

First Person Presentation of C. H. Spurgeon

Reformation Month 2000

By Dr. Edward Panosian

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Faith Free Presbyterian Church

1207 Haywood Rd
Greenville, SC 29615

Website: www.faithfpc.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/faith

Good evening. I appreciate your coming again. I appreciate the fact that you have over these several years of Reformation months been faithful and consistent.

I come to you tonight as a 19th century figure. That sounds like a long time after the 16th century Reformation but my roots were in the 16th century in the Netherlands, in Holland. My family lived there as Reformed Protestants at a time when the king of Spain, who controlled the Netherlands then, was seeking to uproot Protestantism from the land and reestablish as dominant the Church of Rome. My family fled that and fled to Essex County, England, and we settled in the town of Kelvedon.

The name Spurgeon means sparrow, like that unattractive bird of which there are many, and they're not very valuable. I'll let you draw whatever inferences you wish from that observation. But I was born into a family of preachers. My father was a preacher. My grandfather was a preacher. My great-grandfather's great-grandfather was a preacher in the 17th century at the time of John Bunyan. I understand you have met him not long ago. John Bunyan, you know, was imprisoned in Bedford jail for the gross crime of preaching the Gospel without the authorization of a state church. I speak as a fool. He was imprisoned and God used his imprisonment to be an instrument of blessing. My great-grandfather's great-grandfather, Job Spurgeon, was imprisoned in Chelmsford jail about the same time that John Bunyan was in Bedford jail, and for the same reason, and I was often proud to remember that there flowed in my veins the blood of one who had been imprisoned for the Gospel's sake, and that gave me more joy than if there had been in those veins the blood of emperors or kings.

I was the eldest of 17 children, and I remind you before you gasp at that observation, of the prevalence of child mortality in my time, and how few of those born into a family survived childhood and lived to adulthood. In my family, there were 8 of those 17 who survived, 6 girls and 2 boys. I'll let you make whatever observations come to mind as to the weaker sex, therefore.

My brother and I, my brother was named after my grandfather. My grandfather and grandmother lived alone with their unmarried daughter Ann. My grandfather was a pastor of the Stambourne Meetinghouse for 54 years. In fact, that congregation had had a total of 4 pastors in 200 years. I guess that qualifies as pastoral stability. And because a

number of children came into my parents' home, rather quickly after my birth, it was decided by my loving parents that I would be housed and reared from the age of 2 until, as it turned out, about my 8th year in my grandfather's home. My parents loved me. They were not getting rid of me. They were not exactly farming me out, but they were making room for other members of the family, and I had a remarkable experience during those years of living in the home of a godly man and woman, living in the midst of preaching and praying and studying. As a child before ever any formal schooling, I was taught my letters by my Aunt Ann. I found in the upper floor of grandfather's home a pile of heavy tomes of Puritan writings, Puritan books, and I would literally drag them down the steps, bumping on each stair, and open them before the hearth and lie on my stomach and turn the pages as if I were reading them, and before very long, I did manage to read them a little.

So hearing preaching, hearing grandfather's pray at table before we ate. We thanked the Lord for what we were about to receive and after we ate, we thanked the Lord for what we had just received, and not only for the food but grandfather would pray for the members of his congregation, and as a little boy, I was grieved at realizing how greatly grandfather was grieved over the members of his congregation, some of whom had once borne a faithful testimony, who had been stalwart members of the congregation, known in the community as saints of God; some of whom had gone back on that testimony, had slidden back into the world, had renounced by their action and life and made a mockery of their testimony. And grandfather was so grieved at this. He would weep at table, at particularly one, Old Roads was his name. Roads, not like the scholarship South African, R-o-a-d-s, just the way you'd expect it to be. Old Roads, and Old Roads was such a grief to grandfather. He had gone back into the world, back to his old sins, and I as a boy of 5 or 6, one day announced at table, "Grandfather, some day I'm going to kill Old Roads." And grandfather and grandmother were not much pleased at that remark and didn't know what I had in mind.

