

ENDORSEMENTS

“Steve Lawson, a great preacher in his own right, has emerged as our generation’s finest biographer of great preachers. His works on John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards are both masterpieces. Steve has a knack for pointing out and explaining the outstanding traits that made each of these unique preachers truly important and influential. This work on Charles Spurgeon is likewise brilliant, highlighting Spurgeon’s Calvinistic convictions alongside his evangelistic zeal—showing why those two characteristics are perfectly harmonious and equally essential characteristics of any truly biblical ministry. A riveting work, this book will fuel your enthusiasm for both sound doctrine and earnest evangelism.”

—DR. JOHN MACARTHUR
Pastor-teacher, Grace Community Church
Sun Valley, California

“Charles Spurgeon was a model pastor-theologian. His theology came to life in his plea for sinners to be reconciled to God. Lawson points us to the necessity of a theology fueled by fervor for evangelism in this excellent primer on the prince of preachers.”

—DR. ED STETZER
Vice president of research and ministry development
LifeWay Christian Resources, Nashville, Tennessee

“I own at least three dozen different biographies of the prince of preachers, but Steve Lawson’s new book on Charles Spurgeon will from now on have a key place of prominence in my short list of favorites. Dr. Lawson understands what made the great preacher’s heart beat: it was the gospel, charged with a passion for the souls of lost people and kept steady by the doctrines of grace. The clear rhythm of that pulse reverberates through this book, and it’s a catchy beat. I’m profoundly glad for that, and I hope countless readers will be moved to get in step with the cadence.”

—PHIL JOHNSON

Executive director, Grace to You
Curator, The Spurgeon Archive (www.spurgeon.org)

“Steve Lawson provides a succinct and captivating analysis of the heart of one of the greatest preachers of all time. Spurgeon’s ministry is legendary, but what animated and motivated his life and ministry is often overlooked. With ample extracts from Spurgeon’s own writings and sermons, this book reveals how the gospel of Jesus Christ provided both the power and content of his preaching. Far from being a distraction to the gospel, those doctrines that are historically known as Calvinism caused Spurgeon to understand the person and work of Jesus more clearly and preach Christ more passionately. While some who do not hold to Spurgeon’s view of the doctrines of grace might wonder how he could be a Calvinist and *yet* be evangelistic, Lawson clearly demonstrates that the prince of preachers was a bold evangelist precisely *because* of his Calvinism. There is much wisdom in this book both for preachers and for those who value preaching.”

—DR. THOMAS K. ASCOL

Lead pastor, Grace Baptist Church, Cape Coral, Florida

“For more than thirty-six years, Steve Lawson has had an intense interest in the ministry of Charles Spurgeon. In April 1976, he wrote a paper on Spurgeon’s theological controversies for a Baptist history class at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. In that paper, Lawson said about Spurgeon, ‘He magnified God’s grace and glorified God’s Son.’ Lawson has shown in this book how those traits of Spurgeon’s ministry, plus his thorough commitment to the infallibility of Scripture, his fervent grace-centered evangelism, his utter dependence on the work of the Holy Spirit, and his personal courage, make Spurgeon transcend the ages as a model for church-centered gospel ministry. Every Christian will be encouraged by Lawson’s description of Spurgeon’s life and his analysis of Spurgeon’s driving commitments to the whole counsel of God. Loaded with pungent quotes from Spurgeon and punctuated with helpful and pertinent exhortations from Lawson, this is a book for us all.”

—DR. THOMAS J. NETTLES

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The Long Line of Godly Men Profiles

Series editor, Steven J. Lawson

The Expository Genius of John Calvin

by Steven J. Lawson

The Unwavering Resolve of Jonathan Edwards

by Steven J. Lawson

The Mighty Weakness of John Knox

by Douglas Bond

The Gospel Focus of Charles Spurgeon

by Steven J. Lawson

The Gospel Focus of

Charles
Spurgeon



A **Long Line of Godly Men** Profile

The Gospel Focus of

Charles Spurgeon

STEVEN J. LAWSON

The Gospel Focus of Charles Spurgeon

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To Iain H. Murray,
whose tireless efforts for
more than a half century
have introduced Reformed truth
to a new generation,
and whose book
The Forgotten Spurgeon
made a dramatic and lasting impact
on my life for good

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Followers Worthy to Be Followed

Down through the centuries, God has raised up a long line of godly men, those whom He has mightily used at critical junctures of church history. These valiant individuals have come from all walks of life—from the ivy-covered halls of elite schools to the dusty back rooms of tradesmen’s shops. They have arisen from all points of this world—from highly visible venues in densely populated cities to obscure hamlets in remote places. Yet despite their differences, these pivotal figures, trophies of God’s grace, have had much in common.

