

The Anguish and Agonies of Charles Spurgeon

Debilitating gout, poisonous slander, recurring depression—Spurgeon suffered them all. What happened to his faith as a result? Dr. Darrel W. Amundsen is professor of classics at Western Washington University and co-editor of *Caring and Curing* (Macmillan, 1988). January 1, 1991

Spurgeon's friends and even casual acquaintances remarked on his hearty laughter. His humor also found expression in his sermons and writings, for which he was sometimes criticized. Spurgeon responded that if his critics only knew how much humor he suppressed, they would keep silent.

At the same time, Spurgeon's life was saturated with suffering. We know about his sufferings intimately owing to his frequent and candid descriptions of them.

What torments did Spurgeon suffer? How did he reconcile his painful experiences with his view of a gracious God? Spiritual Agonies

At the risk of oversimplifying, we can categorize Spurgeon's sufferings as spiritual, emotional, and physical—although recognizing the interplay of categories.

Spurgeon's spiritual suffering began most markedly five years prior to his conversion. Throughout his ministry, he referred to the horrors he had felt for five years while under deep conviction of sin, intellectually aware of the gospel, yet blind to its personal application. "The justice of God, like a ploughshare, tore my spirit," he recalled. "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."

To Spurgeon, no suffering he later endured could equal this devastating bitterness of soul. These spiritual sufferings taught him to loathe the foulness of sin and to cherish the holiness of God. And they engendered within him a seraphic joy in his salvation.

Slander and Scorn

During his early years in London, Spurgeon received intense slander and scorn. In 1881 he could look back at those years and say, "If I am able to say in very truth, 'I was buried with Christ thirty years ago,' I must surely be dead. Certainly the world thought so, for not long after my burial with Jesus I began to preach his name, and by that time the world thought me very far gone, and said, 'He stinketh.' They began to say all manner of evil against the preacher; but the more I stank in their nostrils the better I liked it, for the surer I was that I was really dead to the world."

At the time, however, Spurgeon wavered between rejoicing in such persecution and being utterly crushed by it. In 1857 he wrestled with his feelings:

"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; ... This thing I hope I can say from my heart: If to be made as the mire of the streets again, if to be the laughing stock of fools and the song of the drunkard once more will make me more serviceable to my Master, and more useful to his cause, I will prefer it to all this multitude, or to all the applause that man could give."

The Weight of Preaching

From the beginning of his ministry, Spurgeon attracted vast audiences in such establishments as Exeter Hall and the Royal Surrey Gardens Music Hall. While to all appearances he brimmed with self-assurance, in reality he was filled with trepidation. In 1861 he remarked, "My deacons know well enough how, when I first preached in Exeter Hall, there was scarcely ever an occasion, in which they left me alone for ten minutes before the service, but they would find me in a most fearful state of sickness, produced by that tremendous thought of my solemn responsibility...."

Spurgeon felt great anxiety, but it stemmed not so much from the multitudes as from the awesome responsibility of being accountable to God for the souls of so many. This remained a hearty source of spiritual suffering throughout his career. He remarked in 1883: "I have preached the gospel now these thirty years and more, and ... often, in coming down to this pulpit, have I felt my knees knock together, not that I am afraid of any one of my hearers, but I am thinking of that account which I must render to God, whether I speak his Word faithfully or not."

Emotional Trial by "Fire!"

On the evening of October 19, 1856, Spurgeon was to commence weekly services at the Royal Surrey Gardens Music Hall. That morning he preached at New Park Street Chapel on Malachi 3:10: "Prove me now." With chillingly prophetic voice he declared, "... I may be called to stand where the thunderclouds brew, where the lightnings play, and tempestuous winds are howling on the mountain top. Well, then, I am born to prove the power and majesty of our God; amidst dangers he will inspire me with courage; amidst toils he will make me strong.... We shall be gathered together tonight where an unprecedented mass of people will assemble, perhaps from idle curiosity, to

hear God's Word; and the voice cries in my ears, 'Prove me now.' ... See what God can do, just when a cloud is falling on the head of him whom God has raised up to preach to you....