On one occasion shortly later, I was sent into the village to purchase something for grandmother and I looked in the window of the tavern and I saw in there Old Roads cavorting with his friends, drinking his ale, blaspheming his God, and I did something that a little boy, or an older one either, should not have done. I went into that tavern and I thrust my finger in the face of Old Roads and I said to him, "What doeth thou here, Elijah?" Now, his name was not Elijah, but I had heard grandfather preach on that text and somehow it seemed appropriate for Old Roads. And without waiting for an answer and somewhat tearful I might get one, I fled then and went home, and at table that night I announced to grandfather, "Grandfather, today I killed Old Roads," and now what had been consternation over my earlier remark was intensified with wonder until there came a knock on the door of grandfather's home and a penitent Old Roads came to grandfather's house and begged forgiveness and was restored to his God, and a little child in ignorance had been an instrument in the hand of God.

"God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform." I first heard that phrase when a missionary who was going to speak in grandfather's church the following Sunday morning, arrived on Saturday at grandfather's house and became acquainted with this

little grandson. We walked in the garden. Grandmother had a garden, a flower garden. Not for vegetables, for flowers. She loved flowers. She would harvest those flowers and take bunches to shut-ins and sick, so that others could enjoy the blessing of the beauty of those flowers.

Well, we walked in the garden and on the morning, and suddenly Mr. Knill was his name, K-n-i-l-l, he was not nothing, he was something, Mr. Knill, he stopped and he put his hand on my head, my little head and said, "Young man, I feel impressed to believe that one day you will preach to thousands," and he said, "and when you do," he did not say if you do, he said, "and when you do, I want the first hymn you announce to your people to be 'God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform.'" I remembered that many years later, but at the time it seemed a most unlikely possibility.

I lived in my grandfather's home. I learned my letters from Aunt Ann. I enjoyed the experience of close fellowship with aged members of my family. One Sunday, grandmother was not feeling well. We left her as we went to the meetinghouse. She was sitting in her rocker with the Bible open on her lap. After church as we returned home, we found grandmother still sitting in her rocker with the Bible open on her lap, she was still in death and her finger lay on the verse, "The hand of the Lord hath touched me." And we buried grandmother and soon later it was decided I would be returned to my parents' home.

The parting was a difficult one. I didn't want to leave grandfather. Oh, I had seen my parents from time-to-time. I want you to understand it was not abandonment or they were not distant from me, but I didn't want to leave and grandfather looked up in the sky and he said, "Charlie," not many people called me Charlie but a few, "Charlie," he said, "we'll both be looking at the same moon. Wherever you are, you look at the moon and know that grandfather is looking at the moon too. The same moon." And I remembered that, and more than once in my youth and indeed in later years, I enjoyed the reminder of looking at the moon.

I went back to my home and became now better acquainted with my own siblings, my brothers and sisters, and having the opportunity now to be with people of my nearer age, I decided that we would play church. This is what I had known best and there was nothing sacrilegious about it or we were not being blasphemous. I was the eldest and, therefore, I sat them down, I led them in hymns, and I preached to them and they were required to be still and listen. This was our play. It was not, I say, disrespectful. It was what I knew best. I had been reared in the midst of it, but I was also conscious that I knew nothing of the grace of God in my own heart. I was immersed in preaching but the Spirit of God had never conquered the soul of this young boy. But that was to come.

I set about to the town of Newmarket where I was to attend a grammar school. Here Mrs. Cook conducted a school. It was some little distance but it was not a boarding school, but it was not right in the town of Kelvedon. Mrs. Cook required on a certain day that we have a slate pencil, a slate pencil with which to write on the slate which could then be erased and reused. I did not have a slate pencil and my pastor/father had many children

and I was reluctant to ask him for the farthing I required with which to purchase a slate pencil. Now, there are four farthings in one pence, one penny then. But a friend told me of the magic of the possibility of going to the general store, the proprietor of which would give me whatever I wanted if I would sign a note, a promise to pay in the future when I could, and I could get whatever. I thought this was remarkable, wonderful. I went to the store, I got my slate pencil, I signed my note and I went home quite proud of what I had accomplished and expected father would be pleased at my ingenuity. He was not pleased. He immediately marched me, and I mean quite literally marched me hand-in-hand back to the general store and paid the farthing and tore up the note and lectured me all the way home saying, "Son, there are three things in life you must avoid. You must shun them: number 1 is the devil; number 2 is dirt; and the third is debt." Well, I got the message. I thought he was making more of it than necessary, but I must tell you, in future years that experience was well remembered and not before the last \$2,000 came in, would we open the finished building of the Metropolitan Tabernacle. But I run ahead. I learned a lesson. It was to hold me in good stead.

