October 25, 2015

“Charles Spurgeon: Suffering Under God’s Sovereignty”

Philippians 2:9-11

**FCF**: Through the lens of a life, learning of suffering under God’s sovereignty

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) Christ, in His sovereign love, brings us storms for our good.

(magnet) We must learn how to live in that. And how to learn of this from others who have gone before us.

**TOPIC INTRODUCTION:**

In the context of a worship service, is it right to take time to examine the life of a mortal man? Praise can be found in any of God’s image bearers because we all reflect something of Him. That’s true of every person. Pushing this further, how much so in the lives of His people?

Consider this quote from John Piper (READ The Legacy of Sovereign Joy)

*God ordains that we gaze on his glory, dimly mirrored in the ministry of his flawed servants. He intends for us to consider their lives and peer through the imperfections of their faith and behold the beauty of their God*.

The point being there is much to be gained here. If we will have the humility but to listen.

But that begs a question, “Why Charles Spurgeon?” And I would say, “Because of what he was about.” By that, I mean two things. First, his commitment to truth, the Scriptures, and the gospel of grace. Second, the fact that he was a man like us who lived in this world and knew what it is to suffer. And his life gives us a lens through which we can learn to suffer as well.

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Philippians 2:9-11

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Let me give you a brief explanation of the text we just read and how it relates to Spurgeon. In Philippians 2, the Apostle Paul is urging his readers to unity in faith and service. In vv.5-11, he sets before them Christ’s example of humility. Poetically, the stages of Christ’s ministry are sketched out – His pre-existence, incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension. The idea being that He was brought as low as He could be. And then, as we see in vv.9-11, He was raised, raised and exalted. Spurgeon preached a sermon on this (READ quote):

*Look at him! Can your imagination picture him? Behold his transcendent glory! The majesty of kings is swallowed up; the pomp of empires dissolves like the white mist of the morning before the sun; the brightness of assembled armies is eclipsed. He in himself is brighter than the sun, more terrible than armies with banners. See him! See him!*

You get a sense of Spurgeon’s passion in preaching. This is Jesus – risen, ruling, and reigning.

It was this sweet assurance and deep conviction that anchored Spurgeon in the storms of life. Both these things being equally true – the storms and the anchor that Spurgeon held and that held him. Christ is exalted and is Lord in and over every storm we will ever face. Indeed, Christ, in His sovereign love for us, brings us such storms for our good. The implication of this? We need to learn how to live in that. And, I would add for our purpose this morning, we need to learn of this from others who have gone before us. Which is where our study comes into play.

1. **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Let me start with a brief biographical sketch, just hitting some highlights.

1. *Early Years*
2. Birth

Charles Haddon Spurgeon was born June 19, 1834 in a little cottage in Essex. He was the first of 17 children, nine of whom died in infancy. Both his father and his grandfather were pastors.

1. Childhood

Eighteen months later, when his mother was about to deliver her second child, Charles was sent to visit his grandparents. He ended up staying with them until he was six. During this time, a bond grew with his grandfather, the result of this being access to his grandfather’s library. Young Charles loved to read, especially Pilgrim’s Progress and, by the age of ten, the Puritans.

1. Yearly teens

As he moved into his teens, he began writing poetry and editing a magazine. Shortly before he turned 15, he wrote a 295-page book titled, Antichrist and Her Brood: Popery Unmasked. It was obvious to all who knew him that he was wise beyond his years and exceptionally mature.

1. *Conversion*
2. Deep conviction of sin

But he was not yet a Christian. When he was 10, Spurgeon was deeply convicted of his sin but with no saving knowledge of Christ. He was aware of his need but unable to become settled.

1. Unlikely circumstances

And this lasted for five years. Until Sunday, January 6, 1850 when a snowstorm drove him to seek shelter in a Methodist chapel. And there he sat under the hesitant instruction of a reluctant substitute preacher. The text was from Isaiah (READ Isaiah 45:22). After stumbling through his exposition, the man spotted this young visitor and, speaking to him, said (READ CH quote), “*That young man there looks very miserable…Look! Look, young man! Look now!*” Surprisingly and perhaps even strangely, those words pierced Spurgeon to the core. And he looked to Christ.