Certainly each man possessed stalwart faith in God and the Lord Jesus Christ, but more can be said. Each of them held deep convictions concerning the God-exalting truths

known as the doctrines of grace. Though they differed in secondary matters of theology, they stood shoulder to shoulder in championing the doctrines that magnify the sovereign grace of God in His saving purposes in the world. To a man, they upheld the essential truth that “salvation is of the Lord” (Ps. 3:8; Jonah 2:9).

How did these truths affect their lives? Far from paralyzing them, the doctrines of grace enflamed their hearts with reverential awe for God and humbled their souls before His throne. Moreover, the truths of sovereign grace emboldened these men to further the cause of Christ on the earth. This fact should not surprise us, as history reveals that those who embrace these truths are granted extraordinary confidence in their God. With an enlarged vision of Him, they step forward and accomplish the work of many men, leaving a godly influence on generations to come. They arise with wings like eagles and soar over their times in history. Experientially, the doctrines of grace renew their spirits and empower them to serve God in their divinely appointed hours.

The Long Line of Godly Men Profiles aim to highlight key figures from this procession of sovereign-grace men. It is the purpose of this series to explore how these figures used their God-given gifts and abilities to further the kingdom of heaven. Because they were stalwart followers of Christ, their examples are worthy of emulation today.

In this volume, I want to introduce you to the revered British preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Spurgeon’s voice

thundered with the truth throughout England and beyond in a day when the church stood in great need of red-hot, straightforward, no-holds-barred gospel preaching—and that of a Calvinistic strand. Despite the theological and methodological declines of his day, Spurgeon was deeply devoted to preaching Christ and Him crucified. As the Lord empowered him, his pulpit became one of the most prolific sounding boards the kingdom of God has ever known. To this day, Spurgeon remains “the Prince of Preachers,” eminently worthy to be profiled in this series.

May the Lord use this book to greatly embolden you, so that, like Spurgeon, you will leave an indelible mark on this world. May you be strengthened with the gospel to walk in a manner worthy of your calling.

Soli Deo gloria!

—*Steven J. Lawson*
Series editor

Why Spurgeon?

It was more than thirty years ago, as a young seminary student, when I was first confronted with the biblical truth of the sovereignty of God in salvation. To that point, I had viewed salvation as a joint venture between God and man. I assumed that God extends the offer of salvation, but man has the ability to accept or reject it. But unexpectedly, the sovereign grace of God toward those whom He chose in eternity past to save was made known to me. To my amazement, my eyes were opened to behold God as I had never seen Him before.

A thick fog lifted. Suddenly I could see those truths in the Bible known as the doctrines of grace. Astonishingly, they had been there all along. As my eyes raced through the Scriptures,

I became absorbed with an endless number of verses teaching the predestining grace of God. For every one verse I saw, there were a hundred more virtually leaping from the pages of God's Word, screaming for my attention. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible was now declaring, "Salvation is of the Lord."

This discovery was, at first, devastating. I was shaken to the core of my being. My whole orientation to the Bible was in upheaval. This biblical teaching was pride-crushing. I was laid low in the dust, my soul desolate. But at the same time, these doctrines were God glorifying and Christ exalting. They lifted me up with a sense of awe toward God and filled me with excitement. Joy flooded my being. These glorious truths ignited a great awakening within me, one from which I have not recovered.

This deeper understanding of God's grace, however, created an enormous dilemma for me. How would the doctrines of sovereign grace affect my preaching? If God is sovereign in salvation, *why* preach the gospel? If I am to do so, *how* do I preach the gospel? *Why* witness? *Why* pray for the lost? *Why* make sacrifices for the gospel? These questions haunted me, especially since I was called to preach. Perhaps they have challenged you.

