

## The Remedy of Self-Sacrificing Service The Ministry of Susannah Spurgeon

Charles Spurgeon was only nineteen years old when he was called to be the pastor of the New Park Street Chapel, the church Susannah Thompson attended occasionally with friends. She was singularly unimpressed when she first heard him preach. The eloquence and powerful sermons of the “boy preacher” were the talk of London, but all Susannah could see was a country bumpkin with a bad haircut, a ridiculous blue polka dot handkerchief and a black silk cravat that was much too large to be in style.

As Susannah listened to Spurgeon’s preaching in the following weeks, she gradually turned her attention away from the dress of the messenger and toward the message he delivered. She came to church more often as the Holy Spirit used Spurgeon’s preaching to expose her shallowness and indifference to the things of God. She sought counsel from Charles and others, and after struggling for a few months, came to a full assurance of faith in Jesus Christ. Charles and Susannah’s new friendship deepened to something more over the next year, and when he proposed marriage, she joyfully accepted.



It was an odd courtship. Charles had little free time to devote to Susannah. One of their regular dates consisted of Susannah quietly minding her own business while Charles edited his weekly sermon for publication. Susannah once accompanied Charles to a speaking engagement in a crowded venue. As they walked in, Charles was preoccupied with the message he was about to deliver. He turned into a side door, completely forgetting about Susannah, who found herself abandoned in the crushing crowd to find her own way to a seat. Miffed, she left the building and took a cab home to her parents’ house.

Mrs. Thompson was not as sympathetic to the perceived slight as her daughter expected her to be. Wisely, she urged Susannah never to try to make herself an idol in her fiancée’s heart. Charles was God’s servant first and foremost, and she warned Susannah that she must never hinder his ministry. Susannah wrote, “I never forgot the teaching of that day; I had learned my hard lesson *by heart*, for I do not recollect ever again seeking to assert my right to his time and attention when any service for God demanded them.”<sup>1</sup>

So instead of vying to be the focus of Charles’ attention, she became a true partner in his ministry. After they married, Spurgeon would call his “wifey” to come and help him on Saturday afternoons. Together they read commentaries and discussed the Scripture for the next day’s sermon. Susannah was Charles’ sounding board and emotional support. When he was discouraged, she read to him from Baxter’s *Reformed Pastor* or from the poetry of George Herbert.

Susannah counseled women and girls in the church and carefully taught her twin boys. She managed their household wisely, uncomplainingly endured separations as Charles traveled, and welcomed him home when he returned. Her days were full and their little family was happy.

But then Susannah became chronically ill. For long seasons, she was unable to accompany her husband to church and was often confined to bed. Discouraged and confused, Susannah cried out to God. Later, she would write, “. . . the moment we come into any trial or difficulty, our first thought should be, not how soon can we escape from it, or how we may lessen the pain we shall suffer from it, but how can we best glorify God in it . . .”<sup>2</sup> But how could Susannah glorify God or minister with her husband while confined to a sick room?

In the summer of 1875, Charles completed the first volume of his book, *Lectures to My Students*. He gave a proof copy to Susannah and asked her opinion of it. After reading it, she said, “I wish I could place it in the hands of every minister in England.” Charles quipped, “Then why not do so; how much will you give?”<sup>3</sup>

Susannah took the challenge seriously. She had, on a whim, been saving crown pieces as she happened to get them. When she counted them out, there were exactly enough coins to buy 100 copies of the new book. Charles announced in his magazine that 100 copies of *Lectures to my Students* would be mailed to poor pastors at no charge. Orders flooded in for the books from English ministers, many of whom were so strapped for money that they hadn’t bought a new book in years. Susannah mailed out the books and received dozens of grateful letters in thanks. Some pastors wept when the precious volumes arrived. Spurgeon announced the results in the next issue of his magazine and asked his readers to help continue the work. Donations poured in. Though they never again asked for funds, enough money continued to trickle in over the years to distribute hundreds of thousands of theological books.

Susannah often worked from her sick bed, keeping track of the finances and corresponding with pastors. A room in their home was dedicated to storing and shipping books. As long as Susannah was well enough, volunteers would come in once every two weeks to help pack books for shipping.

Charles later wrote about the effect the labor involved in the book fund had on his wife. “Our gracious Lord has ministered to His suffering child in the most effectual manner when He graciously led her to minister to the necessities of His servants. . . . Let every believer accept this as the inference of experience: that for most human maladies, the best relief and antidote will be found in the self-sacrificing work for the Lord Jesus.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harrald, Joseph and Spurgeon, Susannah, *The Autobiography of Charles Spurgeon, Vol. 1*, Banner of Truth, 1962, pg. 289

<sup>2</sup> Spurgeon, Susannah, *Morning Devotions* included in the book *Free Grace and Dying Love*, Banner of Truth, 2006, pg. 83

<sup>3</sup> Ray, Charles, *The life of Susannah Spurgeon*, included in the book *Free Grace and Dying Love*, Banner of Truth, 2006, pg. 196-197

<sup>4</sup> Harrald, Joseph and Spurgeon, Susannah, *The Autobiography of Charles Spurgeon, Vol. 11*, Banner of Truth, 1962, pg. 462