1. Change

His burden was lifted. And the change was obvious. On returning home, his appearance caused his mother to say (READ CH quote), “*Something wonderful has happened to you*.” And it had.

1. *The Prince of Preachers*
2. Early preaching

His first experience in preaching was in a house meeting in 1851. His gifts were clear. He was asked to fill the pulpit at Waterbeach Chapel near Cambridge. And he did so for two years.

1. New Park Street Baptist Church

In December 1853, he was asked to candidate at New Park Street Baptist Church, the largest best known Baptist church in London. So five years and one day after his conversion, he preached his first sermon to the congregation he would then pastor for the next 38 years. Weekly attendance grew to 10,000. He once spoke to a crowd of nearly 24,000 – without amplification.

1. Metropolitan Tabernacle

New Park Street outgrew their facility and, in 1861, built Metropolitan Tabernacle in the heart of south London. In time, membership grew from 232 to over 5,300. The ministry was expansive.

1. Expansive ministry

Let me give you some summaries and anecdotes to illustrate this. While at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Spurgeon began a pastor’s college that trained nearly 900 students in his lifetime. And it continues still today. He also opened almshouses for needy widows. And an orphanage for the children of the street. All of which was the fruit of and testimony to the gospel.

A few other things worth noting. By accepting so many invitations to speak, Spurgeon often preached 10 times in a week. During his lifetime, he is estimated to have preached to 10,000,000 people. In 1865, Spurgeon’s sermons sold 25,000 copies a week and were translated into more than 20 languages. He is the most widely read preacher (apart from biblical ones) and there is more material available written by Spurgeon than by any other Christian author, living or dead.

Some anecdotes that might help to flesh all this out. One woman was converted through reading a single page of one of Spurgeon’s sermons wrapped around some butter she had bought. Testing the acoustics in the vast Agricultural Hall, Spurgeon shouted, “*Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world*.” A worker high in the rafters of the building heard this and became converted to Christ as a result. Spurgeon often worked 18 hours a day. Famous explorer and missionary David Livingstone once asked him, “*How do you manage to do two men’s work in a single day?*” Spurgeon replied, “*You have forgotten that there are two of us*.” Occasionally Spurgeon asked members of his congregation not to attend the next Sunday’s service, so that newcomers might find a seat. During one 1879 service, the regular congregation left so that newcomers waiting outside might get in. The building immediately filled again.

Charles Spurgeon died January 31, 1892. He was 57. London mourned. Sixty thousand people came to pay homage during the three days his body lay in state at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. A funeral parade two miles long followed his hearse from the Tabernacle to the cemetery. One hundred thousand people stood along the way, flags flew at half-mast, shops and pubs were closed. It was a remarkable demonstration of affection and respect, even in an era when people were rather scrupulous in observing the rituals that accompanied death.

1. **HIS EXPERIENCE WITH SUFFERING**

But that is not to say all was easy for this gifted beloved man. Which brings me back to the main thrust of this message. Christ, in His sovereign love, brings us storms for our good. We must learn how to live in that. And how to learn from others who have gone before us. So let me take a few minutes to give you an overview of the varied sufferings Spurgeon endured.

1. *Everyday Ministry Burdens*

Not surprisingly, such a ministry brought with it the everyday burdens of the pastorate.

1. Ordinary common

There were the ordinary frustrations of lukewarm members – the common disappointments brought by hard-hearted folks with their petty criticisms, ill-timed input, and selfish suggestions.

1. Relational pain

But beyond that, there was also relational pain – the betrayal of trusted friends and confidants, the shocking falls into temptation by leaders, and disheartening strife, division, and slander.

1. *Extraordinary Calamities*

But Spurgeon endured far worse, including that of extraordinary calamity.

1. The tragedy

On October 19, 1856 he preached for the first time in the Music Hall of the Royal Surrey Gardens because New Park Street could 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 more were injured.