As I wrestled through these issues, I walked into the semi-nary bookstore one day to browse among the books. On this occasion, I noticed several volumes of sermons by Charles Spurgeon. Curious, I pulled one off the shelf and began reading. Quite frankly, I was not prepared for what I found. As

I pored over the pages, I found message after message dripping with the biblical truths of sovereign grace. But at the same time, each message was on fire with evangelistic fervor, as Spurgeon pleaded with sinners to be saved. Never had I read anything like this. These sermons were like an electric current running through my soul. They shocked my senses and enlightened my mind.

Here is what captivated me. This gifted preacher, perhaps the greatest since the Apostle Paul, was, by his own admission, a *Calvinist*—Reformed to the core, deeply committed to the doctrines of grace. But at the same time, he was an *evangelist*. How could these seemingly opposite realities fit together? How could one be both staunchly Calvinistic *and* passionately evangelistic?

Spurgeon showed me. In one hand, he firmly held the sovereignty of God in man's salvation. With the other hand, he extended the free offer of the gospel to all. He preached straightforward Calvinistic doctrine, then, in the same sermon, fervently urged lost sinners to call on the name of the Lord. Having expounded the truths of predestination, he then warned his listeners that if they refused Christ, their blood would be on their own hands. In sermon after sermon, this prolific preacher expounded God's sovereign grace with unmistakable precision. Yet, he did it with a genuine passion for the lost.

I concluded that this was what it must look like to be consumed with the glory of God in the salvation of His elect

and, at the same time, be filled with flaming zeal in reaching sinners with the gospel. There was no cold, clinical Calvinism here—no dead orthodoxy, no “frozen chosen” religion, no empty rehearsing of Reformed doctrine for people to take or leave as they might choose. Neither was there any shallow evangelism that portrayed God as pacing in heaven, wringing His hands, desperate for someone to accept Him. Instead, here was what the Puritans described as a fire in the pulpit, yielding both the *light* of Calvinistic truth and the *heat* of evangelistic passion.

In Spurgeon, I saw a historical example of what God was calling me to be and do. I finally understood that my Reformed theology was not a hindrance but a launching pad for evangelism. Here was the best of both worlds. I already had come to see clearly how these twin truths meet in the Bible. Now I could see how they come together in preaching.

Tragically, many pulpits today are pulled toward one of two extremes—the dead orthodoxy of Hyper-Calvinism or the shallow inconsistencies of Arminianism. In the former error, the doctrines of grace are upheld, but with little burden for the lost and no free offer of the gospel to all. In the latter error, there is soul-winning fervor, but the supreme authority of God in the salvation of men’s souls is denied. Between these polar opposites stands biblical Calvinism, claiming the high ground in both message and ministry.

In this short book, my intention is to introduce you to the

remarkable Charles Spurgeon. My hope is that his example will revolutionize your approach to gospel ministry. May you be emboldened by the gospel focus of Spurgeon, who continues to cast his broad shadow across the landscape of the evangelical church.

Furthermore, I pray that this book will help you gain a proper understanding of the full counsel of God in Scripture. My desire is that you will appreciate the tension between divine sovereignty in man's salvation and fiery passion in spreading the gospel. Only biblical Calvinism does both.

I want to thank the publishing team at Reformation Trust for their commitment to this Long Line of Godly Men Profiles series from church history. Greg Bailey, director of publications, has done an excellent job editing this manuscript and encouraging me along the way. Chris Larson was instrumental in envisioning this series and overseeing the beautiful graphic design of this book. I remain proud of my association with my former professor, Dr. R. C. Sproul, and Ligonier Ministries.

I further want to thank Christ Fellowship Baptist Church of Mobile, Alabama, which I serve as senior pastor. I am extremely grateful for the support of my fellow elders and the congregation, who encourage me in my extended ministry. I want to express my gratitude for my executive assistant, Kay Allen, who typed this document, and Keith Phillips, a fellow pastor at Christ Fellowship, who helped edit this manuscript.

Finally, you should know that my family remains a tower

THE GOSPEL FOCUS OF CHARLES SPURGEON

of encouragement in my personal life and ministry. My wife, Anne, and our four children, Andrew, James, Grace Anne, and John, stand as one with me in the message and mission of this book.

