

# *The Seraphic Samuel Pearce*

## *His Times*

Samuel Pearce was born in the 18th century—a time of great advance and achievements. Through military conquest and through exploration the British empire was expanding to far away places all around the globe. Around the time of Pearce’s birth, the British conquered Bengal, General James Wolfe defeated the French forces in Canada on the Plains of Abraham, and James Cook was changing the world with his explorations and mapping of New Zealand and Australia.

During this same time period the Lord was preparing his people to expand *his* kingdom through missions. Up until this time period Evangelical Christianity was largely confined to northern Europe and Eastern North American seaboard. God was raising up a generation of Baptist missionaries—out from hyper-Calvinistic roots—that would change the world.

## *Early Life*

On July 20, 1766 in Plymouth, Samuel Pearce was born in into a strong Baptist family.<sup>1</sup> Tragically, his mother died while he was still an infant, so Pearce went to live with his grandparents until he was around eight or nine years of age.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, both his father and grandfather were pious and godly men who would have a good influence on Pearce from his earliest of years.<sup>3</sup> Pearce was also blessed by growing up in a church that was known as a ‘sturdy Baptist community.’<sup>4</sup>

After he turned nine, Pearce returned to the home of his father, to apprentice in his father’s trade of silversmith. There he would continue to receive godly instruction in the home.<sup>5</sup> Yet despite his heritage and his godly lineage, Pearce would remain an unconverted youth, in need of the grace of God into his teenage years.

## *Conversion*

Looking back on his early years, Pearce would recollect how he spurned the rich evangelical heritage he had been blessed with for many years. He became close friends with those whom he would later describe as ‘vicious’ and full of ‘wicked inclinations.’<sup>6</sup> His life was that of a sinner in need of heart-changing grace. Andrew Fuller described Pearce as a youth by saying, he was becoming ‘more and more cor-

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<sup>1</sup> Michael A.G. Haykin, *A Cloud of Witnesses* (ET Perspectives, No.3; Darlington: Evangelical Times, 2006), 66.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Wells, “Samuel Pearce (1766-1799)” in Michael A.G. Haykin, ed., *The British Particular Baptists 1638-1910*, v.2 (Springfield, Missouri: Particular Baptist Press, 2000), 184.

<sup>3</sup> Haykin, *Cloud of Witnesses*, 65.

<sup>4</sup> Haykin, *Cloud of Witnesses*, 65-66.

<sup>5</sup> Wells, “Samuel Pearce (1766-1799)”, 184.

<sup>6</sup> Haykin, *Cloud of Witnesses*, 66.

rupted.<sup>7</sup> His conscience functioned in fits and starts, rebuking him for his sin at times, but then subsiding again as he himself, like his friends, remained full of ‘wicked inclinations.’<sup>8</sup>

In the providence of God, Pearce heard Isaiah Birt preach a gospel message at the Plymouth meeting house in the summer of 1782, when Pearce was 16 years old. As Pearce heard Birt preach his heart was strongly impressed with a ‘sense of his lost condition’ and Birt faithfully directed Pearce to the ‘gospel remedy’ for his troubled soul.<sup>9</sup>

Though the change was sudden for Pearce, it was indeed effectual. His heart and life were changed seemingly instantaneously. He would write of his conversion,

I believe few conversions were more joyful. The change produced in my views, feelings, and conduct was so evident to myself, that I could no more doubt of its being from God than of my existence. I had the witness in myself, and was filled with peace and joy unspeakable.<sup>10</sup>

From the earliest days of his Christian life he displayed all the great benefits of having been raised in a Christian home. All the truth he had learned growing up quickly became his passion. His progress to maturity as a Christian was quick and ministry was not far off on the horizon.