I had a hurt in my heart. I was conscious that something was not right. Father preached. Grandfather preached. Preaching was in my ears but it was not in my heart and I began to be concerned of soul. I heard mother pray, "Lord, if my children continue in sin it will not be out of ignorance that they will be damned, and at the judgment seat, I will consent to their judgment." Now that is a sober word from a loving mother, it was a loving word, and this young man heard and was inclined to heed, and I became troubled of soul and concerned and fearful, and I wished and I labored, and I feared and I doubted, and I hoped and I feared election, and I feared the Father, the heavenly Father, I feared dying, and I set about in my early teens to investigate from other places than my father's church, what it was that I needed. I became a church tramp. I went around to various churches to hear what they were preaching. My parents were not pleased. It was inappropriate for their son to be thus engaged, but I was uncomfortable and that discomfort led me to this disrespectful procedure.

I was in the age of 14 and under-teacher at a little school. That sounds strange to you, having no more than a grammar school education myself, and therefore a degree of independence, a slight degree of independence, and I went around to various churches and I discovered that every place I went told me either of the blessings awaiting the redeemed hereafter or of the judgments that awaited the damned, and nobody made clear to me how I could move from the state of the second to the state of the first, and in my teenage heart, still not knowing the grace of God as my own, I determined that if ever Mr. Knill's prophetic word in the garden at grandfather's house should prove true and that ever I should preach, I would be sure always to make clear how a man, a woman, a boy, a girl, could move from a sinner to a saved saint. That, too, was a wholesome experience for years to follow.

On a particular Sunday in January of 1850, I was 15 ½ years old, born in June of 1834. It was January of 1850. January. It was winter. It was cold. The snow was deep. The church I had intended to visit that Sunday was too far away. Instead, I went to one nearby which my parents had warned me about. It was the Artillery Street Primitive Methodist Church.

I say my parents had warned me about the Primitive Methodists. They told me, "They sing so loudly that your ears will ache." But I had an ache considerably south of my ears and I was quite willing to endure even that potential if that ache could be healed.

So I went to this meeting on this Sunday morning. There were not more than six people present. I was conspicuous enough and sought a place of refuge under the gallery, you'd say balcony, in the rear, hoping not to be noticed. The time for the service came and passed and several minutes passed. The pastor himself had been unable to arrive, so deep was the snow that day. Eventually in great collective embarrassment, if you consider six people a collection, a tall lanky layman stood to his feet and hesitantly, almost as if he were intruding, walked into the pulpit, opened a Bible, cleared his throat and read a verse. You sang about that verse a few minutes ago from Isaiah 45:22, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else." And then having read it, he was at a loss for what to do next. He stepped back, swallowed hard, waited for some thought, and then he again read the same verse, and there was mutual embarrassment but then with nothing else to do, he began to say somewhat to the desk, "Now this is a simple verse," and it was a good thing, "All it says is look. Now it's not hard to look. Anybody can look," he said, and gradually he was beginning to raise his head. "Now it says don't look to yourself. There's no help there. Don't look to election. That's by and by," he said. "Don't look to the Father, look to him later. It says look to Jesus." There wasn't Jesus in that verse but he had the right message. Then he looked up and then he spied me under the gallery in the back and he said as he pointed to me, "Young man, you look miserable." Well, it was true but I didn't think it showed so clearly. He says, "You're in trouble and you'll always be in trouble until you look to Jesus." And then he reared back as if only a Primitive Methodist could do, and he said, "Young man, look. Look!" And then he wept as he said, "Look." And I who had been ready to do 50 things, could have looked my eyes away and I came for the first time to know and understand what grandfather had been preaching about, what father had been preaching about, what Job Spurgeon, my great-grandfather's great-grandfather had been preaching about, what the saints of the ages had understood, that Jesus, the only Savior, who finished the work of redemption by his death upon the cross, from whose side came a river of blood in which if men are plunged, their sins are washed away, and I had now a heart for God. I had had a head for God, now I had a heart.

