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# ‘A SINGULAR SUBMISSIVENESS TO THE WILL OF GOD’: THE SPIRITUALITY OF SAMUEL PEARCE (1766–1799)

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## INTRODUCTION: WHY STUDY SAMUEL PEARCE?

You might wonder, ‘Why remember and study the life of someone born more than 250 years ago?’ Well, one of the reasons we study church history is to learn from the past—both from events and people, especially those who faithfully laboured in the gospel. Negatively, we can learn from the mistakes of these saints. One once said, ‘A wise man learns from his mistakes; a wiser man learns from the mistakes of others; a fool learns from neither of them.’<sup>1</sup> Positively, we can learn from their examples of holiness. Past saints were not perfect, but we can imitate them insofar as they imitated Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). And since ultimately, history is ‘his story’ (that is, Christ’s story), the focus of our study of the past is God in Christ who causes all things (without exception) to work together for the good of his people. The grand goal of our study is conformity to Christ (Rom. 8:28–29). If therefore your study of history does not draw you closer to Christ, something is wrong. Perhaps you are studying primarily to inform your mind, rather than transform your heart. But as we look at the life of Samuel Pearce and learn from him, we want God to transform our hearts. We will first sketch his life and then look at one of the aspects of his spirituality: cheerful submission to God’s will. I pray we will all learn to cheerfully submit to God’s sovereign will, even if his will counters ours, knowing that he knows what is best for us.

## ‘PREEMINENTLY A HOLY MAN’: A SKETCH OF SAMUEL PEARCE

Calvinistic Baptist by conviction, Samuel Pearce was born on July 20, 1766 in Plymouth, Devon, England. He was the son of William and Lydia Pearce, both Baptists. His mother died when he was only a child, and the young Pearce was then taken care of by his pious paternal grandfather. Pearce lived with his grandfather at Tamerton Foliot from 1766 to 1774. When Pearce was around eight, his father took him back to Plymouth to be under his care. His father was a deacon in the Baptist church at Plymouth. Thus Pearce grew up in church and under the care of a godly father.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Joel R. Beeke and Michael A. G. Haykin, *Why Should I Be Interested in Church History* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), p. 11.

However, his 'vicious school-fellows'<sup>2</sup> at the school in their town, where he studied from 1774 to 1780, influenced him to be involved in wickedness. And as he matured in age, 'he became more and more corrupted.'<sup>3</sup> But in 1782, age sixteen, Pearce experienced evangelical conversion through a sermon preached by Isaiah Brit (1758–1837) at the Plymouth Baptist congregation. On July 20, 1783, his seventeenth birthday, Pearce was baptized and became a member of the Plymouth Baptist church.

From 1780 to 1786, Pearce worked as an apprentice to his father, who was a respectable silversmith. Yet with a desire to preach the gospel to the lost, he studied at the Bristol Baptist Academy from 1786 to 1789. While studying, Pearce preached to the miners of the Forest of Dean.<sup>4</sup> In 1790, the year after he completed his theological training, he was ordained minister of Cannon Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, where he found his future wife Sarah Hopkins (1771–1804). The two married on February 2, 1791. They had a wonderful marriage, resulting in five children. Pearce faithfully served his congregation and remained with his flock until his death on October 10, 1799. With God's blessing, the congregation grew spiritually and numerically (more than three hundred souls were converted) under his preaching. During his ministry, Pearce established a Sunday school, benevolent society to assist the poor, and a sick society to care for the afflicted.<sup>5</sup> William Ward (1769–1823), one of Pearce's contemporaries and who had been impacted by Pearce's life, said of him, 'I have seen more of God in him than in any other person I ever knew.'<sup>6</sup> Years later on her reading of a biography of Pearce, Susan Huntington (1791–1823) wrote, 'I am reading the *Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel Pearce*, compiled by Andrew Fuller. How the life of such a man shames and condemns that of common Christians. He was pre-eminently a holy man.'<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Fuller, *A Heart for Missions. The Classic Memoir of Samuel Pearce* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2006), p. 3. This is a reprint of the third edition of Fuller's *Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel Pearce*. A.M.

<sup>3</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> E. F. Clipsham, 'Pearce, Samuel,' *Dictionary of Evangelical Biography 1730–1860*, ed. by Donald M. Lewis (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers), 2:864.

<sup>5</sup> *The Piety of Samuel and Sarah Pearce: Joy Unspeakable and Full of Glory*, ed. and intro. by Michael A. G. Haykin (Kitchener, ON: Joshua Press, 2012), pp. 8, 10–11.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in *Piety of Samuel and Sarah Pearce*, p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in *Piety of Samuel and Sarah Pearce*, p. xix.

## 'INTO BUSINESS WITH ALL HIS HEART'

In May 1791, Pearce attended the ordination of William Carey (1761–1834) at Leicester, where for the first time he probably met Carey and 'in whom he found a soul nearly akin to his own.'<sup>8</sup> The following year, he was at Kettering for the founding of the Baptist Missionary Society, originally called the Particular (or Calvinistic) Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Amongst the Heathen. Pearce was among those ministers who signed an agreement for this missionary society. Other ministers included John Sutcliff (1752–1814), John Ryland Jr. (1753–1825), and Andrew Fuller (1754–1815)—the latter being elected secretary of the society and the one who wrote a biography of Pearce.<sup>9</sup> Along with Carey, all these men became close friends of Pearce.