## ***Beginnings in Ministry***

Having been converted at 16 he was baptized a year later and Pearce quickly set his sights on the ministry. After a brief confusing season of trying to make commitments and vows to the Lord based on his own strength, Pearce quickly realized that he we could not rely on his own strength, and he would write in his journal of his growing understanding of his need to rely ‘solely on the blood of the cross.’<sup>11</sup> The more he understood the importance of living a ‘cross-centred life’, the more he grew in holiness. Eventually Pearce would end up studying for the ministry at Bristol Baptist Academy—an institution for training Calvinistic Baptist ministers—from 1786-1789.<sup>12</sup>

From the very beginning of his preaching ministry, Pearce’s sermons were both faithful and fruitful. As a student, the school arranged opportunities for him to preach. He was happy to use the opportunities, regardless of where they were—and the Lord blessed his efforts. Later in life Pearce would recall times preaching to 30 or 40 colliers in a hut. He would remember that even as a student at his young age, with a relative lack of experience, he preached and was blessed with ‘such an unction from above’ that many of those who heard were ‘melted into tears’ and that he too was among them, weeping and ‘could scarcely speak.’<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Fuller, *A Heart for Missions: The Classic Memoir of Samuel Pearce* (Birmingham: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2006), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Fuller, *A Heart for Missions*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Fuller, *A Heart for Missions*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Wells, “Samuel Pearce (1766-1799)”, 184.

<sup>11</sup> Fuller, *A Heart for Missions*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Haykin, *Cloud of Witnesses*, 67.

<sup>13</sup> Haykin, *Cloud of Witnesses*, 67.

Once finished his training (spring 1789) Pearce was called to serve a year's probation at Cannon Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. He had been there to preach on two previous occasions and there had been conversions both times, so the call from the church was natural.<sup>14</sup> In July of 1790, after his probationary year, Pearce accepted the call to remain at Cannon Street. It was easy to see why: It is estimated that in the first two years of his ministry alone he saw more than thirty converts to Christ.<sup>15</sup> That, however, was just the beginning of the fruitfulness of Pearce's ministry.

## ***Fruitfulness & Faithfulness***

In his own preaching ministry Fuller writes that from the beginning till the end, all of Pearce's time in the pulpit 'had been almost one continual revival of religion.'<sup>16</sup> By the mid-1790s Pearce was a preacher in demand, often travelling to preach and drawing great crowds of people even at unorthodox times.<sup>17</sup> Pearce had many opportunities to travel and take the gospel to surrounding regions and even to Dublin!<sup>18</sup> Speaking as a man who had heard Pearce preach (and could still recall the effect 50 years later!), William Jay would write,

It may seem to be saying much, but I speak the words of truth and soberness,—when I have endeavoured to form an image of our Lord as a preacher, Pearce has oftener presented himself to my mind than any other I have been acquainted with... I cannot accurately convey the appearance and impression he made, yet I can see the one, and feel the other, even at this great distance of time.<sup>19</sup>

The words of Jay are no small compliment and bear testimony to the power and the fruitfulness of Pearce's pulpit ministry.<sup>20</sup> The power in this pulpit ministry bore incredible fruit in the short, ten-year span of pulpit ministry that Pearce was to have. In his time at Cannon Street Pearce saw over 335 baptized and received into membership and watched his Sunday School (started in 1795) grow to having over 1,200 people enrolled in a short span of time.<sup>21</sup>

The fruitfulness of his preaching ministry bears witness to the faithfulness with which he carried out his responsibilities to preach the gospel first and foremost. In reflecting on the life of Pearce, Michael Haykin notes that 'A leading characteristic of Pearce's spirituality ... was his continual focus on the cross

<sup>14</sup> Haykin, *Cloud of Witnesses*, 67.

<sup>15</sup> Wells, "Samuel Pearce (1766-1799)", 185.

<sup>16</sup> Wells, "Samuel Pearce (1766-1799)", 188.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, the stories recounted of the people clamouring to hear Pearce preach at the Baptist meeting house in Guilsborough, Northamptonshire in 1794 in Haykin, *Cloud of Witnesses*, 71-72.

<sup>18</sup> The stories of his preaching in Dublin and the resulting conversions are found in Wells, "Samuel Pearce (1766-1799)", 189.

<sup>19</sup> Wells, "Samuel Pearce (1766-1799)", 183.

