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C.H. Spurgeon and Suffering

Peter J. Morden

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I Introduction

On 9 October 1880 the *Boy's Own Paper* published silhouettes of those it considered to be the greatest 'celebrities' of late-Victorian Britain. Unsurprisingly, the collection included the two most notable prime ministers of the age, William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli. Also pictured, in the centre of the nine silhouettes, was the Baptist pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892).¹ The bracketing of Spurgeon and, say, Gladstone can seem strange to modern commentators but, as Patricia Kruppa observes, 'many Victorians would have found it appro-

priate'.² As David Bebbington states, Spurgeon was by far 'the most popular preacher of the day' in an era when religion bulked large in the life of the nation.³ As such he was a 'personality of national standing' in Victorian Britain.⁴

Principally because of the circulation of his printed sermons, Spurgeon's reputation and influence travelled far beyond his British base. As early as 1858, when he was only twenty-four years of age, the North American Review was reporting that Americans returning from a trip to England were invariably asked two questions, namely, 'Did you see the Queen?' and 'Did you hear Spurgeon?' The paper went on to declare that there was

1 *Boy's Own Paper*, 9 October 1880, in C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography: Compiled from his Diary, Letters, and Records by his Wife and his Private Secretary* (4 Vols; London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1897-99), Vol. 4, 185.

2 P.S. Kruppa, *Charles Haddon Spurgeon: A Preacher's Progress* (New York: Garland, 1982), 1.

3 D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 145.

4 D.W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Leicester: IVP, 2005), 57.

Peter J. Morden (PhD, University of Wales) is tutor in church history and spirituality at Spurgeon's College, London, UK, where he is also one of the College's chaplains. He was formerly senior pastor of Shirley Baptist Church, Solihull, UK. Dr Morden is the author of *Offering Christ to the World: Andrew Fuller and the Revival of 18th Century Particular Baptist Life* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003) and of two books on Spurgeon: *C.H. Spurgeon: The People's Preacher* (Farnham: CWR, 2010) and 'Communion with Christ and his People': The Spirituality of C.H. Spurgeon (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2011 [available from www.rpc.ox.ac.uk])).

'scarcely any name more familiar' than Spurgeon's in America.⁵ By 1875 his sermons had been translated into languages as varied as French, Dutch, Telegu and Maori.⁶ Soon to follow were some Russian editions of a few select messages. These were passed by the Tsarist censor and approved by the Orthodox Church for official distribution.⁷ A staggering one million copies were printed.⁸ Spurgeon also made a significant impact in Australia where he became, as Australian Baptist historian Ken Manley states, a 'household name'.⁹ Many additional examples could be adduced to demonstrate his truly global reach. C.H. Spurgeon was a figure of international importance in the nineteenth century.

It is easy to tell Spurgeon's story in a triumphalistic way, but the truth is that his life was marked by significant

suffering. This article outlines the nature and extent of this, and analyses the theology he developed in response. Particular attention is given to the ways his 'afflictions' shaped his 'spirituality' (I am understanding spirituality, along with Philip Sheldrake, as being concerned with the conjunction of theology, communion with God, and practical action; it thus relates to both the inner and outer dimensions of the Christian life).¹⁰

Spurgeon came to believe that suffering resulted in important benefits for Christians, although for this to happen believers needed to remain faithful through their trials. The most important of these benefits was that believers could know closer communion with the suffering Christ as they experienced their own struggles. Suffering also fitted a believer for ministry and mission, giving them a deeper sympathy for others in difficulty and equipping them to be a source of comfort and strength.

Overall, I hope to show that suffering shaped Spurgeon's life and ministry in a range of significant ways. Certainly his experience of God and the content and tone of his preaching ministry would have been very different if he had not suffered in the way that he did. Spurgeon's life and ministry provide a rich resource for those who are wrestling with the topic of suffering today.

5 *North American Review* (Boston: Crosby and Nicholls, 1858), 275.

6 C.H. Spurgeon, 'Twenty Years of Published Sermons', in C.H. Spurgeon (ed.), *The Sword and The Trowel: A Record of Combat With Sin and Labour For The Lord (Sword and Trowel)* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1865-92), January 1875, 7; C. Ray, *A Marvellous Ministry* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1905), 27-28.

7 One of these, published in 1880, is held in archives of Spurgeon's College. See 'Spurgeon's Scrapbooks, Numbered Volumes', Spurgeon's College, Heritage Room (2G), Vol. 4, 58 b.

8 M. Hopkins, *Nonconformity's Romantic Generation: Evangelical and Liberal Theologies in Victorian England* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004), 155.

9 K.R. Manley, *From Woolloomooloo to 'Eternity': A History of Australian Baptists: Growing an Australian Church (1831-1914)* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 109.

10 P. Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History* (London: SPCK, 1991), 32. Cf. I.M. Randall, *Evangelical Experiences: A Study in the Spirituality of English Evangelicalism 1918-1939* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), 2.

II Spurgeon's Physical Suffering

Spurgeon suffered physically, mentally and spiritually. Physical suffering was a significant feature of his life from 1867 onwards. In the autumn of this year he was taken seriously ill and found, to his consternation, that he was quite unable to preach on a number of successive Sundays.¹¹ He was diagnosed as having rheumatic gout although, with hindsight, it can be seen that he also showed symptoms of kidney disease, identified, in the last years of Spurgeon's life, as 'Bright's disease', i.e. chronic nephritis.¹² In the closing months of 1867 he was in agony. He visited Mentone in the south of France in the winter of 1867-68 in order to recuperate.¹³ The visit was a success and he returned to the French Riviera most winters from this point on until his death, usually spending between one and three months in Mentone every year.¹⁴ Nevertheless, there were, from late 1867 onwards, few days in his life which were entirely pain

free. From 1879 this physical suffering became increasingly acute, culminating in his death at the age of fifty-seven in January 1892.

During this final phase of ministry, the question as to whether or not Spurgeon would be able to take the services at his church on any given Sunday became a weekly drama, one that was regularly played out in the press. Much information was carried in both the religious and the secular papers respecting the state of the pulpit celebrity's health. On Monday 21 March 1881 the *Daily News* reported that a letter from Spurgeon had been read to his congregation the previous day explaining his absence from the pulpit. He had written that he was being 'driven out upon the sea of pain' by repeated blasts from 'the tempest of disease'. 'My pains have at times been overpowering, and I have needed Divine succour to come through them.'¹⁵

Spurgeon was effectively 'shut in' at home, unable even to go downstairs. Sunday preaching had been an impossibility in the first weeks of March and he had frequently missed midweek services too. In the letter reported in the *Daily News*, Spurgeon had written that he was recovering: a 'little longer and it will all be over', he had said.¹⁶ But this was too optimistic.

On Sunday 27 March he was back preaching, but the press described him by turns as 'pale', 'weak' and 'very fee-

11 C.H. Spurgeon, 'The Editor's Illness', in Spurgeon (ed.), *Sword and Trowel*, November 1867, 526-27.

12 *The Times* gave the cause of Spurgeon's death as 'congestion of the kidneys complicated by gout'. *The Times*, 1 February 1892, 'Charles Haddon Spurgeon: Obituaries—Newspaper Cuttings' (Held at Spurgeons [Spurgeon's Childcare], Rushden, Northamptonshire), 1.