1. The impact

Spurgeon was 22 years old and was overcome by this calamity. He said later (READ quote), “*Perhaps never my soul went so near the burning furnace of insanity, and yet came away unharmed*.” But not all agreed he was unharmed. One close friend and biographer said (READ quote), “*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*.”

1. *Family Pain*

Beyond this, there was suffering close to home. He knew family pain all too well.

1. Marriage to Susannah Thomson

In January 1856, a few months before the Music Hall tragedy, he married Susannah Thomson. She was not initially impressed with him but he was a persistent suitor. They married, went to Paris for their honeymoon, and she gave birth to twins sons, born the day after that tragedy.

1. Health struggles

We’re not sure of the cause but Susannah was unable to have more children. And by 1865, when she was but 33, she became a virtual invalid and was seldom able to hear her husband preach. Through it all, their marriage was a source of strength to them both. But this was hard.

1. *Physical Ailments*

As were Spurgeon’s own physical ailments, the pain of which was often terrible.

1. Various forms

He suffered from gout, rheumatism, and Bright’s disease (an inflammation of the kidneys). The first attack of gout came when he was 35. Seldom was he free from pain or not in need of rest.

1. The impact

The impact of this was such that, according to one biographer (READ Murray quote):

*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 illness.*

1. *Public Ridicule*

Added to all this was the public ridicule and vicious slander he had to endure.

1. Example

It came from all sides – pastors on both the left and right. Then the press (READ Piper quote):

*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.*

1. Controversy

The worst came in the twilight of his ministry during the Downgrade Controversy. This was a battle for the doctrinal integrity of the Baptist Union. Spurgeon withdrew. And was censured.

1. *Battle with Depression*

But I’ve left the worst till last, Spurgeon’s long battle with debilitating depression.

1. Multi-faceted causes

As is often the case, the causes were likely multi-faceted. For starters, the man was clearly overworked and, at times, overwhelmed. As I’ve laid out already, his burdens were many. The worst of which was the Surrey Garden tragedy which seemed to stay with him, haunting him.

1. The effect

In 1858, at age 24, it came upon him. He said (READ CH quote), “*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.*”

Years later, in lectures at the Pastor’s College, he told his students (READ Lectures quote):

*Causeless depression cannot be reasoned with, nor can David's harp charm it away by sweet discoursings. 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.*

Let it never be said this gifted man led a charmed life. It was far far from it.

1. **LESSONS FROM HIS SUFFERING**

Which, again, brings us to the main thrust of this message. Christ, in His sovereign love, brings us storms for our good. We must learn how to live in that. And how to learn from others who have gone before us. So, with the overview of the sufferings Spurgeon endured, let us reflect for a few minutes on the lessons we can learn. For he can serve as something of a guide.

But let me note this as we start. As we go through this list, each point will become less and less intuitive, even foreign to us. And so more and more necessary for us to consider.

1. *Practical Helps*

At a practical level, Spurgeon points us to the need for rest and time in nature.

1. Rest

On the need for rest and time to gather our strength, he told his students (READ Lectures):

*It is wisdom to take occasional furlough. In the long run, we shall do more by sometimes doing less. On, on, on forever, 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.*

1. Nature

Good counsel. As is his advice to get out at times to enjoy God’s creation (READ Lectures):

*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.*

Again, sound advice that Spurgeon knew was all too needed in his own experience.

1. *Perspective on the Causes*

As is a proper perspective on the causes of our struggles, the essential way we see them.

1. Listed out

In one of his lectures to his students, Spurgeon lists out the possible roots of our sorrows.

1. Summarized

Which is helpful to think about. But I couldn’t help but notice how he starts the list as (READ Lectures quote) “*the reasons why these things are permitted*.” Not why they “happen” or “come about” but “are permitted.” Meaning God’s hand is behind it. That’s a crucial distinction.

1. *Perspective on the Times*

I’ll press on. This proper perspective is needed not only on the causes but on the times.

1. Counter-weight

The Apostle Paul wrote of the assurance that this momentary affliction is working for us an eternal weight of glory. And so Paul looked to the things that are eternal. So did Spurgeon.