<sup>20</sup> Wells, in citing Jay, notes that his words are nothing to take lightly. C.H. Spurgeon would later refer to Jay as one who is to preaching what Matthew Henry was to writing. Surely a preacher of this quality would recognize and remember good preaching when he heard it.

<sup>21</sup> Michael A.G. Haykin, *The Armies of the Lamb: The Spirituality of Andrew Fuller* (Dundas, Ontario: Joshua Press, 2001), 173, n.1.

of Christ.<sup>22</sup> Pearce was a man faithful to keep the centre of the Bible (the cross) at the centre of his preaching, even when it seemed that it would be death to do so.

One example of Pearce's faithfulness to preach the cross regardless of perceived cost is shown in his preaching in Dublin in June and July of 1796. Pearce noted that upon his arrival he perceived that the situation was grim even amongst professing evangelicals; worldliness was rampant.<sup>23</sup> Pearce feared that preaching about impending hell and judgement and calling for repentance would bring the ire of the crowds against him in force. He recounts the situation and the results of his preaching:

I feared my faithfulness would have given them offence: but I am persuaded, it was the way to please the Lord; and those who I expected would be enemies are not only at peace with me, but even renounce their sensual indulgences to attend my ministry. I do assuredly believe that God hath sent me hither for good.<sup>24</sup>

Thus was the habit and the pattern: As Pearce was faithful to preach the gospel, the Lord blessed his ministry with fruitfulness.

Even though he was called to be a preacher—and was a successful one at that—Pearce engaged in various other forms of fruitful ministry. Pearce was one of the founding members of the Baptist Missionary Society.<sup>25</sup> One historian says he 'threw himself heart and soul into the work of the Missionary Society'<sup>26</sup>—and that work bore fruit. Pearce reflected on this work, apart from his pastoral ministry at Cannon Street, was 'the high point in Pearce's life.'<sup>27</sup> This group, which began with 'pastors of obscure little village causes ... of no fame and of scantiest salary' who could barely scrape together 13 pounds<sup>28</sup> would change the world. Though they had such humble beginnings, Pearce 'took heart at these small beginnings in the knowledge that God can work by many or by few, with much or with little.'<sup>29</sup> Its fruit continues globally even to this day, as it is broadly recognized to be the 'catalyst' of all that has been called 'the modern missionary movement.'<sup>30</sup>

Though he was a preacher at heart and desired to be a missionary as well, the Lord saw fit to bring fruit to his ministry as an administrator too. For the cause of the Missionary Society Pearce served as the editor of the *Periodical Accounts* and was involved in relationships between various associations, encouraging them towards missions as well.<sup>31</sup> Pearce was also used powerfully of God as he travelled and represented the Missionary Society to London and the surrounding regions, raising funds for the mis-

<sup>22</sup> Haykin, *Cloud of Witnesses*, 70.

<sup>23</sup> Wells, "Samuel Pearce (1766-1799)", 189.

<sup>24</sup> Wells, "Samuel Pearce (1766-1799)", 189.

<sup>25</sup> Michael A.G. Haykin, "Samuel Pearce, Extracts from a Diary: Calvinist Baptist Spirituality in the Eighteenth Century", *The Banner of Truth* 279 (December 1986, 9-18), 9.

<sup>26</sup> A.C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: The Kingsgate Press, 1947), 168.

<sup>27</sup> Wells, "Samuel Pearce (1766-1799)", 186.

<sup>28</sup> This description of the first meeting of the Baptist Missionary Society comes from Wells, "Samuel Pearce (1766-1799)", 186-187.

<sup>29</sup> Wells, "Samuel Pearce (1766-1799)", 187.

<sup>30</sup> Wells, "Samuel Pearce (1766-1799)", 186.

<sup>31</sup> Tom J. Nettles, "The Kind of Man God Uses: Samuel Pearce (1766-1799)", *Founders Journal* 57 (Summer 2004, 24-25), 24.

sionaries who had been found and were being sent to take the gospel to India.<sup>32</sup> One of the reasons why Pearce was eager and able to work so hard for the cause of the Missions Society was that he was a man marked by a passion for missions and a strong desire to serve as a missionary himself.