13 Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, Vol. 3, pp. 237-39. This 1867-68 visit was part of a longer European tour which also took in, amongst other places, Venice and Rome. In subsequent winters Spurgeon would head straight for the south of France.

14 Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, Vol. 4, 198.

15 *Daily News*, 21 March 1881, in 'Spurgeon's Scrapbooks, Numbered Volumes', Vol. 4, 77.

16 *Daily News*, 21 March 1881, in 'Spurgeon's Scrapbooks, Numbered Volumes', Vol. 4, 77.

ble'.¹⁷ During the morning service he had insisted that he was now 'quite free from pain'¹⁸ but, according to *The Baptist*, the results of his latest 'attack' were 'unmistakable on his countenance' as he tackled the platform stairs with the aid of a stick. It came as little surprise that he was unable to manage the evening service.¹⁹ Series of events such as these from March 1881 would become commonplace during the ensuing decade.²⁰ Spurgeon's ministry was thus characterised by physical suffering.

III Mental suffering

Spurgeon also experienced mental suffering alongside these physical struggles. A tragedy that occurred at a service at the Surrey Gardens Music Hall in London, on 19 October 1856, was probably a significant trigger for this. Spurgeon preached in a building that was dangerously over-full, with many outside unable to gain entrance.

It is not entirely clear what happened, but it appears some in the crowd inside the Music Hall sought to cause trouble, shouting (erroneously) that there was a 'fire' or possibly that the building's 'galleries were collapsing'. In the ensuing panic seven people

lost their lives and many more were injured.²¹ Following the disaster Spurgeon spoke of his thoughts being like a 'case of knives' cutting his heart 'in pieces'. It was a time of unrelenting 'misery' and 'darkness'. Then, suddenly, in an instant, the 'burning lava' of his brain was cooled.²²

Nevertheless, from this time on he experienced regular bouts of insomnia and mood swings which could be violent and sudden, with ecstasy giving way to weeping and despair. A fellow Baptist pastor, William Williams, once mentioned to Spurgeon that he was going to preach on Proverbs 3:33, not knowing that this had been the text his friend had taken on the night of the Surrey Gardens tragedy. Spurgeon's reaction was immediate. He gave a 'deep sigh' and his previously bright 'countenance' changed before Williams had even finished quoting the verse. The mention of Proverbs 3:33 had, Williams believed, given a revealing insight into the 'furnace of mental suffering' Spurgeon had endured and continued to endure.²³

Others recognised that Spurgeon suffered from some form of depression,²⁴ although the word was not used with any precision. Spurgeon was quite open about this himself. For example, he wrote to his congregation from Mentone on 1 March 1885 about his expe-

¹⁷ *Daily News*, 28 March 1881; *Christian World*, 31 March 1881, in 'Spurgeon's Scrapbooks, Numbered Volumes', Vol. 4, 80.

¹⁸ *Christian World*, 31 March 1881, in 'Spurgeon's Scrapbooks, Numbered Volumes', Vol. 4, 80.

¹⁹ *Christian World*, 31 March 1881; *The Baptist*, 1 April 1881, in 'Spurgeon's Scrapbooks, Numbered Volumes', Vol. 4, 80.

²⁰ Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, Vol. 4, 351-52.

²¹ I describe this tragedy in more detail in P.J. Morden, *C.H. Spurgeon: The People's Preacher* (Farnham: CWR, 2010), 68-70.

²² Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, Vol. 2, 195-96.

²³ Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, Vol. 2, 220.

²⁴ So J.D. Douglas, *The Prince of Preachers: A Sketch; A Portraiture; And A Tribute* (London: Morgan and Scott, n.d. [1893]), 99.

riencing 'fits of deep depression'. These were, he believed, the result of 'brain weariness'.²⁵ Doubtless these feelings of being depressed were closely bound up with the physical pain, with such feelings being especially prominent in the last twenty years of his life. Nevertheless, depression could strike when least expected, and when physical pain was not the trigger, as in the conversation with Williams about the Surrey Gardens tragedy.

I have shown the material which now takes its place in this article to a psychiatrist, Dr Anil Den, as well as talking more generally to him about Spurgeon's insomnia and mental suffering.²⁶ He advises that when circumstances become too much for a person depression can be reactive; such depression is transient and when circumstances change the suffering lifts. He also advises that another form of depression is endogenous (that is, from the inside), with the root cause an imbalance of brain chemicals. Although this form of depression can be brought on by a traumatic event and exacerbated by other illnesses, it remains even when these other factors are removed.

25 C.H. Spurgeon, 'Letter from Mr Spurgeon', 1 March 1885, *New Park Street Pulpit (NPSP) / Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit (MTP)* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1856-1917), *MTP*, Vol. 31, 132.

26 As revealed in e.g. C.H. Spurgeon to an unnamed friend, September 1873, 'Original Correspondence of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, 1863-1886', Spurgeon's College, Heritage Room, (4G), No. 10, in which he speaks about 'becoming demented with the sleeplessness of a brain over-wrought'.

Surveying Spurgeon's symptoms, Dr Den's opinion is that Spurgeon was suffering from a form of endogenous depression and that, if he had presented with such symptoms today he would certainly have been treated with a mixture of medication and therapy.²⁷ Thinking of Spurgeon as clinically depressed adds to the picture of him as someone who suffered.

IV Spiritual Depression

In addition to physical and mental suffering, Spurgeon often battled an accompanying sense of spiritual depression. In a message preached in May 1885, just months after composing the letter to his church from Mentone, Spurgeon spoke of specifically *spiritual* struggles, what he termed an 'agony of soul'. The sermon was on Psalm 77.9 and the question posed in the text, 'Hath God forgotten to be gracious?'. Spurgeon said,

Pain of body, when it is continuous and severe, is exceedingly trying to our feeble spirits; but agony of soul is worse still. Give me the rack sooner than despair. Do you know what it is to have a keen thought working like an auger into your brain? Has Satan seemed to pierce and gimlet your mind with a sharp, cutting thought that would not be

27 Personal conversation with Dr Anil Den, 22 October 2009 at Spurgeon's College, London. I am also drawing from printed notes provided by Dr Den entitled 'Mood Disorders', which are dated 7 November 2004. It is possible Spurgeon was bi-polar (a condition sometimes termed manic depression), but there is not quite enough evidence to make this diagnosis with certainty.

put aside?... When Asaph prayed for relief, and the relief did not come, the temptation came to him to ask, 'Am I always to suffer? Will the Lord never relieve me? It is written, "He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds"; has he ceased from that sacred surgery? "Hath God forgotten to be gracious?"'.²⁸

The mention of Satan and the reference to Asaph's temptation to doubt God's word highlight the spiritual depression Spurgeon experienced. His comments on this verse were clearly shot through with autobiography and he believed that Psalm 77 mapped out his own experience.²⁹ This spiritual depression was surely closely linked with his physical and mental 'afflictions', indeed, the three different strands of suffering I am identifying were closely woven together. Nevertheless, the suffering Spurgeon highlighted here involved doubting God's gracious character and the promises of his word.