Spurgeon's Life and Legacy

There was no voice in the Victorian pulpit as resonant, no preacher as beloved by the people, no orator as prodigious as Charles Haddon Spurgeon.¹

—HUGHES OLIPHANT OLD

Hailed as the greatest preacher of nineteenth-century England, Charles Haddon Spurgeon is arguably the preeminent preacher of any century. Regarded as the most widely successful expositor of modern times,² Spurgeon heads virtually every list of renowned preachers. If John Calvin was the greatest theologian of the church, Jonathan Edwards the greatest philosopher, and George Whitefield the greatest evangelist, Spurgeon surely ranks as its greatest preacher.³ Never has one man stood in one pulpit, week after week, year after year, for almost four decades, and preached the gospel with

greater worldwide success and lasting impact than Spurgeon. To this day, he remains “the Prince of Preachers.”⁴

Through the centuries, expositors such as Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, Calvin, and countless others have committed themselves to preaching in a verse-by-verse style through entire books of the Bible. But this was not Spurgeon’s approach. Though he was “an expository preacher *par excellence*,”⁵ Spurgeon drew his message each week from a different book in the Bible. This free style distinguished Spurgeon from these other great preachers, positioning him, first and foremost, as an *evangelistic* expositor.

Throughout his prolific ministry, Spurgeon was consumed with a gospel zeal. He made it his practice to isolate one or a few verses as a springboard to proclaim the gospel. He asserted, “I take my text and make a beeline to the cross.”⁶ Every time Spurgeon stepped into the pulpit, he set his gaze intently on the salvation of sinners through the proclamation of the saving message of Jesus Christ. As Hughes Oliphant Old notes, Spurgeon was sent “at a particular time to a particular place to preach the eternal gospel for the salvation of souls and God’s everlasting glory.”⁷ Perhaps none can compare with Spurgeon as an evangelistic pastor.

Though he deeply loved theology, Spurgeon stated, “I would sooner bring one sinner to Jesus Christ than unpick all the mysteries of the divine Word.”⁸ He reveled in seeking the salvation of the lost. Here is how Spurgeon described the central importance of evangelism in his ministry:

I would rather be the means of saving a soul from death than be the greatest orator on earth. I would rather bring the poorest woman in the world to the feet of Jesus than I would be made Archbishop of Canterbury. I would sooner pluck one single brand from the burning than explain all mysteries. To win a soul from going down into the pit, is a more glorious achievement than to be crowned in the arena of theological controversy . . . to have faithfully unveiled the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ will be, in the final judgment, accounted worthier service than to have solved the problems of the religious Sphinx, or to have cut the Gordian knot of Apocalyptic difficulty. One of my happiest thoughts is that, when I die, it shall be my privilege to enter into rest in the bosom of Christ, and I know that I shall not enjoy my Heaven alone. Thousands have already entered there, who have been drawn to Christ under my ministry. Oh! what bliss it will be to fly to Heaven, and to have a multitude of converts before and behind.⁹

To understand this gospel focus is to feel the very pulse of Spurgeon's heart. To grasp this evangelistic zeal is to touch the live nerve of his soul. Simply put, he was compelled to preach the gospel and gather in the lost. As an expositor, Spurgeon truly possessed the heart of a soul-winner.

Let us begin our assessment of Spurgeon's gospel ministry with a consideration of his extraordinary life and legacy.

BORN AND BORN AGAIN

A descendent of French Huguenot and Dutch Reformed stock, Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892) was born on June 19, 1834, in a cottage at Kelvedon, Essex, England. Many of his Protestant ancestors had been driven out of their native countries by persecution, taking refuge in England. Spurgeon would say, "I had far rather be descended from one who suffered for the faith than bear the blood of all the emperors within my veins."¹⁰ Both his father, John, and grandfather, James, were Independent ministers who faithfully pastored congregations. Charles was the eldest of seventeen children. His younger brother James would later serve as his co-pastor at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London. Charles' twin sons would likewise follow him in the ministry.