Pearce 'entered into [the society's] business with all his heart.'<sup>10</sup> His biographer put Pearce's early involvement in the society this way:

On his return to Birmingham [from Kettering], he communicated the subject to his congregation with so much effect, that, in addition to the small sum of 13 pounds [...] with which the subscription was begun, 70 pounds were collected, and transmitted to the treasurer [...]. Early in the following spring, when it was resolved that our brethren, Thomas [a Baptist medical missionary]<sup>11</sup> and Carey, should go on a mission to the Hindus, and a considerable sum of money was wanted for the purpose, he laboured with increasing ardour in various parts of the kingdom; and when the object was accomplished, he rejoiced in all his labour, smiling in every company, and blessing God.<sup>12</sup>

In 1794, convinced the Lord was calling him to be a missionary, he considered going to India to help Carey, who had only been in India since November 1793. Pearce's intense desire to join Carey was clear in a letter he wrote to him from Birmingham on October 24, 1794: 'Brother, I long to stand by your side, and participate in all the vicissitudes of the attack—an attack which nothing but cowardice can make unsuccessful.' He adds,

Every day more fully convinces me that I ought to go. Now, as I mean to adhere to my plan, I have not yet acquainted the Society with my views. There is a meeting at Road, on the 12th of November, 1794. That opportunity I intend to embrace, God willing, and then, whether my Master will count me

<sup>8</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> See Fuller's *Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel Pearce. A.M.*

<sup>10</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> John Thomas (1757–1801) accompanied Carey to India.

<sup>12</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 28.

worthy of so high a calling, or whether his providence will check my temerity, will be determined.<sup>13</sup>

Pearce's wife supported his plan for India. In the same letter, written October 24, 1794, he tells Carey, 'Yesterday my wife told me that, on mature deliberation, she approved of the plan I have adopted, and was much more comfortable in her mind than ever before.'<sup>14</sup> However, the Baptist Missionary Society committee, which met in Northampton and sent out Carey, thought it would be better for the mission work in India if Pearce remained in England. As his biographer explains,

The committee, after the most serious and mature deliberation, though they were fully satisfied as to brother Pearce's qualifications, and greatly approved of his spirit, yet were unanimously of opinion that he ought not to go; and that not merely on account of his connections at home, which might have been pleaded in the case of brother Carey, but on account of the mission itself, which required his assistance in the station which he already occupied.<sup>15</sup>

Pearce's reaction to the committee's ruling displays an important aspect of his spirituality: cheerful submission to God's will.

#### 'TO MAKE MY SAVIOUR'S WILL MY OWN'

After receiving the committee's opinion, he wrote to his wife from Northampton November 13, 1794,

I am disappointed, but not dismayed. I ever wish to make my Saviour's will my own. I am more satisfied than ever I expected I should be with a negative upon my earnest desires, because the business has been so conducted that I think [...] the mind of Christ has been obtained.<sup>16</sup>

Pearce showed that at the end of the day he wanted nothing but to obtain Christ's mind—that is, to make Christ's will his own. In a diary written October 15, 1794, just preceding the committee's meeting, he penned, 'My business is only to be where he would have me [...]. I say [...] "*Thy will be done!*"'<sup>17</sup>

On March 27, 1795, from Birmingham Pearce informed Carey of the committee's decision,

<sup>13</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, pp. 39, 41.

<sup>14</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 48.

<sup>16</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 57. Italics original.

Instead of a letter, you perhaps expected to have sent the writer; and had the will of God been so, he would by this time have been on his way to Mudnabatty; but “it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.” Full of hope and expectation as I was, when I wrote you last, that I should be honoured with a mission to the poor heathen, and be an instrument of establishing the empire of my dear Lord in India, I must submit now to “stand still, and see the salvation of God.”<sup>18</sup>

Here we see the main reason why he wanted to go to India—to establish the empire of God through the proclamation of the gospel. In his diary dated October 15, 1794, he lamented,

There are in Birmingham 50,000 inhabitants; and, exclusive of the vicinity, ten ministers who preach the fundamental truths of the gospel. In Hindostan there are twice as many millions of inhabitants; and not so many gospel preachers. Now Jesus Christ has commanded his ministers to go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature: why should we be so disproportionate in our labours? Peculiar circumstances must not be urged against positive commands: I am therefore bound, if others do not go, to make the means more proportionate to the multitude.<sup>19</sup>

But with the committee’s recommendation, Pearce stayed in England. Pearce took the committee’s advice as coming from the Lord. Writing to Carey, Pearce said, “To this [decision] I was enabled cheerfully to reply, “the will of the Lord be done;” and, receiving this answer as the voice of God, I have for the most part been easy since, though not without occasional pantings of spirit after the publishing of the Gospel to pagans [in India].”<sup>20</sup> Pearce never held a grudge against the committee; he respected their opinion. In fact, his love for them grew even stronger after the meeting. As he said to Carey in a letter dated March 27, 1795, “I shall ever love my dear brethren the more, for the tenderness with they treated me, and the solemn prayer they repeatedly put up to God for me.”<sup>21</sup>

Yet while Pearce submitted cheerfully to God’s will, his passion for the lost in India never disappeared, despite the committee’s decision. There was still part of him that longed to go to India. In March 1795, after he had recovered from a serious sickness, he wrote to Fuller,

Through mercy I am almost in a state of convalescence. May my spared life be wholly devoted to the service of my dear Redeemer I do not care where I

<sup>18</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 57.