Williams even remembers his friend once, when he was 'very low and depressed', doubting his 'standing in Christ' (that is, lacking assurance that he was truly a Christian).³⁰ On another

occasion, in a message entitled 'Strength And Recovery', Spurgeon spoke of how the soul could sometimes be 'grievously diseased', infected by doubt, fear and 'lukewarmness'. He believed the 'heavenly surgeon' was always waiting to heal believers. Nevertheless, for him the periods of spiritual depression could be very real.³¹ Overall, it should be clear that Spurgeon experienced considerable suffering—physical, mental and spiritual.

V Spurgeon's Theology of Suffering

How did Spurgeon account for the presence of suffering in God's world, specifically in the lives of committed Christians like himself? To begin with he emphasised the fall of the first man and woman and the way this had brought misery and pain into the world.³² There was a stress, then, on human responsibility for suffering, although Spurgeon also regarded its presence in the world as being the result of the devil's activity.³³ What he really wanted to emphasise, however, was that all suffering fell within the scope of God's sovereignty.³⁴ This was

²⁸ C.H. Spurgeon, 'A Question for the Questioner', *MTP*, Vol. 31, S. No. 1843, Psalm 77.9, delivered 31 May 1885, 303.

²⁹ Cf. C.H. Spurgeon's comments on Psalm 77.2 in *The Treasury of the Old Testament* (4 Vols; London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, n.d.), Vol. 2, 726.

³⁰ W. Williams, *Personal Reminiscences of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (rev. and ed. M. Williams; London: Religious Tract Society, n.d. [1933]), 32.

³¹ C.H. Spurgeon, 'Strength and Recovery', *MTP*, Vol. 30, S. No. 1805, Zechariah 10.12, delivered 18 September 1884, 571.

³² C.H. Spurgeon, 'Honey from a Lion', *MTP*, Vol. 27, S. No. 1591, Romans 5.15, delivered 3 April 1881, 186.

³³ C.H. Spurgeon, 'The Roaring Lion', *MTP*, Vol. 7, S. No. 419, 1 Peter 5.8,9, delivered 17 November 1861, 833-35.

³⁴ C.H. Spurgeon, 'For the Troubled', *MTP*, Vol. 19, S. No. 1090, Psalm 88.7, delivered 12 January 1873, 16-17.

fundamental to him, and he especially stressed this principle as it related to the suffering of Christians.

Thus, in a sermon entitled 'Gratitude For Deliverance From The Grave', preached in 1887, he stated that although a Christian's 'afflictions' were most certainly the result of a 'cruel enemy', the devil's actions were overruled by God and 'made to work for his [i.e. God's] good'.³⁵ In this message he also spoke of the devil as the 'second agent' in suffering and God as the 'Great First Cause'. Others bore the responsibility for suffering, but God was sovereign over it.

The cross of Christ was the supreme example of the outworking of this principle. Here, as in all suffering, God was not to be blamed: the cross was the fault of the devil, as well as being an 'atrocious crime' committed by ungodly people.³⁶ Yet the cross was also 'pre-determined in the counsel of God' and this was the fundamental reason why Christ had died.

The precise relationship between human and demonic responsibility for suffering and God's sovereignty over it was not a conundrum that needed to be explained but a mystery that needed to be believed. Moreover, once believers accepted the mystery of the sovereignty of a loving God over suffering they would find it deeply consoling.³⁷

The cross showed that Christians did not ultimately have to pay for their own folly, neither were they in the hands of the devil. Rather, they were in the hands of God who was gracious, suffering in their place to win them salvation. Working within this framework, Spurgeon held that a believer's trials were strictly limited, both in duration (for suffering would ultimately give way to a heaven guaranteed by Christ's death) and in scope.

With regard to scope, as well as affirming that Christ had taken the punishment that was due to sinful people, so that those who believed would never have to endure such agonies,³⁸ Spurgeon also wanted to insist that God's mercy limited the suffering of believers in other ways. Speaking personally, he declared his belief that he had never 'yet experienced a trouble which might not have been worse'.³⁹ A note at the beginning of 'Gratitude For Deliverance From The Grave' recorded that this message had been preached in connection with the dedication of 'Jubilee House', an addition to the Metropolitan Tabernacle's already extensive buildings which commemorated the fiftieth year of Spurgeon's life. This was a life which, the preacher reminded his hearers, had often been 'threatened by grievous sickness'.

Spurgeon was clear that he had suffered much, but he wanted to affirm what he believed was a greater truth, namely that he had been repeatedly

35 C.H. Spurgeon, 'Gratitude for Deliverance from the Grave', *MTP*, Vol. 38, S. No. 2237, Psalm 118.17,18, n.d., 1-2.

36 Spurgeon, 'Gratitude for Deliverance from the Grave', 3.

37 Spurgeon, 'Gratitude for Deliverance from the Grave', 3.

38 Spurgeon, 'Gratitude for Deliverance from the Grave', 8.

39 Spurgeon, 'Gratitude for Deliverance from the Grave', 3-6.

'delivered from the grave'.⁴⁰ He was sure, despite his familiarity with suffering, that God had ameliorated or withheld affliction on countless occasions. The sovereign and gracious God had, in fact, been extremely merciful to him. A Christian's sufferings were strictly limited.

Suffering was, therefore, an area in which Spurgeon's essentially Calvinistic theological frame of reference intersected strongly with his spirituality. His focus on God's sovereignty provided an underpinning for his approach to questions of suffering, an approach in which he was able to maintain, firstly, that God was not to blame for 'afflictions', which were the result of the fall; secondly, that God was still in control, being the sovereign 'first cause' of suffering; and, thirdly, that God was still good, limiting the suffering of believers.

The doctrine of final perseverance is also relevant here. If someone had truly trusted in Christ that was proof that they were one of the elect and so would persevere to the end: no suffering could ever separate them from God.⁴¹ Suffering was not only limited in extent, but duration. All of this was a cause for rejoicing, even when the trials were fierce and continued year on year.

VI Suffering and the Cross

At the heart of Spurgeon's theology of

suffering was the belief that the cross, as well as being the supreme example of God's sovereignty over suffering, revealed that God himself had suffered in the person of his Son. Spurgeon regularly reflected on Christ's passion in his preaching and his writing, reflections which were invariably emotionally charged.⁴² A passage from his devotional book of daily readings, *Evening By Evening* provides an example:

'He humbled Himself? Was He not on earth always stripping off first one robe of honour and then another, till, naked, He was fastened to the cross, and there did He not empty out His inmost self, pouring out His life-blood, giving up for all of us, till they laid Him penniless in a borrowed grave? How low was our dear Redeemer brought!... Stand at the foot of the cross, and count the purple drops by which you have been cleansed; see the thorn-crown; mark His scourged shoulders, still gushing with encrimsoned rills; see hands and feet given up to the rough iron, and His whole self to mockery and scorn; see the bitterness, and the pangs, and the throes of inward grief, showing themselves in His outward frame; hear the thrilling shriek, 'My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?' And if you do

⁴⁰ Spurgeon, 'Gratitude for Deliverance from the Grave', 1. This dates the sermon as having been preached in either May or June 1884. For details on 'Jubilee House', see Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, Vol. 4, 237-52.

