurgeon Library, see <https://www.spurgeon.org/>

Reading is what Spurgeon did as young boy. When others were outside, Spurgeon was always with books.

This relationship with written words found reinforcement at home. Spurgeon's mother regularly gathered the children on Sunday evenings to explain Scripture, read aloud books, and pray. In his *Autobiography*, Spurgeon recounts:

Yet I cannot tell how much I owe to the solemn words of my good mother. It was the custom, on Sunday evenings, while we were yet little children, for her to stay at home with us, and then we sat round the table, and read verse by verse, and she explained the Scripture to us. After that was done, then came the time of pleading; there was a little piece of Alleine's *Alarm*, or of Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*, and this was read with pointed observations made to each of us as we sat round the table; and the question was asked, how long it would be before we would think about our state, how long before we would seek the Lord.²

Often Spurgeon's mother would pray: "Now, Lord, if my children go on in their sins, it will not be from ignorance that they perish, and my soul must bear a swift witness against them at the day of judgment if they lay not hold of Christ."³ This thought of his mother standing against him was unbearable and caused him to seek the Lord.

Spurgeon would later say:

Fathers and mothers are the most natural agents for God to use in the salvation of their children. I am sure that, in my early youth, no teaching ever made such an impression upon my mind as the instruction of my mother; neither can I conceive that, to any child, there can be one who will have such influence over the young heart as the mother who has so tenderly cared for her offspring. A man with a soul so dead as not to be moved by the sacred name of 'mother' is creation's blot. Never could it be possible for any man to estimate what he owes to a godly mother.⁴

² *Autobiography*, 1:68.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

His mother's prayers were answered when Spurgeon was 15. At this time Spurgeon was experiencing deep conviction of sin saying, "I do speak of myself with many deep regrets of heart. I hid as it were my face from Him, and I let the years run round."⁵ But, soon the Holy Spirit would press the conviction of sin upon Spurgeon's soul:

My heart was fallow, and covered with weeds; but, on a certain day, the great Husbandman came, and began to plough my soul. Ten black horses were His team, and it was a sharp ploughshare that he used, and the ploughshare made deep furrows.⁶

In these words, Spurgeon described his young heart as "fallow" and "covered with weeds." But one day, the "great Husbandman" began to plow his soul with a team of "ten black horses," one for each commandment under which Spurgeon stood condemned.

In this state, Spurgeon sunk lower and saw himself to be nothing but "rotteness, a dunghill of corruption." While Spurgeon would later acknowledge that "A spiritual experience which is thoroughly flavoured with a deep and bitter sense of sin is of great value to him that hath had it," it was overwhelming for young Spurgeon.⁷ In late 1849, Spurgeon visited different churches in and around Colchester, but without much relief or encouragement. He explains:

From chapel to chapel I went to hear the Word preached, but never a gospel sentence did I hear; but this one text preserved me from what I believe I should have been driven to, - the commission of suicide through grief and sorrow. It was this sweet word, 'Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'⁸

When Spurgeon was in the "hand of the Holy Spirit" and experiencing a "clear and sharp sense of the justice of God" he could not believe in *substitution*; the "sum and substance of the gospel." For Spurgeon the central question was "Who would or could have thought of the just Ruler dying for the unjust rebel?" Yet, while Spurgeon then did not believe that

⁵ Ibid., 67-68.

⁶ Ibid., 75.

⁷ *Autobiography*, 1:76.

⁸ Ibid., 95.

“it was possible that *my* sins could be forgiven,” soon the “Great Change” would take place.

During this period, Spurgeon was employed as an “usher” for a private school in Newmarket. As an ‘usher’ Spurgeon was both student and tutor for this school, paying for his tuition by his work. When the school closed temporarily in December due to an outbreak of fever, Spurgeon returned home to Colchester.

On one Sunday morning Colchester was hit with a substantial snowstorm. Spurgeon, while en route, stumbled into a private Methodist church hidden in a back alley.⁹

The regular minister was unavailable that morning and an unidentified lay preacher took the pulpit. By Spurgeon’s account, this person spoke quite ineloquently for about ten minutes on the passage, ‘Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth’ (Isaiah 45:22).¹⁰

Thanks to the providence of a snowstorm, Spurgeon found himself subject to the ‘preaching’ of a man who he claims was “really stupid” and “did not even pronounce the words rightly.”

Nevertheless, the message from this crude preacher effectually struck a chord in Spurgeon’s anguished soul, for at the end of the service the preacher looked squarely at Spurgeon and said, “Young man, you look very miserable.” Spurgeon recounted his thoughts:

Well, I did but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made from the pulpit about my personal appearance before. However, it was a good blow, struck right home.

He continued, ‘and you will always 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.’ Then lifting his hands, he shouted, as only a Primitive Methodist could do,

⁹ In recent years, three pews from this Primitive Methodist Chapel on Artillery Street, Colchester, where Charles Spurgeon was converted, were kindly donated by the current congregation of Artillery Street Evangelical Church to The Spurgeon Library at Midwestern Seminary. Visitors to the Library can see an artist’s depiction of the scene described here as well as see the actual pews on which many people of this era sat to hear preaching like Spurgeon heard on that day.

¹⁰ *Autobiography*, 1:105.

'Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothing to do but look and live.'