## ***Passion for Missions***

Though his pastoral ministry at Cannon Street had known so much success and had seen such gospel-advance, still Pearce's heart yearned for the gospel to go forth to places where it had not yet been proclaimed. As early as 1793 Pearce sensed that the Lord was calling him to serve not just on the Missionary Society, but as a missionary on the front lines as well. Taking the calling seriously, Pearce devoted a day-per-week to committing himself to prayer and fasting, seeking the will of God. Increasingly, as he studied the word of God and sought the mind of Christ in prayer, he became persuaded that he was to go. In spite of troubles, he would write to William Carey, 'But I thank God I faint not, and every day more fully convinces me that I ought to go.'<sup>33</sup>

By 1794 he was fully convinced and made his proposition known to the Missionary Society. Their response shocked and disappointed him. They determined that he was too valuable in his present roles to be sent away as a missionary. They stated that the cause of Christ would be best served with him remaining as he was.<sup>34</sup> Pearce responded that he was 'disappointed but not dismayed.'<sup>35</sup> Rather than shrinking back in the face of disappointment, Pearce's passion for missions only encouraged him to increased faithfulness which led to greater fruitfulness for the cause of missions. From that point on he gave himself even more whole-heartedly to the cause of raising money and awareness of the missions work so that the cause of the gospel could go forth through others.<sup>36</sup> His passion for missions—rooted in his passion for the gospel—remained unabated.

## ***Marriage***

It might be supposed by some that a man so given over to the gospel ministry might be found, through want of time and energy, to be a poor husband and father. The reality, however, is the exact opposite. As a man marked by the gospel of Jesus Christ, who laid down his life for his bride, Pearce was a man who loved his wife dearly.

Peace married the love of his life, Sarah Hopkins, in February of 1791, two years after he had begun his ministry at Cannon Street.<sup>37</sup> His love for her was everywhere evident in the letters he would write her when they were separated by his travelling. For example, in September of 1792 he wrote:

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<sup>32</sup> Wells, "Samuel Pearce (1766-1799)", 187.

<sup>33</sup> Fuller, *A Heart for Missions*, 39.

<sup>34</sup> Haykin, "Samuel Pearce, Extracts from a Diary", 10-11.

<sup>35</sup> Haykin, "Samuel Pearce, Extracts from a Diary", 10.

<sup>36</sup> Haykin, "Samuel Pearce, Extracts from a Diary", 11.

<sup>37</sup> Wells, "Samuel Pearce (1766-1799)", 185.

Tomorrow morning I set off for Launceston. I write tonight, lest my stay in Cornwall might make my delay appear tedious to the dear and deserving object of my most undissembled love. O my Sarah, had I as much proof that I love *Jesus Christ* as I have of my love to *you*, I should prize it more than rubies! As often as you can find an hour for correspondence, think of your more than ever affectionate—S.P.

We can learn much from Pearce's private letters to his wife—how he considered her and loved her and wooed her. We can see from his letters and journals how Pearce, when deliberating over whether or not to leave for missionary work in India, dealt with Sarah's semi-resistant response. Pearce was eager to win her through the word, the gospel, prayer, and patience, and was intent on not forcing her. He ardently prayed for her and planned how he could lead her in a way that would best bring glory to God.

She loved him deeply in response. One historian says, 'Sarah's devotion to Samuel appears at the end of his race when she carefully recorded many of the words of his last four or five weeks.'<sup>38</sup>

## ***A God-Glorifying Death***

Pearce's passion for faithful gospel ministry and for missions in particular, sadly, led to his death. It was on his way home from the commissioning service of William Ward (a missionary) that Pearce got drenched as he travelled through the rain. He would develop a 'severe chill' that would eventually be his undoing. Despite his sickness, Pearce continued on a rigid schedule which was far too busy in light of his failing health. By the winter of 1798-1799 Pearce would have to call someone in (William Ward) to fill his pulpit for him, as he was no longer able to preach. He developed pulmonary tuberculosis by the spring of 1799.<sup>39</sup> In April of that year he would travel to south England apart from his beloved wife and five children in hopes that the rest there would be the panacea they hoped to find. Unfortunately, the disease had progressed too far already.