⁴¹ Spurgeon, 'Gratitude for Deliverance from the Grave', 9.

⁴² For examples of such descriptions, see C.H. Spurgeon, 'Our Sympathizing High Priest', *MTP*, Vol. 32, S. No. 1927, Hebrews 5.7-10, delivered 31 October 1886, 591; *The Treasury of the Bible: The New Testament* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1962), 387-401.

not lie prostrate on the ground before that cross, you have never seen it: if you are not humbled in the presence of Jesus, you do not know Him.⁴³

Christ's suffering here was physical, as shown, for example, by the piercing of hands and feet; mental, as shown by the 'mockery' he endured; and spiritual, as evidenced by, amongst other things, the cry of dereliction. This, of course, corresponded with Spurgeon's own threefold experience of suffering. The difference between Christ and Spurgeon was in the degree of affliction, although one senses that the astonishingly vivid language and imagery Spurgeon employed was shaped not only by his fertile imagination but also by his various experiences of suffering, including his precariously balanced mental state. His descriptions of Christ's passion certainly came from the heart.

Christ's suffering also provided believers with a 'pattern' for faithful discipleship. In a sermon based on the words addressed to Christ on the cross by the religious leaders in Matthew 27:43, Spurgeon insisted that it would 'do his hearers good' to paint the picture of Christ being verbally abused and physically mistreated on the cross in their own minds, adding, 'I shall not complain if imagination heightens the colouring'. Seeing Christ thus would remind believers that Jesus' suffering was redemptive.

However, in this message Spurgeon also wanted to say that Christ's suffer-

ings were a model for Christians who were called to bear the cross and its accompanying shame in their own lives.⁴⁴ He regularly insisted that Christians were called to take up a cross.⁴⁵ A Christian's cross-bearing was not, of course, for salvation, as Christ's sacrifice was once for all time. Nevertheless, Christians still carried a cross in order that God's purposes might be accomplished in them and, through them, that God might be known in the world.⁴⁶

Spurgeon's statements on this subject were often accompanied by evidence. They proceeded not only from his reflections on the biblical text but also from his own experience. In *The Gospel of the Kingdom* he closed his comments on Matthew 10.38 with a direct address to God, 'Lord, thou hast laid a cross upon me, do not permit me to shirk from it, or shrink from it.'⁴⁷

In the light of this material, further strand needs to be added to our understanding of Spurgeon's theology of suffering. Christians were called to cross-shaped discipleship in response to both the example and direct command of Christ. This cross-bearing was, Spurgeon believed, a high calling indeed.

⁴⁴ C.H. Spurgeon, 'Let him Deliver him now', *MTP*, Vol. 34, S. No. 2029, Matthew 27.43, delivered 17 June 1888, 337-38.

⁴⁵ In addition to the other references in this paragraph, see, e.g., C.H. Spurgeon, 'Jesus Declining the Legions', *MTP*, Vol. 33, S. No. 1955, Matthew 26.53,54, delivered 27 March 1887, 191.

⁴⁶ Spurgeon, 'Let him Deliver him now', 338, 348.

⁴⁷ C.H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of the Kingdom. A Popular Exposition Of The Gospel According to Matthew* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1893) (Matthew 10.38), 75.

⁴³ C.H. Spurgeon, *Evening By Evening* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1868) (3 June), Philippians 2.8, 155.

In continuing to set out Spurgeon's theology of suffering, we need to note that for him the cross affirmed that there was a purpose in suffering. One of the points he made as he preached on Christ's afflictions was that Jesus learned 'obedience through the things...he suffered.' He made much of this thought as he preached on Hebrews 5:7-10 in 'Our Sympathizing High Priest'. Moreover, as Christ had learned obedience through suffering, so believers would do the same. Spurgeon made his basic point by way of an analogy: in the same way that swimming could be learnt only in the water, so obedience could be learnt only through suffering.

In a powerful passage, Spurgeon expanded on how he saw this dynamic working in practice. If a Christian prayed for healing for a chronically sick spouse or child only to see their loved one die, how ought they to respond? Resentment or bitterness might be natural responses, but they would be entirely inappropriate for the Christian. Here was an opportunity, said Spurgeon, to 'learn obedience'. The Christian was being called to a deeper faith and a more thoroughgoing obedience, one that endured even in the suffering engendered by fervent hopes disappointed.⁴⁸ 'Who knows what it is to obey God to the full until he has had to lay aside his own will in the most painful and tender respects?'⁴⁹

By having a range of motives for faith and obedience stripped away, a believer would learn a deeper faith that was focused on bare trust in Christ whatever the circumstances. This may have been in his mind when he once thanked God in prayer for bringing him low because by this means the 'little buildings on the rock had been swept away, and he had come to the solid granite itself'.⁵⁰ *In extremis*, a believer was left only with God and the promises of his word. This had been the lot of Christ, who had not been spared 'the last ounce of crushing sorrow' on the cross. In such desperate circumstances Christ continued to trust and in this he was the supreme example to believers.⁵¹

Overall, Spurgeon had a theology of suffering in which Christ, and especially the cross, was the fulcrum. The cross displayed God's sovereignty over suffering and his love for the world. It also set forth an example for believers to follow and provided a dynamic by which Christians could grow in obedient faith. Viewed in the light of the cross, suffering was both bearable and beneficial.

VII The Benefits of Suffering

Spurgeon held that suffering could, potentially, result in many benefits for the Christian, with the learning of obe-

⁴⁸ On the specific issue of deepening faith, see 'Thursday Evening at the Tabernacle', *The Baptist*, 6 August 1886, in 'Loose-Leaf Scrap Folders', March 1886–October 1886, Spurgeon's College, Heritage Room (2H), 49-50.

⁴⁹ Spurgeon, 'Our Sympathizing High Priest', 597. He used the swimming analogy

again in 'Two Good Things', *MTP*, Vol. 27, S. No. 1629, Psalms 119.71 and 73.23, delivered 17 June 1880, 640.

⁵⁰ *Christian Commonwealth*, 16 April 1885, in 'Spurgeon's Scrapbooks, Numbered Volumes', Vol. 12, 102.