When his mother was to deliver her second child, young Spurgeon, age two, was sent to nearby Stambourne to live with his grandfather, where he would remain until age six. During this time and on subsequent visits, Spurgeon was exposed to many Puritan works, including John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Richard Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*, and Joseph Alleine's *Alarm to the Unconverted*. Despite his exposure to these books and the spiritual influence of his family, Spurgeon remained unconverted. He recalled: "I had heard of

the plan of salvation by the sacrifice of Jesus from my youth up; but I did not know any more about it in my innermost soul than if I had been born and bred a Hottentot. The light was there, but I was blind.”¹¹

On Sunday morning, January 6, 1850, Charles, age fifteen, was walking to church in the little town of Colchester when a snowstorm drove him into a small Primitive Methodist church. Only a dozen people were in attendance, and even the minister could not arrive. A reluctant lay preacher stepped forward to expound Isaiah 45:22: “Look unto Me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth.” This unassuming figure exhorted the small congregation to look by faith to Jesus Christ alone. Fixing his eyes on young Spurgeon, he urged: “Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothing to do but to look and live.”¹²

Like an arrow from heaven's bow, the gospel hit its intended target. Spurgeon wrote: “I saw at once the way of salvation. Like as when the brazen serpent was lifted up, the people only looked and were healed, so it was with me.”¹³ Gazing by faith on Christ, he was dramatically converted. Consumed with joy, he could scarcely contain himself “even for five minutes without trying to do something for Christ.”¹⁴ Such boundless energy would mark his life from that point forward. On April 4, 1850, he was admitted to fellowship at St. Andrews Baptist Church, and soon after he was baptized and took his first Communion.

With growing zeal, Spurgeon, age sixteen, preached his first

sermon in a small cottage at Teversham near Cambridge. His preaching gift was immediately recognized. When he was only seventeen years old, Spurgeon was made the minister of a rural Baptist church in a tiny village, Waterbeach. At the Waterbeach Baptist Chapel, Charles preached the gospel with extraordinary power and noticeable results. Despite being in a small hamlet known for its debauchery, this humble Baptist chapel grew over the next two years from a mere forty to more than one hundred members.

NEW PARK STREET CHAPEL

Reports of this preaching prodigy soon reached London. On December 18, 1853, Spurgeon was invited to preach at the largest and most famous Particular Baptist church in all of London, the New Park Street Chapel. This historic church, staunchly Calvinistic, had been pastored by such luminaries as Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), John Gill (1697–1771), and John Rippon (1750–1836), but it had fallen into serious decline. A mere two hundred people were meeting in a building that had been built to seat twelve hundred. After preaching there for three months, Spurgeon, age nineteen, was called to be its pastor. He would faithfully shepherd the New Park Street flock until his death thirty-eight years later.

Under Spurgeon's preaching, New Park Street Chapel instantly grew. Within months, five hundred people were in regular attendance. After the first year, the building could

not contain the crowds that were coming to hear his preaching. The chapel was enlarged to seat fifteen hundred, with standing room for five hundred more. Still, the people were jammed along the walls and down the aisles, and crammed into windowsills. Soon, the church began issuing free tickets for admission to even the midweek services.¹⁵ Streets became blocked with traffic in the neighborhood around the chapel. London had not witnessed such a meteoric rise since the electrifying preaching of George Whitefield.

In the midst of this prolific growth, Charles met Susannah Thompson, a member of his congregation. A friendship soon became an attraction, and the two were married on January 8, 1856, at New Park Street Chapel, filled to overflowing. Their affection for one another never waned. Sadly, Susannah became a semi-invalid after the birth of their twin sons later in 1856. She was confined to home for long periods of time throughout her adult life, unable to hear Charles preach. Despite this affliction, she remained a source of strong encouragement to him and oversaw a thriving ministry that provided her husband's books for pastors and missionaries.

The crowds soon forced the New Park Street church to move into Exeter Hall, an enormous public building with seating for four thousand people and standing room for another thousand. But even this large structure could not contain the growing multitudes. Hundreds were turned away on a weekly basis. It became apparent that a new building would have to be erected for the fast-growing congregation. Plans were drafted

for what would become the famous Metropolitan Tabernacle, the largest Protestant house of worship in the world.

Meanwhile, Spurgeon moved his bulging church into an even larger venue, the Music Hall at Royal Surrey Gardens. This vast edifice with three large balconies seated twelve thousand people. At the first service, on October 19, 1856, the massive structure was filled from floor to ceiling, and thousands were turned away. But then catastrophe struck. Someone in the gallery shouted, “Fire!” Panic ensued and, as people rushed to escape, several were trampled to death—a tragedy that devastated young Spurgeon.