Fifteen and a half years old. Announced to my parents what I had done. They rejoiced with me. Proceeded to go on visitation, hand out tracts, little pamphlets with the Gospel. Gave my testimony at Sunday school. Was soon invited to give my testimony elsewhere. Was invited to a Sunday school convention there to give my testimony. Did so and then immediately following, two mature ministers got up and excoriated me publicly for having the effrontery, being so young, to have addressed such an important occasion. I was cowed but replied, "The apostle says, 'Let not your youth,'" what is the verse? Help me. "Let no man despise thy youth but be thou an example." And I said, "You have not set me, a youth, a good example in my effort to witness for my Lord." But in the audience that day was a lay-deacon, a Mr. Gould, who had a friend in London. I'll tell you about that friend in a moment.

At the age of 17, I was made a pastor of a little congregation in the town of Waterbeach. Waterbeach. That was the name of the town. I was 17. I had no business being a pastor. They arranged that I would live in a different family's home each week. They didn't have to provide for me otherwise, the family in which I was living each week would provide for me. And God blessed the ministry of this boy without an education. I was a country bumpkin, I was ignorant, but when I stood before the people with the word of God, God gave me a liberty, a freedom, a voice, a message, and courage to proclaim his truth.

It was not long afterward that this Mr. Gould who had heard me at a Sunday school convention met with his friend, Thomas Olney, in London, who was a member of a committee of the New Park Street Chapel which had been without a pastor for several months. This church had had an audience of 1,200. It had had the pastorate in its past years of men like John Rippon, John Gill, Benjamin Keach. It had been a well-taught congregation which was a sterling center of the Gospel in London. London. They were without a pastor. The congregation had dwindled from 1,200 to 300 and they were looking for someone, and on the recommendation of this Mr. Gould who had heard me at the Sunday school convention, Mr. Olney reported to the fellow members of his committee of the possibility of inviting as a candidate this boy out in Waterbeach. I received such an invitation and was sure it had been a mistake. Upon investigating, it was concluded that it was not a mistake and so I prepared, totally unprepared, to go to London.

Let me tell you that soon after I had begun to preach, my father said I should get an education, a very appropriate thing to do in my case. I had no high school even, let alone college or university. It was arranged that I would meet with a professor from Regent's College, Cambridge, in Cambridge town at the home of Mr. Macmillan. Some of you know him, the publishing company, also a Prime Minister in the 20th century, your century. I was seeing him on a certain day. In those days, you did not fill out an application and send it in, you had an interview with a professor and on the strength of his recommendation you were considered for enrollment.

I was well-prepared, eager, and hopeful, and arrived early at this home, the most important home in the town. I was met at the door by a dull, I mean she was not bright, a dull maid. I will not say more, but she immediately ushered me into a room to wait for the professor since I was early. She did not tell other members of the family that I was in the house. At the appointed hour, the professor arrived, was ushered into another room and waited for me. And the time passed and the need for him to move on arrived and I had not arrived, as far as anyone knew except the dull maid who had me in another room. And the professor had to leave. My hopes were dashed. All my opportunity for a formal education was lost and then she remembered that I was in the house.

I was deeply depressed for several days following. My opportunity had been lost and in that depression, the Lord seems to speak to my soul and I heard, as it were, with the ears of my soul, the word, "Seeketh thou great things for thyself? Seek them not." And the load was lifted but the burden of a self-education remained, and I hope you who have and have had and are having and will have the privilege of teachers to assist you in the

process of learning, though I hesitate to say this in my true persona, will somehow recognize the gift of such an opportunity. Through the remaining years of my life, I had to read and educate myself but God gave me in compensation a good memory. I was able to remember what I read. He gave me a wife in good time who often read to me and thus gave me opportunity for meditation on what I was hearing. And I was able to use from a wealth of reading in the arts and sciences, the various disciplines, illustrations from life and from nature that were poignant opportunities to convey spiritual truths. So God more than compensated for this lost opportunity.