⁵¹ Spurgeon, 'Our Sympathizing High Priest', 597.

dience being just one of these. He believed that, whilst prosperity softened a Christian, adversity had the opposite effect, bracing the soul and strengthening it.⁵² Once again, this was a principle which was deeply rooted in his own experience of suffering. On the last Sunday of 1888 Spurgeon was in Mentone and had a serious accident when his stick slipped at the top of a flight of marble stairs. In the ensuing fall he rolled over at least twice and was badly bruised and shaken, losing two teeth.⁵³

One of the sermons he gave on returning to London was on Exodus 15:22-27 and entitled 'Marah Better Than Elim'. Spurgeon referred to his Mentone fall in the sermon's introduction, saying that, soon after his tumble, an unnamed friend had spoken to him, comparing his experience with that of the Israelites who had encountered the bitter water at the springs of Marah (Exodus 15:23). Spurgeon agreed, but both he and his friend concurred that 'Marah' was actually better than the clean springs of 'Elim', as described in Exodus 15:27. This was because there was more lasting benefit to be gained from the former than from the latter.

As Spurgeon reflected further on his text he made comparison between the two contrasting experiences of God's people. There had been a miracle at Marah, but no corresponding miracle at Elim. God had made a 'decree' for his people at Marah, saying that if they

were faithful to him then they would not be inflicted with the plagues the Egyptians had experienced (Exodus 7-13), but there had been no such decree at Elim.

The contrast in favour of Marah was further shown by the fact that Elim was dealt with in only one verse in Exodus, whilst Marah was given four verses. For the preacher the message was clear: 'bitter' experiences such as his serious fall could be times of God's special blessing, where he dealt with his people in a particularly thoroughgoing, lasting way.⁵⁴

Spurgeon's handling of Exodus 15:22-27 gives evidence that his own personal experience of suffering was shaping his reading of the biblical text. Earlier, in 1880, he had insisted that his own 'affliction' had been spiritually beneficial for him. He believed this, he said,

[N]ot because we have been told so, but because of personal proof; and we assert it now, not as young beginners who are buckling on the harness, and who think themselves certain; but as those who have gone some distance in the pilgrimage of life, and know by actual test and matter of fact that it is even so.⁵⁵

As Spurgeon said elsewhere, 'We

52 C.H. Spurgeon, *The Saint And His Saviour: The Progress of the Soul in the Knowledge of Jesus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1889 [1857]), 419; Spurgeon, 'The Pitifulness of the Lord...', 332.

53 G.H. Pike, *The Life and Work of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (6 Vols; London: Cassell, 1894 [1892-93]), Vol. 6, 308-309; C.H. Spurgeon to Newman Hall, 20 Jan 1889, in C. Spurgeon (ed.), *The Letters of C.H. Spurgeon* (London: Marshall, n.d. [1923]), 195.

54 C.H. Spurgeon, 'Marah Better than Elim', *MTP*, Vol. 39, S. No. 2301, Exodus 15:22-26, delivered 4 April 1889, 145-46.

55 Spurgeon, 'Two Good Things', 637.

have never reaped such a harvest from any seed as from that which fell from our hands while tears were falling from our eyes.⁵⁶ He believed that suffering was beneficial for believers, he believed this strongly, and, finally, he believed this on the basis of personal experience.

Spurgeon spent considerable time in his preaching setting out specific ways in which suffering benefited the Christian. He held that affliction was often God's way of getting the attention of sleepy Christians. Some believers were apt to stumble through their Christian lives in a spiritual lethargy. Such people needed 'awakening and arousing' and trials did this. For other believers who were making more progress, but were tending to pride, suffering acted as a salutary reminder of the old nature.

A glass of water might look clear, but a little stirring disturbed the sediment and made the water cloudy. So it was with believers—the agitation caused by suffering brought the sin and compromise, which had been present before although not visible, to the surface. Whether a believer was sleepwalking aimlessly through the Christian life or boasting of sinless perfection, suffering acted as a spiritual wake-up call.⁵⁷

Having been suitably awakened, the faithful believer was then led to search his or her heart for possible sin. Spurgeon believed that suffering could be occasioned by specific sin, although he was clear that this was often not the

case.⁵⁸ But whether a believer's sin had been a cause of his or her trials or not, certainly the trials should be accepted as 'chastisement' and used as an opportunity for confession, 'for the best of us have much to mourn in the presence of the Most High'.⁵⁹ Growth in humility and holiness was thus achieved.

In addition, suffering afforded an important opportunity for the development of Christlike character.⁶⁰ It gave, for example, opportunities to show courage, a virtue Spurgeon believed was exemplified by Christ.⁶¹ The point about suffering and courage was brought out in the aforementioned sermon, 'Gratitude For Deliverance From The Grave'. In this Spurgeon declared,

We cannot show our courage unless we have difficulties and troubles. A man cannot become a veteran soldier if he never goes to battle... Rejoice, therefore, in your tribulations, because they give you opportunities for exhibiting a believing confidence, and thereby glorifying the name of the Most High.⁶²

Trials gave an opportunity for a believer to display courage and, also, a believing confidence in God. These

58 Just as Spurgeon believed that accidents were not, usually, to be regarded as God's judgments. See *Autobiography*, Vol. 4, 214.

59 C.H. Spurgeon, 'For the Sick and Afflicted', *MTP*, Vol. 22, S. No. 1274, Job 34.31,32, n.d., 40-42.

60 C.H. Spurgeon, 'God's People in the Furnace', *NPSP*, Vol. 1, S. No. 35, Isaiah 48:10, delivered 12 August 1855, 273.

61 See, e.g., Spurgeon, *Gospel of the Kingdom*, Matthew 20:17-19, 170.

62 Spurgeon, 'Gratitude For Deliverance from the Grave', 2.

56 C.H. Spurgeon, 'The Pitifulness of the Lord...', 325.

57 Spurgeon, 'Two Good Things', 640-42.

were two qualities that Spurgeon prized highly, and without adversity there would be no opportunity for them to be tested and to grow. Patience was another virtue which was both epitomised by Christ and developed through suffering. Christ had shown patience through suffering and in this he was the pattern for believers.⁶³

The connection between patience and suffering was a theme taken up by Spurgeon writing under the pen name of 'John Ploughman'. After asserting that 'the disciples of a patient saviour should be patient themselves', Spurgeon's *alter ego* insisted that affliction was a God-given opportunity to show and develop patience.⁶⁴ Elsewhere Spurgeon confessed he failed to see how patience would be produced 'apart from affliction'. Just as a veteran warrior was the 'child of battles', so a patient Christian was the 'offspring of adversity'.⁶⁵

These comments on patience are similar to those he made with regard to courage. Virtues such as these could be shown only in trials which required their use. Going through the fire of suffering was, therefore, an essential part of the process of sanctification and growth towards Christian maturity.⁶⁶

Christ had shown courage and patience in the face of suffering; Christians were to do the same, thus growing to become more like Christ themselves.