1. Applied to the trials

Applied to the public ridicule, Spurgeon said during the Downgrade Controversy (READ Piper):

*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.*

1. *Communion with Christ*

But it was more than having a perspective. Crucial to that was communion with Christ.

1. In the Word

Spurgeon spoke to his students of the how vital it is for us to be nourished (READ Lectures):

*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’.*

1. In prayer

And integrally yoked to that was time in prayer. He wrote of this in 1871 (READ CH quote):

*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 are 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.*

1. *Trust in God’s Care*

Pushing further against the grain of what comes intuitively to us, Spurgeon was also sustained in his trials and suffering by his trust in God’s care – both His power and His love.

1. Sweet sovereignty

His was a deep assurance of God’s sovereignty over all our afflictions (READ CH quote):

*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.*

Hear what he’s saying here. It’s not just that God knows what is coming but that He knows because He planned it that way. And that is grounds for peace, knowing nothing comes accidentally. And it is fuel for prayer for it is to a mighty God, a sovereign King, we pray.

1. Purposeful pain

Spurgeon was upheld by the hope of sweet sovereignty and purposeful pain (READ CH quote):

*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.*

1. *Devotion to God’s Glory*

That brings us to this last point, the one that goes most directly against our inclinations and so most likely needs to be stressed the most. And that is a heart’s devotion to God’s glory.

1. The sermon

On November 2, 1856, Spurgeon preached a sermon entitled “The Exaltation of Christ”. His text that morning was Philippians 2:9-11, the passage we read earlier. It had been two weeks since the Surrey Garden tragedy and it was his first time back in the pulpit. I’ve been reading through this sermon over the last several days and have found myself deeply moved by Spurgeon’s heart. And not just that, but the Lord’s gracious sustaining work within Spurgeon’s heart as well.

1. A summary

Let me summarize it. When all else is giving way, our minds return to the one place they have been dwelling all along. We ask, “*Is it safe and secure?*” That’s true for every human being. It’s how we’re wired. So, with that in mind, when disaster strikes, when tragedy comes upon us and the grief threatens to unmake us, where then should the Christian’s mind return to? To the one place that should occupy our minds the most all the time – Christ’s glory, our chief desire. So we ask, “*Is it safe and secure?*” Yes. It stands and forever will stand fast and firm.

That’s Spurgeon’s basic point and he goes on for pages to unpack it. It is what he said (READ quote) “*has comforted me, and in a great measure, enabled me to come here today*.” Now that will tweak your compass. It is an other-worldly perspective. And one we desperately need.

**CONCLUSION:**

Back to where we began. Christ, in His sovereign love, brings us storms for our good. We must learn how to live in that. And how to learn of this from others who have gone before us. We need wisdom from another time, grounded in the eternal truth of the Scriptures. We have this in Charles Spurgeon. And, on this topic of suffering, we need this all the more.

His life and ministry is something of a gift to us. In at least these two ways. First, in how we can be encouraged to be honest and candid about our struggles. Not being so quick to say, “Fine” when asked how we are but speaking to the hurt and confusion we feel, even as we’re holding on. Certainly Spurgeon did – to his friends, his students, and his congregation. We know he did by his letters, lectures, papers, and sermons. He was honest about his struggles.

And the second thing was his honesty about the reality of following Christ. He was quite clear. Following Christ is the best and worst thing you will do. For the servant is not above his Master. It is not easy but hard. It is not about quick fixes but spiritual heart surgery. We see that with David, Elijah, and Jonah. Centuries later, we see it with Luther, Calvin, and Spurgeon. It is joy mixed with sorrow. It is pain mixed with the progress. That honesty is needed.

Christ, in His sovereign love, brings us storms for our good. We must learn how to live in that. And how to learn of this from others who have gone before us. Let me end with these last words from the last sermon Spurgeon preached. Hear the man’s heart (READ quote):

*(Christ) 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.*

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) Christ, in His sovereign love, brings us storms for our good.

(magnet) We must learn how to live in that. And how to learn of this from others who have gone before us.