Missing only one Sunday, Spurgeon resumed preaching to the large crowds. With countless unbelievers attending, every service proved to be an evangelistic occasion. Spurgeon and others interviewed converts each Tuesday afternoon. So many lost souls were saved that Spurgeon claimed he never preached a sermon in the Music Hall when God did not save someone. At a time when London was the most prominent metropolis in the world, the people embraced Spurgeon as no city had ever embraced a preacher.

EARLY TRIALS AND TRIUMPHS

Yet all was not smooth sailing. With Spurgeon’s instant popularity came stiff opposition. The London press lampooned him as a religious huckster with self-serving motives. He was repeatedly mocked as “the Exeter Hall demagogue,” “the pulpit

buffoon,” and “a nine days wonder.”¹⁶ Moreover, advocates of Arminian theology assailed him with what they regarded as the worst derision of all, calling him a dreaded Calvinist. Further, Hyper-Calvinists criticized him for being too open in his free offer of the gospel. Spurgeon admitted, “My name is kicked about the street as a football.”¹⁷

Providentially, this persecution attracted more allies to his side, especially young preachers. Though Spurgeon had no university degree and had not attended seminary, he founded the Pastors' College when he was only twenty-two years old. Focusing on the training of preachers, not scholars, he admitted only those who were already filling pulpits. For the first fifteen years, Spurgeon personally underwrote the entire cost of the school through the sale of his weekly sermons. In addition, he lectured to the students every Friday afternoon on a particular aspect of gospel preaching. These messages became the text for his beloved book *Lectures to My Students*. During his lifetime, Spurgeon saw nearly one thousand men trained for the ministry in his college.¹⁸

In 1857, England suffered a tragic defeat in India, and a Day of National Humiliation was proclaimed. On October 7, Spurgeon, a mere twenty-three years old, preached in the famous Crystal Palace to a massive gathering of 23,654, the largest indoor crowd in its day. Trains ran throughout London, bringing people to hear Spurgeon's message from Micah 6:9, “Hear of the rod and of him who appointed it!” This national address was a strong declaration of the sovereignty

of God over England. The defeat, Spurgeon proclaimed, was from God, intended to humble a proud nation.

Through his printed sermons, Spurgeon's influence spread across England and around the globe. On Monday morning, a transcript of Spurgeon's sermon was delivered for his editing, then was published on Thursday.¹⁹ These sermons were sold on street corners for a penny each, so the messages were dubbed the "Penny Pulpit." More than twenty-five thousand copies were sold weekly. Moreover, these sermons were cabled across the Atlantic to America, where they were printed in large newspapers. Eventually, they were translated into forty languages around the globe. The sermons were sold by tract distributors, read in hospitals, taken into prisons, preached by laymen, cherished by sailors, and carried by missionaries.²⁰ Through the printed page, Spurgeon's congregation was estimated to be no less than a million people.²¹

A SWELLING TIDE OF REVIVAL

The year 1859 proved to be the most extraordinary in Spurgeon's ministry. This was the last year his church gathered at the Surrey Music Hall. A season of fervent revival was felt under some of the most Calvinistic yet evangelistic sermons of his ministry. These Spirit-empowered messages included, "Predestination and Calling" (Rom. 8:30), "The Necessity of the Spirit's Word" (Ezek. 36:27), "The Story of God's Mighty Acts" (Ps. 44:1), and "The Blood of the Everlasting Covenant" (Heb. 13:20).

However, this remarkable season in Surrey Gardens ended abruptly. Spurgeon learned that the New Park Street church would be forced to share the facility on Sundays with amusement programs, which he considered a violation of the Sabbath. Spurgeon said he would move the services if such entertainment were allowed. But the owners of the Music Hall refused to yield. The young preacher countered: "My name would cease to be Spurgeon, if I yielded. I neither can nor will give way in anything in which I know I am right; and in the defense of God's holy Sabbath, the cry of this day is, 'Arise, let us go hence!'"²² Rather than compromise, Spurgeon moved his growing flock back into the smaller Exeter Hall, showing himself a man of principle, not pragmatism.