The sort of toughening up that Spurgeon was sure suffering produced was, he believed, essential preparation for future service. Adversity prepared the soul for 'greater heights of service';⁶⁷ for 'future usefulness' it was essential that 'present sorrow' was born.⁶⁸ This last mentioned comment was from a sermon entitled 'Certain Singular Subjects' in which he also used the phrase 'sanctified trials'.⁶⁹ The idea of afflictions being sanctified to the believer was an important one for him.⁷⁰

Two Christians could have similar experiences of suffering and yet respond in markedly different ways. There was a real danger that suffering would make a believer impatient, hardened and bitter. It could also, potentially, lead them to despair. Worst of all, a believer might blame God or slip into what Spurgeon described as a 'kind of atheism', saying that if God was real he would not allow such suffering.⁷¹ For the 'fire' to purify and not consume it had to be sanctified to the believer. For this to happen God had to be at work in a believer's life as they

63 C.H. Spurgeon, 'The Sheep before the Shearers', *MTP*, Vol. 26, S. No. 1543, Isaiah 53:7, n.d., 349-53.

64 C.H. Spurgeon, *John Ploughman's Talk; Or, Plain Advice for Plain People* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, n.d.), 'On Patience', 36-40.

65 Spurgeon, 'Two Good Things', 640.

66 C.H. Spurgeon, 'The Sitting of the Refiner', *MTP*, Vol. 27, S. No. 1575, Malachi 3:3, n.d., 4; C.H. Spurgeon to W. Cuff, 7 March 1891, in C. Spurgeon (ed.), *Letters of C.H. Spurgeon*, 152.

67 C.H. Spurgeon to W.J. Mayers, 25 July 1874, in C. Spurgeon (ed.), *Letters of C.H. Spurgeon*, 170.

68 Spurgeon, 'Certain Singular Subjects', 251.

69 Spurgeon, 'Certain Singular Subjects', 251.

70 Cf. Spurgeon, *Saint and his Saviour*, 361.

71 C.H. Spurgeon, 'Patient Job And The Baffled Enemy', *MTP*, Vol. 36, S. No. 2172, Job 1:22, delivered 28 August 1890, 604-10.

experienced trials.

In the sermon, 'The Sitting Of The Refiner', the 'refiner' is clearly thought of as being Christ, acting by the agency of the Holy Spirit.⁷² But a Christian was still active in this process. He or she had to respond to God's work by accepting suffering 'humbly'⁷³ and 'willingly'⁷⁴ just as Christ had accepted his suffering.⁷⁵ Following the example set by the earthly life of Christ, Christians were to cooperate with all that the risen glorified Christ wanted to do in their lives through the refining work of suffering. If they did cooperate in this process, then they would become purified through affliction. Where believers were enabled to have the right attitude to suffering, they would become more like Christ and more useful for Christ as a result of their trials. If approached in the right way, suffering would lead to growth towards Christlike holiness.

VIII Suffering and Communion with Christ

Suffering, then, painful as it was, could also convey many benefits, but Spurgeon prized it most for its potential to bring Christians into closer commu-

nion with their Lord. In a sermon entitled 'Job Among The Ashes', he insisted that a believer's suffering could lead to a clearer sight of God. Prosperity was a 'painted window' which shut out 'the clear light of God'. Only when the paint was removed did the window become 'transparent', enabling God to be seen with a new clarity. This had been Job's experience: he had lost everything and this 'paved the way' to his receiving a fuller revelation of God.

The principle on display was that in 'the absence of other goods the good God is the better seen'. Again, Spurgeon stressed that the suffering had to be 'sanctified' for this dynamic to work: affliction did not lead to a clearer view of God in every case. However, where God was at work and a believer responded faithfully to this, then spiritual perception would be heightened. Those who gained a spiritually 'enlightened eye' would learn to thank God for the painful process of suffering by which this sharpened spiritual vision had been attained.

Spurgeon turned to the New Testament to provide another example to set alongside that of Job: 'Who would not go to Patmos if he might see the visions of John?' The deprivations of exile were the context in which John had received his revelation of Jesus Christ. Therefore, it was the witness of both Testaments that suffering could lead to a new vision of God, one which made the trials eminently worthwhile.⁷⁶

⁷² Spurgeon, 'The Sitting of the Refiner', 1, 4.

⁷³ Spurgeon, 'For the Sick and Afflicted', 38-41.

⁷⁴ C.T. Cook (ed.), *Behold The Throne Of Grace: C.H. Spurgeon's Prayers And Hymns* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, n.d. [1934]), 'Praise at all Times' (3 November 1889), 81.

⁷⁵ Spurgeon, 'Jesus Declining the Legions', 186-87.

⁷⁶ C.H. Spurgeon, 'Job Among the Ashes', *MTP*, Vol. 34, S. No. 2009, Job 42:5,6, delivered 19 February 1888, 100, 107.

Moreover, this was also Spurgeon's own testimony. In 'The Pitifulness Of The Lord...' he declared,

[T]he Lord has a choice way of manifesting himself unto his servants in their times of weakness. I speak what I do know; for I have trodden...the path upon which shines the inward personal revelation of God. He draws the curtain about the bed of his chosen sufferer and, at the same time he withdraws another curtain which before concealed his Glory!⁷⁷

Scripture and Spurgeon's personal experience agreed. God revealed himself to suffering believers, and did so in a particularly 'choice' way.

In 'Job Among The Ashes' Spurgeon had spoken of how a fuller revelation of God enabled a new closeness to him. The sermon is unusual for him in that it lacked a strong Christological focus. Elsewhere, however, there was a strong stress on suffering as a means to increased closeness to Christ himself. Jesus could be seen more clearly in and as a result of an experience of suffering, and, crucially, he could be known more deeply through it too. In 'The Pitifulness Of The Lord...' Spurgeon insisted that,

[T]hose of us who have done business upon great waters and have endured abundant pain count them happy that endure, even while they are enduring. The people of God find themselves more buoyant in the saltiest seas of sorrow than in other waters. The cross of Christ

doth indeed raise us nearer to God when it is sanctified.⁷⁸

Suffering, when it was considered as a cross given by Christ, drew a believer closer to God. As Spurgeon continued his message he spoke specifically of closeness to Christ. 'Sorrows reveal to us the Man of Sorrows. Grievings waft us to the bosom of our God.' For him, there could be no greater prize, for the 'most delicious of sensations outside of heaven is to faint away on the bosom of the Lord'.⁷⁹

How did Spurgeon believe this dynamic worked? Part of the answer was that 'sorrow and adversity' drove the 'children of God to their knees',⁸⁰ thus fostering increased communion. Similarly, suffering would lead the faithful Christian to search the scriptures as he or she sought comfort and help.⁸¹ A believer, then, was led to seek Christ more diligently in the midst of trials.

This was only one half of the dynamic, however, for Spurgeon was sure that as a suffering believer drew near to God, then God would draw near to them, doing so especially in the person of his crucified and risen Son who was present to the believer by the Spirit. Jesus had shown compassion to suffering people in his earthly ministry, so he would have compassion on

⁷⁷ Spurgeon, 'The Pitifulness of the Lord...', 329.

⁷⁸ Spurgeon, 'The Pitifulness of the Lord...', 328.

⁷⁹ Spurgeon, 'The Pitifulness of the Lord...', 329.

⁸⁰ Spurgeon, 'Certain Singular Subjects', 251.