That evening Surrey Hall, capable of holding up to twelve thousand, was overflowing with an additional ten thousand people in the gardens. The service was underway when, during Spurgeon's prayer, several malicious miscreants shouted, "Fire! The galleries are giving way!" In the ensuing panic, seven people died and twenty-eight were hospitalized with serious injuries. Spurgeon, totally undone, was literally carried from the pulpit and taken to a friend's house where he remained for several days in deep depression.

Later he remarked, "Perhaps never soul went so near the burning furnace of insanity, and yet came away unharmed." At last he found comfort in the verse "Wherefore God hath highly exalted him, and given him a name that is above every name." Spurgeon was but a soldier; the Lord was the Captain of the host, hence victory was assured. Yet until Spurgeon's death, the spectre of the calamity so brooded over him that a close friend and biographer surmised: "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."

Depression

If Spurgeon was acquainted with depression before, following the Surrey Hall disaster, it became a more frequent and perverse companion. In October 1858 he had his first episode of incapacitating illness since coming to London. Having been absent from his pulpit for three Sundays, when he returned he preached on 1 Peter 1:6: "Wherein ye greatly rejoice though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations." In the sermon, entitled "The Christian's Heaviness and Rejoicing," Spurgeon said that during his illness, when "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 ... a kind friend was telling me of some poor old soul living near, who was suffering very great pain, and yet she was full of joy and rejoicing. I was so distressed by the hearing of that story, and felt so ashamed of myself...." While he was struggling with the contrast between his depression and the joy evinced by this woman who was afflicted with cancer, "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" but "that sometimes his spirits should sink within him, and that he should become even as a little child smitten beneath the hand of God."

Spurgeon was indeed frequently "in heaviness." Sometimes Spurgeon's depression was the direct result of his various illnesses, perhaps simply psychologically, and in the case of his gout, probably physiologically as well.

Despite this, Spurgeon thought of his own depression as his "worst feature" and once commented that "despondency 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."

Spurgeon comforted himself with the realization that such depression equipped him to minister more effectively: "I would go into the deeps a hundred times to cheer a downcast spirit. It is good for me to have been afflicted, that I might know how to speak a word in season to one that is weary."

Labors of Ministry

Spurgeon's recurring bouts of depression were exacerbated by his numerous responsibilities. He once remarked: "No one living knows the toil and care I have to bear. I ask for no sympathy but ask indulgence if I sometimes forget something. 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." In 1872 he asserted that "the ministry is a matter which wears the brain and strains the heart, and drains out the life of a man if he attends to it as he should."

Yet he declined to slow down. During his first significant illness (October 1858) Spurgeon wrote to his congregation and readers: "Do not attribute this illness to my having laboured too hard for my Master. For his dear sake, I would that I may yet be able to labour more." Later, in a sermon, he stated: "I look with pity upon people who say 'Do not preach so often; you will kill yourself.' O my God! what would Paul have said to such a thing as that?"

Spurgeon determined that this labor and anguish, though physically damaging, must be undertaken: "We are all too much occupied with taking care of ourselves; we shun the difficulties of excessive labour. And frequently behind the entrenchments of taking care of our constitution, we do not half as much as we ought. A minister of God is bound to spurn the suggestions of ignoble ease, it is his calling to labour; and if he destroys his constitution, I, for one, only thank God that he permits us the high privilege of so making ourselves living sacrifices."

Gout

The disease that most severely afflicted Spurgeon was gout, a condition that sometimes produces exquisite pain. What can clearly be identified as gout had seized Spurgeon in 1869 when he was 35 years old. For the remainder

of his life he would be laid aside for weeks or even months nearly every year with various illnesses. Space does not permit even an abridged chronicling of his physical sufferings. Some appreciation of them comes from this article in *The Sword and the Trowel* in 1871: "It is a great mercy to be able to change sides when lying in bed.... Did you ever lie a week on one side? Did you ever try to turn, and find yourself quite helpless? Did others lift you, and by their kindness reveal to you the miserable fact that they must lift you back again at once into the old position, for bad as it was, it was preferable to any other? ... It is a great mercy to get one hour's sleep at night.... What a mercy have I felt to have only one knee tortured at a time. What a blessing to be able to put the foot on the ground again, if only for a minute!"