On December 11, 1859, in his last sermon at the Music Hall, he preached "The Minister's Farewell," an exposition of Acts 20:26–27, in which he announced that in that place he had declared the full counsel of God. One attendee wrote his impressions of Spurgeon's preaching that day:

How he reveled in preaching that morning! It was very hot, and he kept on wiping the perspiration from his forehead; but his discomfort did not affect his discourse, his words flowed on like a torrent of sacred eloquence. . . . Mr. Spurgeon preached an earnest sermon on declaring the whole counsel of God. There is always something sad about last things, and, as I came away, I felt that one of the happiest experiences

of my youth belonged to the past. So also—in my opinion—passed away the most romantic stage even in Mr. Spurgeon’s wonderful life.²³

THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE

That same year, construction of the Metropolitan Tabernacle began. On August 15, the cornerstone of the building was laid. At the ceremony, Spurgeon declared his unwavering allegiance to the doctrines of sovereign grace: “We believe in the five great points commonly known as Calvinism. We look upon them as being five great lamps which help to irradiate the cross.”²⁴ As the massive facility was being constructed, Spurgeon traveled to the Continent in June and July 1860. When he came to Geneva, Switzerland, he was welcomed as a second Calvin. He was urged to preach in the pulpit of the great Reformer and given the chance to wear his gown, a rare honor he could not refuse.

On March 18, 1861, the Metropolitan Tabernacle officially opened. At this grand occasion, Spurgeon preached an overview of the doctrines of grace, then had five other men preach, each addressing one of the five points of Calvinism. This action revealed Spurgeon’s firm belief that these God-exalting truths form the very heart of the gospel. Spurgeon believed the doctrines of sovereign grace, far from being a hindrance to evangelism, are a great harvester of souls. The truths

of God's elective, redeeming love infused soul-saving power into his preaching and brought many to faith in Christ.

Unparalleled in size, the Tabernacle was the largest sanctuary in the history of the Protestant church. Seating six thousand people, it accommodated one of the largest flocks in regular attendance since the days of the Apostles.²⁵ Until his death thirty-one years later, the Tabernacle was filled each Sunday morning and evening. Spurgeon even requested that the members not attend services once a quarter so that the unconverted might find a seat. His congregation was comprised mainly of common people from everyday walks of life, but he drew the elite as well, including Prime Minister William Gladstone, members of the royal family, Parliament dignitaries, and such notables as John Ruskin, Florence Nightingale, and Gen. James Garfield, later president of the United States.

Throughout the week, Spurgeon preached as many as ten times around London and the surrounding areas, including as far as Scotland and Ireland. Spurgeon's presence in any pulpit emboldened local pastors and encouraged their flocks. With his growing fame, he was repeatedly invited to come to America to preach. Yet Spurgeon declined these trans-Atlantic invitations, choosing to keep the Tabernacle as the hub of his ministry.

People warned Spurgeon that he would break down physically and emotionally under the stress of such expansive preaching. Spurgeon replied: "If I have done so, I am glad of

it. I would do the same again. If I had fifty constitutions I would rejoice to break them down in the service of the Lord Jesus Christ.”²⁶ He added: “We find ourselves able to preach ten or twelve times a week, and we find we are the stronger for it. . . . ‘Oh,’ said one of the members, ‘our minister will kill himself.’ . . . That is the kind of work that will kill no man. It is preaching to sleepy congregations that kills good ministers.”²⁷ Spurgeon found strength in preaching.

ADVERSITIES AND ADVANCES

Further controversy soon embroiled Spurgeon. In 1864, he entered what became known as the Baptismal Regeneration Controversy, a confrontation with the Church of England over its claim that baptism is necessary for the remission of sins. Spurgeon saw this teaching as a corruption of the gospel and therefore spoke out against it. But when he did, he was condemned for intruding into the consciences of Anglican Church members. Spurgeon was forced to withdraw from the Evangelical Alliance, in which he was a prominent figure. Amid this conflict, Spurgeon launched a monthly magazine, *The Sword and the Trowel*, aimed at refuting theological errors of the day and defending the purity of the gospel.