⁸¹ C.H. Spurgeon, 'My Comfort In Affliction', *MTP*, Vol. 31, S. No. 1872, Psalm 119:50, delivered 7 July 1881, 644-45.

his suffering people in Spurgeon's day;⁸² Jesus had suffered agonies on the cross; so he would be present to those Christians who suffered.

In 'Trial By The Word' the preacher offered the following analogy. A faithful mother, he declared, loved her young child at all times. Nevertheless, it was when the child was sick or injured that her full 'tenderness' was seen. 'If you would read all her heart, you should see her when [the child] scarcely breathes, when she fears that every moment will be its last. Then all the mother is revealed. How she fondles it, and what a store of sweet words she brings forth.'⁸³ Spurgeon's imagery was both intimate and daring, but he believed it was entirely justified, employed as it was to describe the closeness which could exist between God and a faithful, suffering believer. Again, as he spoke of God drawing near, it was Christ whom he especially had in mind, for Christ's suffering gave him a special 'sympathy' with other sufferers.⁸⁴ In this way suffering led to 'near and dear communion' between the believer and Christ.⁸⁵

As this communion was enjoyed, Christ would not only comfort and strengthen the Christian, but the believer would gain yet deeper insight and knowledge of Christ. In 'Communion With Christ And His People', an address given when Spurgeon presided

at the Lord's table at a small, intimate service at Mentone, he declared,

Certain of us have had large fellowship with the Lord Jesus in affliction. 'Jesus wept': He lost a friend, and so have we. Jesus grieved over the hardness of men's hearts: we know that grief. Jesus was exceedingly sorry that the hopeful young man turned away, and went back to the world: we know that sorrow. Those who have sympathetic hearts, and live for others, readily enter into the experience of 'the Man of sorrows'. The wounds of calumny, the reproaches of the proud, the venom of the bigoted, the treachery of the false, and the weakness of the true, we have known in our measure; and therein have had communion with our Lord Jesus.⁸⁶

Once again, the note of personal testimony is unmistakable. The thought that Christ comforts believers in 'affliction' is present, but the dominant motif in this extract appears to be that a believer entered into the sufferings of Christ when he or she suffered. A believer's suffering led them to an increased depth of sympathy with Christ, and a greater knowledge of Christ himself. In Spurgeon's thinking and experience, communion with Christ was always a dynamic concept. As far as the communion experienced through suffering was concerned, a

82 Spurgeon, 'The Pitifulness of the Lord...', 333-34.

83 Spurgeon, 'Trial by the Word', 77-78.

84 Spurgeon, 'The Suffering Saviour's Sympathy', 417.

85 Spurgeon, 'The Pitifulness of the Lord...', 329.

86 C.H. Spurgeon, 'Communion with Christ and his People', in *Till He Come: Communion Meditations* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1896), 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, 317.

clearer sight of Christ would lead to increased communion, which would in turn lead to an even fuller revelation of the crucified God. So the dynamic would continue. Suffering had a vitally important role in developing communion with Christ for Spurgeon.

IX Suffering and Ministry

Spurgeon further insisted that believers' afflictions fitted them to be a source of comfort and strength for others. Suffering thus shaped not only the inner dimension of Christian spirituality but its outward expression as well.

Once again, this dynamic—suffering strengthened believers to help others—did not happen automatically. Just as suffering had to be 'sanctified' in order for it to do the believer good, so God had to be active in and through believers if they were to help others, and believers had to cooperate with God in this and be willing to be used by him. Nevertheless, when suffering was sanctified in this further way, Christians could become a rich source of blessing to fellow, struggling pilgrims.⁸⁷ There were, Spurgeon believed, numerous instances of this dynamic at work in scripture.

Regarding the Psalmist, David, Spurgeon said, 'What a mercy it is for us all that [he] was not an untried man! We have all been enriched by his painful experience... May it not be a blessing to others that we also are

tried? If so, ought we not to be right glad to contribute our quota to the benefit of the redeemed family?'⁸⁸ Spurgeon's point was that David's painful experiences, as shared in many of the Psalms attributed to him, had been of great benefit to those (like Spurgeon himself) who had read them and received help from them.

Those who suffered in Spurgeon's day could be glad that they too had the opportunity to minister comfort and strength to others. The supreme example of the sufferer reaching out to help others in affliction, however, was not David but Christ himself. Spurgeon spoke of Jesus learning not only obedience but also 'sympathy' through sufferings.⁸⁹ Christ had repeatedly reached out in compassion to others,⁹⁰ even doing so when he was on the cross.⁹¹ Suffering believers were to follow his example.⁹²

Christians who were, or had been, 'afflicted' in their journey of faith were able to help other struggling believers in a number of different ways. If they patiently endured through intense suffering their example might act as a spur and encouragement to others.

88 C.H. Spurgeon, *My Sermon Notes: A Selection from Outlines of Discourses Delivered at the Metropolitan Tabernacle... From Genesis To Proverbs I to LXIV* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, n.d. [1884]), No. 54, Psalm 143:9, 327.

89 Spurgeon, 'The Suffering Saviour's Sympathy', 409.

90 Spurgeon, *Gospel of the Kingdom* (Matthew 14:14), 113.

91 C.H. Spurgeon, 'Christ's Plea for Ignorant Sinners', *MTP*, Vol. 38, S. No. 2263, Luke 23:34, delivered 5 October 1890, 313, 317.

92 Spurgeon, 'The Suffering Saviour's Sympathy', 410.

87 This theme has been expounded by a range of Christian spiritual writers. Its classic expression is probably found in H. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994 [1979]).

Spurgeon believed that some were especially chosen to suffer and so 'to be monuments of the Lord's special dealings; a sort of lighthouse to other mariners'.⁹³ By showing fortitude and faithfulness in suffering a Christian would give an example which others could follow.

Spurgeon was himself regarded as an example of someone who bore great suffering with particular patience and heroism. This was certainly how he was viewed by many of his students.⁹⁴ It was not enough, however, to suffer silently. The lessons of suffering had to be actively shared. Spurgeon sought to do this through his books and preaching.⁹⁵ He also got alongside people more personally.

This latter point can be seen through letters he wrote to those who were afflicted. In *The Letters of Charles Haddon Spurgeon*, the editor, C.H. Spurgeon's son, Charles Spurgeon, included a section headed 'Words of Sympathy'.⁹⁶ For this section, twelve letters were selected, eleven of which were written to bereaved friends. In

these, Spurgeon sought to help those who were suffering.

The letters are revealing. In them Spurgeon expressed his own grief at various situations faced by his family and friends. He assured his son, Charles, that he would 'never forget the day' he heard of the death of one of Charles' children, his own grandchild.⁹⁷ On another occasion Spurgeon wrote to Thomas H. Olney saying that he 'felt stunned' by news of the death of Thomas's brother, William Olney, one of Spurgeon's deacons: 'I could not realise it; indeed, I cannot now', he said.⁹⁸ He also offered comfort. This included practical help, sending a cheque to help defray funeral expenses, for example.⁹⁹ He repeatedly assured grieving friends of his prayers,¹⁰⁰ and sometimes recorded the nature of his petitions in the letter. 'I beseech the Lord to minister comfort both to you and your sorrowing wife', Spurgeon wrote to William Cuff, a former student, following a family bereavement.¹⁰¹

He gave encouragement too. He was

⁹³ Spurgeon, *My Sermon Notes... From Genesis to Proverbs*, No. 37, Job 3:23, 230.