Well, the invitation to this London pulpit and then my arrival on a Saturday night, stayed in a boardinghouse overnight, and the men in the boardinghouse saw the way I was dressed, saw my speech, heard my speech, and said, "You're not fit for a London pulpit." They were right. They laughed at me and I slept little that night, but in the morning, went to the congregation who had heard about this boy preacher coming to candidate, so many people arrived out of curiosity and listened and what they heard belied what they saw and God used the occasion. I preached on the text, "Every good and perfect gift cometh from above, from the Father of lights in whom is no variableness nor shadow of turning." And more people came Sunday night out of curiosity, having heard about this country bumpkin who spoke in the morning. Among those who came was the daughter of a wealthy respectable merchant in the city. Her name, Susannah Thompson. She, too, was curious. She came. She did not mock. She listened and I saw and in good time, on her birthday, I later sent her a copy of "The Pilgrim's Progress," you know something about that, on the flyleaf of which I had inscribed, "To Susannah Thompson from C. H. Spurgeon, with great interest in the progress of your pilgrimage." I signed it and dated it. You have guessed that in 1856 in my 22nd year, we were married and she was to me God's best earthly gift and a companion and a helpmeet for me. But again I run ahead.

I returned to Waterbeach. Was invited back to London on three subsequent occasions at the same church, and finally asked to come for six months for kind of a trial pastorate. I concluded that three months would be ample, we would both know by then. I agreed to come for three months. At the end of three months, they unanimously invited me to be their pastor and now fruitfulness and opposition. Both were true and both were plentiful by the grace of God.

An uneducated country boy preacher and soon two and three times the number of people attending any other church in London were coming to hear me preach and this caused opposition. One lady said, "I can no longer go to church to sleep. He keeps me awake. I had insomnia. The only place I could sleep was in church and listening to dull theological treatises. But this man keeps me awake." I was most cumbersome in the pulpit. You must understand, I say this to my shame. I had a dark blue, white polka-dotted handkerchief which I used to punctuate my point as I went from point 1 to point 2, and that didn't work in a London pulpit. It was, you would say...I will not say what you would say.

But God was blessing and the people were coming and there was not room to receive them. There was room at the foot of the cross but there was not room in the benches of the pews. And as I was preaching one day, I said, "Because the people of Israel prayed

and believed God, they shouted and prayed and the walls of Jericho fell down, and if we pray and believe God, this wall will fall." I was announcing an expansion program for the building. It was a very unwise way to make the announcement but we proceeded to enlarge the building. It was an unwise move, as well, because having been enlarged, the building was too small. While it was being done, we met in the Exeter Hall in the city, used during the week for public performances, musical performances and symphonies, and it seated 5,000, and it was filled. The Lord Mayor of London, the Chief Commissioner of Police, thieves and prostitutes and everybody in between were coming. Ninety percent of the people attending were men. The women could not stand the jostling of the crowd. You had to come an hour early to get in the building. So the glory of God, this was remarkable. I did not understand it and we didn't have space. There was standing room filled. The police had to divert traffic which meant horse-drawn cabs and wagons, carriages. They had to divert traffic. It was a public menace in some respects. But God was blessing and people were being blessed and the word of God was going forth and fruit was being reaped, and how do you stop it?

We enlarged the building and on my 21st birthday I received a small gift of money in a note from a member of the congregation asking that this be the first gift toward the building of a new building appropriate to our needs. So in 1859, the cornerstone was laid for the Metropolitan Tabernacle, as we called it. A tabernacle built on a Greek audience style. Arch columns at the front and three levels: a main floor and then two balconies, but the pulpit platform was thrust out into the congregation at about the level of the first balcony. So the people on the main floor looked up a little, the people on the second balcony looked down a little, but no one was very far from the preacher. There was a railing around. I was very peripatetic in the pulpit and it kept me from falling into the people who were down below. And by the time it was opened, it seated 5,500 people, 500 more with standing room. There was in the basement lower level a room holding 1,000 for midweek services, and another room holding 1,000 which was used later for the pastor's school. The very phrase is incomprehensible. The pastor himself had never been to school yet he conducted a school for potential pastors, and yet that was a means by which churches were established all over the British Isles and elsewhere, in Australia and the New World. I just taught them what I had learned in the crucible of experience and God was pleased to use it.