Yet as faithful and fruitful as this man was, we should not be surprised that he found ways to glorify God and edify Christians even in his dying. As Michael Haykin notes, Christocentric faith like Pearce's finds its ultimate fruit in joy through suffering and the anticipation of glory.<sup>40</sup> So Pearce would say:

Blessed be his dear name, who shed his blood for me ... Now I see the value of the religion of the cross. It is a religion for a dying sinner ... Yes, I taste its sweetness, and enjoy its fulness, with all the gloom of a dying-bed before me; and far rather would I be the poor emaciated and emaciating creature that I am, than be an emperor with every earthly good about him, but without a God.<sup>41</sup>

Absolutely determined to give God glory and to let others know that God is faithful even in sickness and death, Pearce would say again:

<sup>38</sup> Wells, "Samuel Pearce (1766-1799)", 185.

<sup>39</sup> Haykin, "The Spirituality of Samuel Pearce", 22-23.

<sup>40</sup> Haykin, "The Spirituality of Samuel Pearce", 24.

<sup>41</sup> Haykin, "The Spirituality of Samuel Pearce", 24.

Thanks be to God who giveth my heart the victory. In the thought of leaving I feel a momentary gloom; but in the thought of going a heavenly triumph. Let every Christian sing the loudest, as he draws nearest to the Presence of his Lord.<sup>42</sup>

And again, as he faced the very type of death he had once so feared, in the midst of the trial he was able to declare, ‘O my dear Lord, if by *this death* I can most *glorify thee*, I prefer it to all others!’<sup>43</sup> Surely he was granted his heart’s desire: God was indeed glorified through the death of this great saint on October 10, 1799.

## ***What Can We Learn from Samuel Pearce?***

### **1. Learn from his holiness.**

“There is not one doctrine in the gospel but what is ‘according to godliness’ nor one promise of future happiness unconnected with present holiness.” At once he would recognize that if the Bible teaches us “the doctrine of God’s everlasting love and his sovereign choice of his people,” it also teaches us that they “are predestinated to be conformed to the image of Christ...through sanctification of the Spirit, and belief of the truth.” Our redeemer’s “efficacious sacrifice” certainly removes the iniquity of his people and just as certainly purifies “unto himself a peculiar people zealous of good works.”

*Upon his death, William Ward said, “I have seen more of God in him than in any other person I ever met.”*

### **2. Learn from his passion for the gospel (missions / evangelism).**

“I have for my evening’s discourse the best subject in all the Bible. Eph. 1:7—Redemption! How welcome to the captive! Forgiveness! How delightful to the guilty! Grace! How pleasing to the heart of a saved sinner!”

“A momentary thought glanced through my mind—here may be a man who never heard the gospel, or it may be he is one that regards it as a feast of fat things; in either case, the effort on his part demands one on mine. So with the hope of doing him some good, I resolved at once to forget all else, and, in despite of criticism, and the apprehension of being thought tedious, to give him a quarter of an hour.”

“I do think, however, if they knew how earnestly I pant for the work, it would be impossible for them to withhold their ready acquiescence.”

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<sup>42</sup> Wells, “Samuel Pearce (1766-1799)”, 194.

<sup>43</sup> Wells, “Samuel Pearce (1766-1799)”, 190. Emphasis original.

### 3. Learn from his devotion to prayer.

Historians record the impact of his prayers on others: “We scarcely ever seemed to pray before!”

### 4. Learn from his submission.

*Upon hearing the news from the BMS:* “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.”

*When his daughter was gravely ill:* “One consideration tranquilizes my mind—I and mine are in the hands of God; the wise, the good, the indulgent parent of mankind! Whatever he does is best. I am prepared for all his will, and hope that I shall never have a feeling whose language is not ‘Thy will be done.’”

*On his death bed after months of suffering:* “To me, now, health or sickness, pain or ease, life or death, are things indifferent. I feel so happy in being in the hands of infinite love, that, when the severest strokes are laid upon me, I receive them with pleasure, because they come from my heavenly Father’s hands!”