⁹⁴ J.C. Carlile, *C.H. Spurgeon: An Interpretative Biography* (London: Kingsgate Press, 1933), 130-31.

⁹⁵ For further examples from C.H. Spurgeon's writing, see, e.g., *John Ploughman's Talk*, 'On Patience', 36-40; *Evening By Evening*, 2 Timothy 2:12 (July 3), 186.

⁹⁶ C. Spurgeon (ed.), *Letters of C.H. Spurgeon*, 166-72. Cf. other letters to those who were suffering, e.g., C.H. Spurgeon to unnamed friend, 24 July 1873, No. 9a; C.H. Spurgeon to unnamed friend, 3 June 1882, No. 44, both in 'Original Correspondence of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, 1863-1886'.

⁹⁷ C.H. Spurgeon to Mr and Mrs C. Spurgeon, 11 September 1890, in C. Spurgeon (ed.), *Letters of C.H. Spurgeon*, 166.

⁹⁸ C.H. Spurgeon to T.H. Olney, October 1875, in C. Spurgeon (ed.), *Letters of C.H. Spurgeon*, 167.

⁹⁹ C.H. Spurgeon to E.H. Bartlett, 14 December 1887, in C. Spurgeon (ed.), *Letters of C.H. Spurgeon*, 169.

¹⁰⁰ E.g. C.H. Spurgeon to T.H. Olney, October 1875; to W.J. Mayers, 25 July 1874, in C. Spurgeon (ed.), *Letters of C.H. Spurgeon*, 167; 170.

¹⁰¹ C.H. Spurgeon to W. Cuff, '30 November [no year]', in C. Spurgeon (ed.), *Letters of C.H. Spurgeon*, 170.

especially quick to say that he believed the Lord himself would comfort his friends in their grief,¹⁰² and wanted people to know, in line with the theological framework outlined in Section V of this article, that their suffering did not fall outside of God's sovereignty. Indeed, suffering could be a sign of God's special love. To Cuff he wrote,

It must be a very severe stroke to you, and it is a sign that our Father loves you very much and thinks a great deal of you. I had a watch once which I allowed to lie at ease and never worried it with cleaning for I thought it worthless; but one which keeps time to a second gets wound up every night with a key which touches its inmost springs, and sometimes it gets taken to pieces—for it is worth it.¹⁰³

Such a passage can sound like inappropriate moralising, but the letter appears to have been well received by the recipient and, indeed, treasured. The fact that Cuff made this and other letters available to Charles Spurgeon with permission to publish is, in itself, evidence of this.¹⁰⁴ William Williams wrote positively of the help Spurgeon gave to suffering Christians, saying that his friend 'was as familiar with the

glades of grief and the dark narrow gorges of depression as any man, or he could never with such consummate art have ministered comfort to the suffering...'.¹⁰⁵

Spurgeon had himself learnt the lessons he sought to share with others; suffering had become a crucial aspect of the way he related to God. People knew this, and consequently they knew that when he spoke about suffering his words were not abstract theologising, rather they had the force of personal experience behind them. J.C. Carlile's comment on Spurgeon's battles with suffering is worth quoting: 'The greater part of his career was lived in fellowship with physical pain. How bravely he endured his cross, and made suffering contribute to the comfort and the strengthening of others.'¹⁰⁶ These letters help illustrate this point, and show some of the specific ways Spurgeon sought to help.

He also believed that the lessons of suffering could be shared in evangelism. On one occasion he pictured a believer, who had displayed Christian graces when under severe trial, being questioned by an unbeliever.

'I saw how happy you were, dear friend, when you were in trouble. I saw you sick the other day, and I noticed your patience. I knew you to be slandered, and I saw how calm you were. Can you tell me why you were so calm and self-contained?' It is a very happy thing if the Christian can turn round and answer such a question fully. I like

102 E.g. C.H. Spurgeon to T.H. Olney, October 1875; to J.W. Harrald [n.d.], in C. Spurgeon (ed.), *Letters of C.H. Spurgeon*, 167, 171-72. Cf. C.H. Spurgeon to W. Baldock, 6 October 1886, 'Various Spurgeon Letters', Spurgeon's College, Heritage Room, (K1.9).

103 C.H. Spurgeon to W. Cuff, '30 November [no year]', in C. Spurgeon (ed.), *Letters of C.H. Spurgeon*, 170.

104 C. Spurgeon (ed.), *Letters of C.H. Spurgeon*, 'Introduction', 9.

105 Williams, *Personal Reminiscences* (rev. edn.), 24.

106 Carlile, *C.H. Spurgeon*, 130.

to see him ready to give a reason for the hope that is in him with meekness and fear, saying—‘This is my comfort in my affliction.’ I want you, if you have enjoyed comfort from God, to get it packed up in such a form that you can pass it on to a friend. Get it explained to your own understanding, so that you can tell others what it is, so that they may taste the consolation where-with God has comforted you.¹⁰⁷

It was not just other Christians who could be helped by a believer’s suffering. Rightly shared, a believer’s faithfulness in difficulty could have an evangelistic impact on the non-believer. Spurgeon’s approach to suffering thus connected both with those who were already Christ’s people and those who had yet to experience ‘God’s consolation’ for themselves. Suffering not only shaped the way he related to God but also the way he related to others. The life and ministry of C.H. Spurgeon was decisively moulded by his personal suffering and the ways he responded to it. Spurgeon’s story might be a story of triumph, but it is not a story of triumphalism.

X Conclusion

‘The rod of God teacheth us more than all the voices of his ministers’, said

Spurgeon in his sermon, ‘Trial By The Word’.¹⁰⁸ Such a comment can seem surprising coming from one who had such a high view of preaching, but it shows the vital importance of suffering to Spurgeon’s theology and spirituality. His life and ministry were heavily marked by suffering that was not only physical but also mental and spiritual. He emphasised the benefits that accrued to the believer through ‘sanctified afflictions’. Suffering enabled a believer to grow in virtues such as courage and patience, virtues that were displayed supremely by Christ in his passion. Most importantly, suffering was a crucible in which increased communion with Christ was fashioned, something that was especially precious to Spurgeon.

Christians whose lives were marked by suffering could be a particular source of comfort and strength to fellow believers. Spurgeon was rightly regarded as someone who had persevered through great suffering, and he himself recognised that he had suffered more than many Christians. He and others believed that this gave him a special sympathy with those who were afflicted. The lessons of suffering—for example, that a gracious God comforts sufferers, drawing near to them in Jesus—were those he sought to pass on to others. Overall, the reality of suffering loomed large over his ministry.

107 Spurgeon, ‘My Comfort in Affliction’, 643.

108 Spurgeon, ‘Trial by the Word’, 76.