A few months later he described in a sermon one experience during this period of affliction: "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." He regularly referred to this incident, although it is impossible to determine whether his gout was never as excruciating as it was during that episode.

Spurgeon was seldom free from pain from 1871 on. The intervals between times of forced rest became increasingly shorter, and his condition became more complex as symptoms of Bright's disease (chronic inflammation of the kidneys) began to develop. Beginning in the 1870s, Spurgeon regularly sought recovery and recuperation in Mentone, in southern France.

Spurgeon's last years of physical suffering must be seen through the grid of the Down-Grade Controversy. Early in this controversy he commented that 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." To a friend in May 1891 he said, "Goodbye; you will never see me again. This fight is killing me. "

Susannah Spurgeon also experiencing periods of invalidism. Like her husband, she found ways to be amazingly productive despite her illnesses. For example, she founded and operated a book fund that distributed countless theological works to pastors who could not afford to buy them.

Where Is God During Suffering?

Spurgeon maintained that since God is sovereign, there are no such things as accidents. This, however, is not fatalism: "Fate is blind; providence has eyes." Unwavering belief in God's sovereignty was essential for Spurgeon's well-being: "[I]t 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, not sent to me by his arrangement of their weight and quantity."

Consequently, he tended to look very little at proximate causality. "If you drink of the river of affliction near its outfall," he preached in 1868, "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." He explained in 1873: "As long as I trace my pain to accident, my bereavement to mistake, my loss to another's wrong, my discomfort to an enemy, and so on, I am of the earth, earthy, and shall break my teeth with gravel stones; but when I rise to my God and see his hand at work, I grow calm, I have not a word of repining."

Confidence in God's sovereignty and paternal love did not prevent Spurgeon from sometimes asking "Why?", however—especially when he was laid aside during times that he viewed as crucial for his work. In *The Sword and the Trowel* in 1876 he asked the question in an article entitled "Laid Aside. Why?" Spurgeon answered his own question by concluding that such times are "the surest way to teach us that we are not necessary to God's work, and that when we are most useful he can easily do without us."

Here and elsewhere Spurgeon noted the potential benefits of pain. In a sermon published in 1881 he maintained, "In itself pain will sanctify no man: it may even tend to wrap him up within himself, and make him morose, peevish, selfish; but when God blesses it, then it will have a most salutary effect—a stippling, softening influence." Less than a year before he died Spurgeon discussed that process in a sermon entitled "God's People Melted and Tried." Here he asks, "Were you ever in the melting pot, dear friends? I have been there, and my sermons with me, and my frames and feelings, and all my good works. They seemed to quite fill the pot till the fire burned up, and then I looked to see what there was unconsumed; and if it had not been that I had a simple faith in my Lord Jesus Christ, I am afraid I should not have found anything left.... The result of melting is that we arrive at a true valuation

of things [and] we are poured out into a new and better fashion. And, oh, we may almost wish for the melting-pot if we may but get rid of the dross, if we may but be pure, if we may but be fashioned more completely like unto our Lord!"

Here we see a marvelous paradox in Spurgeon's experiential theology. He candidly admits that he dreaded suffering and would do whatever he legitimately could do to avoid it. Yet when not suffering acutely, he longed for it. "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."

We cannot hope to understand Spurgeon's sufferings unless we glimpse the experiential intimacy of his relationship with his Savior. On June 7, 1891, in extreme physical pain from his illnesses, Spurgeon preached what, unknown to him, proved to be his last sermon. His concluding words in the pulpit were, as usual, about his Lord: "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 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."

Copyright © 1991 by the author or Christianity Today/Christian History magazine.