Spurgeon was also busy spreading the gospel. In 1866, he founded the Metropolitan Colportage Association for the distribution of gospel literature. From March 24 to April 21, 1867, the Tabernacle underwent renovation, and Sunday

services were moved into the Agricultural Hall at Islington. More than twenty thousand people attended each of these five memorable meetings, among the largest congregations that Spurgeon ever addressed. That same year, he broke ground for the Stockwell Orphanage for boys. In 1868, he founded almshouses for the poor. In 1879, Spurgeon began the Girls' Orphanage. In all, under Spurgeon's leadership, some one thousand energetic members were actively proclaiming the gospel throughout London in various ministries. In addition, 127 lay ministers were serving in twenty-three mission stations around London. At his fiftieth birthday, a list was read of sixty-six organizations he had founded for the purpose of advancing the gospel message.

Several years later, in 1887, Spurgeon entered yet another conflict, the greatest of his ministry, known as the Downgrade Controversy. He spoke out in defense of the gospel, confronting the doctrinal decline that was becoming prevalent in many pulpits. He compared the Baptist church to a train that had crested a high mountain pass and was barreling down the steep grade, gaining speed as it plummeted. The further it descended this slippery slope, he contended, the greater its destruction would be. He strongly warned against the undermining of the authority of Scripture, which was resulting in worldly entertainment, Vaudeville techniques, and a circus-like atmosphere in many churches in his day.

But Spurgeon's stern words fell on deaf ears. In a bold move, he resigned from the Baptist Union on October 26,

1887. Some called for him to start a new denomination, but he declined. At the annual meeting of the Baptist Union in April 1888, a motion to censure Spurgeon was passed. In a sad twist of history, it was seconded by his brother James, his co-pastor at the Tabernacle, who mistakenly believed the motion was calling for reconciliation. This controversy so grieved him that it contributed to his premature death just four years later.

THE FINAL DAYS

In his final years, Spurgeon suffered several physical ailments, including a kidney disease and gout. With his health declining, Spurgeon preached what would be his last sermon at the Tabernacle on June 7, 1891. In much distress, he withdrew to the city of Mentone on the French Riviera. He died there January 31, 1892. “The Prince of Preachers” was only fifty-seven years of age.

A funeral service was first conducted in France. Then Spurgeon’s body was taken back to London, where four funeral services were held on Wednesday, February 10—one for members of the Tabernacle, one for ministers and students, one for Christian workers, and still another for the general public. A sixth and final service was held the following day. In all, some sixty thousand mourners paid their respects to this colossal figure. A funeral parade two miles long followed his hearse from the Tabernacle to the cemetery at Norwood, with

one hundred thousand people standing along the way. Flags flew at half-staff. Shops and pubs were closed. It seemed as though a member of the royal family had died.

Atop his coffin was placed a Bible, opened to Isaiah 45:22, the text that had brought him to saving faith in Christ as a teenager. By this, even in death, Spurgeon pointed people to Christ. With his passing, he had fought the good fight, finished the course, and kept the faith.

During his thirty-eight-year London ministry, Spurgeon witnessed his congregation grow from two hundred to almost six thousand members. Over this time, he took 14,692 new members into the church, nearly eleven thousand of them by baptism. In all, it has been estimated that Spurgeon personally addressed nearly ten million people. Eventually, one of his twin sons, Thomas, succeeded him as pastor of the Tabernacle in 1894. His other son, Charles Jr., became the head of the orphanage he had founded.

By 1863, Spurgeon's sermons had already sold more than eight million copies. At the time of his death in 1892, fifty million copies had been sold. By the end of the nineteenth century, more than a hundred million sermons had been sold in twenty-three languages, a figure unmatched by any preacher before or since.²⁸ Today, this number has reached well over three hundred million copies. A century after his death, there were more works in print by Spurgeon than by any other English-speaking author.²⁹ Spurgeon is history's most widely read preacher.

To this day, Spurgeon continues to exert an enormous influence across evangelical Christianity. He authored 135 books, edited twenty-eight others, and wrote numerous pamphlets, tracts, and articles. This body of work remains unprecedented, the single largest publishing project by one author in the history of Christianity.³⁰ With more than thirty-eight hundred messages in print, his sermons comprise the largest bound collection of one man's writings in the English language. These sermons are collected in sixty-three volumes³¹ containing some twenty-five million words.

Given the monumental impact Spurgeon had in England and across the world, certain questions beg to be asked: What made his preaching so compelling? What enflamed him to proclaim the gospel as he did? What gave his evangelistic ministry such converting power? The answers are found in what is the central theme of this book, the gospel focus of Charles Spurgeon.