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

And at that moment Spurgeon "saw at once the way of salvation." He *looked* to Jesus Christ and *lived*. From that moment Spurgeon knew he was no longer under the "frown of God," but could now say, "my Father smiles." The joy of that day was "utterly indescribable" as the teenage Spurgeon rejoiced, "I am forgiven, I am forgiven, I am forgiven!"

Spurgeon later would say:

When I first received everlasting life I had no idea what a treasure had come to me. I knew that I had obtained something very extraordinary, but of its superlative value I was not aware. I did but look to Christ in the little chapel, and I received eternal life. I looked to Jesus, and He looked on me, and we were one forever. That moment my joy surpassed all bounds, just as my sorrow had before driven me to an extreme of grief. I was perfectly at rest in Christ, satisfied with Him, and my heart was glad, but I did not know that this grace was everlasting life till I began to read in the Scriptures, and to know more fully the value of the jewel which God had given me.¹²

What Spurgeon discovered on January 6, 1850, was the "sum and substance of the gospel...*Substitution*."

If I understand the gospel, it is this: I deserve to be lost forever; the only reason why I should not be damned is, that Christ was punished in my stead, and there is no need to execute a sentence twice for sin. On the other hand, I know I cannot enter Heaven unless I have a perfect righteousness; I am absolutely certain I

¹¹ Ibid., 106.

¹² MTP 31:395.

shall never have one of my own, for I find I sin everyday; but then Christ had a perfect righteousness, and He said, "There, poor sinner, take My garment, and put it on; you shall stand before God as if you were Christ, and I will stand before God as if I had been the sinner; I will suffer in the sinner's stead, and you shall be rewarded for works which you did not do, but which I did for you.'

I find it very convenient everyday to come to Christ as a sinner, as I came at the first. 'You are no saint,' says the devil. Well, if I am not, I am a sinner, and Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. Sink or swim, I go to Him; other hope I have none. By looking to Him, I received all the faith which inspired me with confidence in His grace; and the word that first drew my soul — 'Look unto Me,' — still rings its clarion note in my ears. There I once found conversion, and there I shall ever find refreshing and renewal.¹³

That morning Charles Haddon Spurgeon looked to Jesus Christ and was saved. That morning Spurgeon found the joy of Christ, and as he put it, "I could have danced."

Interestingly, Spurgeon returned to that same chapel the next week and took issue with the Pastor's preaching on Romans 7.

The next Sunday I went to the same chapel, as it was very natural that I should. But I never went afterwards, for this reason, that during my first week the new life that was in me had been compelled to fight for its existence, and a conflict with the old nature had been vigorously carried on. This I knew to be a special token of the indwelling of grace in my soul, but in that same chapel I heard a sermon upon "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" And the preacher declared that Paul was not a Christian when he had that experience. Babe as I was, I knew better than to believe so absurd a statement.

¹³ *Autobiography*, 1:113.

What but divine grace could produce such a sighing and crying after deliverance from indwelling sin? I felt that a person who could talk such nonsense knew little of the life of a true believer. I said to myself, 'What! Am I not alive because I feel a conflict within me? I never felt this fight when I was an unbeliever. When I was not a Christian I never groaned to be set free from sin. This conflict is one of the surest evidences of my new birth, and yet this man cannot see it, he may be a good exhorter to sinners, but he cannot feed believers.' I resolved to go into that pasture no more, for I could not feed therein. I find that the struggle becomes more and more intense, each victory over sin reveals another army of evil tendencies, and I am never able to sheathe my sword, nor cease from prayer and watchfulness.¹⁴

On May 3, 1850, Spurgeon received baptism in the River Lark. As his family were Congregationalists, his mother was saddened to learn her son would pursue believer's baptism. She had said to him that while she prayed for his conversion, she did not pray he would become a Baptist. Spurgeon responded, "Ah, mother! the Lord has answered your prayer with His usual bounty, and given you exceeding abundantly above what you asked or thought."¹⁵

By August 1850, Spurgeon preached his first sermon and then was called, in 1851, as pastor in Waterbeach, a village near Cambridge.¹⁶

Recently I read where Andrew Atherstone, of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, was lecturing on Spurgeon and he made a very helpful observation about that sermon Spurgeon heard in Colchester and how God used it in his conversion. He recount that there are three key elements of his conversion. First, God's sovereignty over the circumstances of it. Second,

¹⁴ MTP 31:395-396.

¹⁵ *Autobiography*, 1:69.

¹⁶ For the next three years, he would hone his craft and record his sermons in nine notebooks. These notebooks were lost to publishing history as, until now, the only attempt at publication was undertaken by Spurgeon himself in 1857. That has changed with the publication of *The Lost Sermons of C. H. Spurgeon* from B&H Academic in recent years.

God's powerful Word that convicted him. Third, God's use of Christ-centered preaching.¹⁷

Atherstone observes that all of these would remain the key components of Spurgeon's ministry throughout his life—God's sovereignty, God's Word, and Christ-centered preaching.

From his conversion in the chapel on Artillery Street, Spurgeon kept his gaze set on his "sincere and pure devotion to Christ." As such, much like that preacher, Spurgeon pointed many others to "Look" as well.

¹⁷ Andrew Atherstone, "Andrew Atherstone on C H Spurgeon," at the 2018 Evangelical Ministry Conference. Available from <http://acl.asn.au/andrew-atherstone-on-c-h-spurgeon/>