While the building was being built, the Exeter Hall was now being used on Sunday for amusements and we were opposed to that so we would no longer use it. It was open to us on Sunday formerly because they didn't have anything going on then. So we then moved to the Royal Surrey Gardens Hall which had recently been built. It seated 10,000 and on the opening day of our service there, it was filled and standing room was filled, and I announced a text, and having done little more than announce the text, suddenly from the upper gallery a shout was heard, "Fire! Fire!" The only fire was the fire of the word of God in the pulpit. Ruffians had enraged a people and a mass sought immediately to exit the building, they trampled one another, 128 were hospitalized, 27 seriously wounded, and 7 trampled to death, and the papers blamed the boy preacher. Anybody should have known better than to have gotten that many people together for a preaching service. And I was experiencing a depression. For several weeks I could not preach. I was at fault yet

God had provided the opportunity. Soon our building was built and it remained filled for many years to come.

The cabdrivers with their horse-drawn cabs would hawk their services, "Come over the river to Charlie's. Come over the river to Charlie's," over the Thames River on the other side of which was the Metropolitan Tabernacle which, by the way, still stands. That is, the original facade still stands. It has burned twice. The building itself had been rebuilt on a smaller scale and is still a place of ministry and of good ministry, particularly to college age young people and others who come and go in the city. Well, that's in your 20th century or what some will call the 21st, but I'll get there this December.

I say Susannah was my help. She was not well during many of our years, most of our later years together. We had twin sons only, both of whom became preachers. One became a preacher in Australia, and one for a time, my assistant in the Metropolitan Tabernacle. She was confined to her bed for much of our years thereafter but she had a ministry that was felt the world over. God used her circumstance as an opportunity for being an instrument of blessing to tens of thousands, congregations whose pastors were helped by the books which she, Susannah, arranged to be sent to any minister of the Gospel whose address she could discover. Anywhere in the world. She solicited funds with which to purchase and post books to expand the libraries of simple country preachers with no opportunity or finances to enlarge their own. She sent copies of my sermons. She sent copies of my lectures to my students, to the pastors. She got thank-you notes from Australia, from Denmark, from North Dakota, from Jamaica, and other places unknown. And through this process, she was able, I say, to bring blessing to congregations from her own sickbed.

She was not happy at the confinement. One day in winter, we watched the glowing of the hearth and the sputtering and the whistling of the logs burning, and we heard this high-pitched whistle and God gave me for the moment an opportunity to be a solace to her when I observed that that whistle, that song as the song of a bird that we heard in the hearth, was released under the pressure of difficulty, and so her song, as it were, was heard in spite of her physical difficulty.

I say she would read to me. She would help me. We lived for a while in a small rented apartment and then the opportunity came to move to a place on Nightingale Lane. My wife liked the name of the street. We moved there, rented there. Soon we were given the opportunity to purchase the house. Hesitant, it would require a small mortgage. I had remembered my father's instruction and I never told him that I for a time went into debt, but we paid it off rather quickly. Then before many years had passed, this area where the house was in Nightingale Lane became more valuable for commercial real estate than for domestic, and we were offered a sum for it which enabled us to purchase Westwood, an estate, a manor house with some acreage, a pond, gardens, a little park, rooms for study and meditation, and flowers and gardens. And I was able to sell the place in Nightingale Lane and purchase Westwood with no debt and this was a blessing for Susannah and for her husband.

It was my custom in preparing sermons to choose an idea, a text, a subject, and then to read and study and meditate upon it for the week leading up to the Lord's Day. I did not organize my thoughts until Saturday came. I was letting it gel. It was not that I was not preparing or I was being careless. I was thinking about, reading about, meditating upon, considering, going through whatever was necessary to arrive at a message which first would speak to me and then to my people. One particular week, I was troubled as the week progressed and as Thursday gave way to Friday and Friday to Saturday and still the outline had not come and I did not know how to present it, I knew what it was I wanted to present but the format, the frame is not there, and I was agitated and it was Saturday and it was Saturday night and it still had not come and dear Susannah, Suzie I called her. She called me Tershatha. You look that up in the Old Testament. Tershatha.