### 5. Learn from his joy at conversions.

“Thanks, thanks be to God for the enrapturing prospects before you as a *father*, as a *Christian father* especially. What, *three* of a family! And these three at once! Oh the heights and depths, and lengths and breadths of his unfathomable grace! My soul feels joy unspeakable at the blessed news. Three immortal souls secured for eternal life! Three rational spirits preparing to grace Immanuel’s triumphs, and sing his praise! Three examples of virtue and goodness, exhibiting the genuine influence of the true religion of Jesus before the world!—Perhaps three mothers training up to lead three future families in the way to heaven. Oh what a train of blessings do I see in this event! Most sincerely do I participate with my dear friend in his pleasures, and in his gratitude.”

### 6. Learn from his husbanding.

“O my Sarah, had I as much proof that I love *Jesus Christ* as I have of my love to *you*, I should prize it more than rubies!”

### 7. Learn from his balance of character.

*Fuller said,* “For my own part, I never knew a man in whom were united greater portion of the contemplative and the active; holy zeal, and genuine candour; spirituality, and rationality; talents which attracted almost universal applause, and the most unaffected modesty; fortitude that would encounter any difficulty that stood in the way of duty, and gentleness that would not break a bruised reed; faithfulness in bearing testimony against evil, and compassion to the soul of the evil-doer;



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deep seriousness, and habitual cheerfulness; finally, a constant aim to promote the highest degree of piety in himself and others, and, at the same time, a readiness to hope the best of the lowest.”

#### **8. Learn from his death.**

“Praise God with me, and for me, my dear brother, and let us not mind dying any more than sleeping. No, no; let every Christian sing the loudest as he gets the nearest to the presence of his God.”

“Blessed be his dear name, who shed his blood for me ... Now I see the value of the religion of the cross. It is a religion for a dying sinner ... Yes, I taste its sweetness, and enjoy its fulness, with all the gloom of a dying-bed before me; and far rather would I be the poor emaciated and emaciating creature that I am, than be an emperor with every earthly good about him, but without a God.”

“I have not a wish to live or die, but as he pleases. I truly enjoy the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and would not be without his Divine atonement, whereon to rest my soul, for ten thousand worlds. I feel quite weaned from the earth and all things in it. Death has lost his sting, the grace its horrors, and the attractions of heaven, I had almost said, are sometimes violent.”

*Facing the death he had once most feared: “O my dear Lord, if by this death I can most glorify thee, I prefer it to all others!”*

## ***Timeline of His Life:***

- July 20, 1766 – Samuel Pearce is born in Plymouth
- 1774-1775 – Pearce returns home to train under his father after having lived with his grandparents
- Summer, 1782 – Pearce is converted at 16 years of age; baptized one year later as a 17 year old
- 1786-1789 – Pearce trains for ministry at Bristol Baptist Academy
- Spring 1789 – Called to serve a year’s probationary ministry at Cannon Street Baptist Church, Birmingham
- July, 1790 – The church at Cannon Street confirms his call (there would be more than 30 conversions in his church in these first two years alone!)
- February, 1791 – Pearce marries the love of his life, Sarah Hopkins, a member of Cannon Street Church
- 1792 – The Baptist Missionary Society is formed
- 1793 – Pearce first records his determination to go serve as a missionary in India with William Carey
- 1794 – Now convinced of his calling, Pearce presents his desires and requests to the BMS—only to receive the negative response
- 1795 – Pearce begins Sunday School at Cannon street (would grow to over 1,200 people by 1799)
- Summer, 1796 – Pearce preaches in Dublin
- 1798 – Pearce gets sick travelling home from a missionary’s commissioning service; by winter he is too sick to preach or even speak
- Spring 1799 – Pulmonary tuberculosis takes its toll; Pearce travels to southern England in hopes of recovering
- October 10, 1799 – Samuel Pearce goes to be with Lord and God

## ***Want to Learn More about Pearce?***

- *A Heart for Missions: The Classic Memoir of Samuel Pearce* by Andrew Fuller (Introduction by Michael Haykin). Published by Solid Ground Christian Books, 2006. ISBN: 1932474749.