<sup>20</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 51.

<sup>21</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 51.

am, whether in England or in India, so I am employed as he would have me; but surely we need pray hard that God would send some more help to Hindostan.<sup>22</sup>

Again, writing to Fuller in 1796 regarding the letter he had received from Carey about the update of the mission work in India, Pearce said, 'OH THAT I WERE THERE TO WITNESS THE DELIGHTFUL PROCESS [i.e., the delightful conversion of the people in India]! But whither am I running? [...] I LONG TO WRITE YOU FROM HINDOSTAN!'<sup>23</sup>

'I WILL DO ALL I CAN TO SERVE THE MISSION AT HOME'

'Disappointed, but not dismayed,'<sup>24</sup> Pearce continued to support the ministry in India while in Birmingham. He regularly prayed for their missionaries. In his diary dated October 17, 1794, he closed his personal devotion with 'earnest prayer to God for my family, my people, the heathen world, the Society, and particularly for the success of our dear brethren Thomas and Carey.'<sup>25</sup> He continued to raise funds for the mission work. Through his preaching, he cultivated an evangelistic zeal among his people; he challenged and encouraged them to assist the work in India through their offering and prayer. He invited all his 'friends to a day of prayer on behalf of the mission.'<sup>26</sup> Through ink, he encouraged their missionaries. In short, he kept what he promised to do if his plan to go to India fell through. The week before the committee met on November 12, 1794, he wrote in his journal,

I look at brother Carey's portrait as it hangs in my study: I love him in the bowels of Jesus Christ, and long to join his labours: every look calls up a hundred thoughts, all of which inflame my desire to be a fellow labourer with him in the work of the Lord. *One thing, however, I have resolved upon, that the Lord helping me, If I cannot go abroad, I will do all I can to serve the mission at home.*<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 54.

<sup>23</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 54. Capitalization original.

<sup>24</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 48.

<sup>25</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 58. We find a similar prayer in his diary dated October 31, 1794: 'I prayed for myself, the Society, the missionaries, the converted Hindoos, the church in Cannon Street, my family, and ministry.'

<sup>26</sup> This special prayer meeting for the work in India was held on December 28, 1796. See Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 55.

<sup>27</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, pp. 65–6. Italics mine.

Indeed, from a human point of view, we can say that part of the success of the work in India was due to Pearce's unceasing help. Even though at one point Pearce feared that if he stayed in England, he would be 'a poor useless drone.'<sup>28</sup>

After Pearce's death, Fuller, who also opposed Pearce's going to India, said that if the committee had seen Pearce's diary written shortly before the meeting, 'they would not have dared to oppose his going. But the Lord hath taken him to himself. It no longer remains a question now whether he shall labour in England, or in India.'<sup>29</sup> Then Fuller made a remarkable observation, which highlights one of the aspects of Pearce's piety: 'There appears throughout the general tenor of his life *a singular submissiveness to the will of God*; and, what is worthy of notice, this disposition was generally most conspicuous when his own will was most counteracted.'<sup>30</sup> For sure, it was not easy for Pearce to surrender to God his dream to serve in India.<sup>31</sup> In fact, he once said in his diary written seven days before the committee assembled, 'If they knew how earnestly I pant for the work [in India], it would be impossible for them to withhold their ready acquiescence.' Then he went on to say, 'O Lord, thou knowest my sincerity [...]. If I stay in England [...] I doubt whether I shall ever know inward peace and joy again.'<sup>32</sup> I do not think that what he doubted came to pass, for he learned the heavenly art of converting his disappointment into joy and finding peace in God's sovereign will. In his concluding reflections on Pearce's life, Fuller declared, 'In him we see, in clear and strong colours, *to what a degree of solid peace and joy true religion will raise us, even in the present world*.'<sup>33</sup> Oh, may we also learn to submit to God's perfect will and find peace therein, even when his will counters ours!

<sup>28</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 65. He gave this statement prior to the committee's meeting.

<sup>29</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 55.

<sup>30</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 67. Italics mine.

<sup>31</sup> Pearce would literally have a dream about the mission work in India. He wrote in his diary dated October 18, 1794, 'I dreamed that I saw one of the Christian Hindoos. Oh how I loved him! I long to realize my dream. How pleasant will it be so to sit down at the Lord's table with our swarthy brethren, and hear Jesus preached in their language!' See Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 58.

<sup>32</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 65. Italics original.

<sup>33</sup> Fuller, *Heart for Missions*, p. 171.