

A sepia-toned portrait of an elderly woman, Susannah Spurgeon, with her hair styled in an updo adorned with a blue flower. She is wearing a dark, ornate dress with a high collar and a large gold brooch. The portrait is framed by a thin gold border.

SUSIE

THE LIFE AND LEGACY
OF SUSANNAH SPURGEON
wife of Charles H. Spurgeon

RAY RHODES JR.

Foreword by R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.



A Marriage Made for Heaven



The air was cold and damp in London on January 8, 1856. However, the weather did not prohibit crowds from lining the streets, blocking the roads, and flooding into the sanctuary of the New Park Street Chapel. Over two thousand people had to be turned away from the overcrowded building, so they then took their places with the rest of the throng who filled the streets, pressing as near to the chapel as possible. The people were gathered in hopes of catching a glimpse of London's famous newlyweds.

Susie had spent much of the morning in prayer. R. B. Thompson took the hand of his only daughter and helped her into the carriage, and then they ventured out on the short journey from Falcon Square, across the Thames, and to the front entrance of the New Park Street Chapel. As they made their way to the Chapel, Susie remembered sitting by her father's side and wondered if those who watched her pass by had any idea "what a wonderful bridegroom she was going to meet."¹

Police, called to duty for this special occasion, had to clear a pathway

through the people so that R. B. and Susie could get inside the church building where the capacity crowd awaited. If Mr. Thompson had once been hesitant about Charles Spurgeon, he now supported the marriage of his daughter to the wildly popular young preacher. Though the clouds hung low on that cold Saturday, it was a day of great joy, for it was the wedding day of Charles Spurgeon and Susannah Thompson.²

Susie, in later years, reflected on the wedding ceremony and spoke of her feelings that day as “a deep and tender gladness.” She and Charles “clasped each other’s hand, and then placed them both in that of the Master.” She saw their wedding as the beginning of a “journey,” and she was “assured that [God] would be their Guide.”³ Susie considered Charles as “the best man on God’s earth.”⁴ She remembered, with utmost tenderness, the events of that wonderful day that began early in the morning on her knees in prayer:

I see a young girl kneeling by her bedside in the early morning; she is awed and deeply moved by a sense of the responsibilities to be taken up that day, yet happy beyond expression that the Lord has so favoured her; and there alone with Him she earnestly seeks strength, and blessing, and guidance through the new life opening before her.⁵

This reliance on God for the resources that she and Charles would need in their marriage attested to Susie’s godliness, a godliness that would characterize her for the remainder of her life. Charles realized that Susie was no ordinary lady, and he valued her as his wife, friend, and assistant in ministry.

Spurgeon biographer Tom Nettles surmised:

The revelation of the depth of her Christian experience made Spurgeon evaluate the gift of her hand even more, knowing that God himself loves the gift and he may love it too. . . . Spurgeon’s

letters to “Susie” always exhibited an indivisible solution of ardent spirituality, intense love for her, deep desire for greater usefulness, unfettered love of God and the gospel along with a consciousness of the need for more purity and single-mindedness in his love for Christ.⁶

The wedding service was the sort of gospel-saturated affair that Charles would have approved of. The ceremony, led by Alexander Fletcher of Finsbury Chapel, opened with the congregation singing “Salvation, O the Joyful Sound.”⁷ Such a salvation-exalting hymn was an appropriate way to usher in the Spurgeons’ marriage, and it highlighted the gospel mindset that was so characteristic of Susie and Charles. After reading Psalm 100, Fletcher reminded the congregation that their pastor had often spoken of the smiles of Christ in his preaching: “He [Christ] must surely have smiled upon the bride and bridegroom whose marriage feast was graced by His presence.” Turning to the couple, Fletcher exhorted them that God had “more blessings in reserve for their enjoyment, felicity, and usefulness.”⁸

Thomas Spurgeon, soon after Susie’s death in October of 1903, spoke of his parents’ sweet wedding day and marriage: “Thus commenced the union ‘till death us do part,’ that lasted for six and thirty years, and was throughout of the most tender and loving character. That his wife was a true helpmeet, is proved by my dear father’s repeated testimony to her worth, by word of mouth and by the fact that he set it down in black and white, again and again.”⁹ Quoting Tennyson, Thomas reflected: “She set herself to him like perfect music unto noble words.”¹⁰

For Susie Thompson, 1854–1856 were years of change. Though originally taken aback by Charles’s uncouth manner, four months after her first encounter with him, she received a gift from his hand. Two more months passed, and the “boy preacher from the Fens” revealed his romantic feelings for her. And, six weeks later, Charles Spurgeon, two and a half years her junior, asked the twenty-two-year-old Susannah Thompson for her

hand in marriage. Finally, on January 8, 1856, near the pulpit where he preached each Sunday, he put a ring on her finger to the delight of the crowd packed inside the New Park Street Chapel.

Though the Spurgeons enjoyed much happiness, the couple was confronted with difficulties from the start. Along with challenges in ministry, both Susie and Charles later experienced prolonged health problems. In 1888, Susie described one year of their suffering and wrote that it had brought “a series of varied trials to us, and a great fight of afflictions beset both my dear husband and myself.”¹¹ Such a year was not unusual, but though they faced trials both individually and as a couple, Susie declared that she wanted “with all my heart, and soul, and strength, to praise the Lord, who has been to us ‘a very present help in trouble.’”¹²

Early in their marriage, Susie experienced difficulties related to her husband’s popularity and the demands of his calling. She truly disliked his numerous overnight preaching trips and was sometimes downcast because she missed him. However, she determined never to be an obstacle to him in his ministry.¹³ Charles wrote to her, “I have served the Lord far more and never less for your sweet companionship.”¹⁴ Charles suffered throughout his adult life with bouts of depression so severe that his mental health was significantly challenged. Lewis Drummond surmised that Susie was a primary reason that Spurgeon kept his sanity.¹⁵ His assessment underlines again how necessary Susie was to Charles.

With hearts aflame in prayer, grounded in Scripture, and joined together in the bonds of holy matrimony, Charles and Susie began their marriage. They entered upon their labors with joyful hearts and courageous convictions that would last a lifetime. Late in her widowhood, Susie contemplated her wedding service and her thirty-six-year marriage to Charles: “But the golden circlet then placed on my finger, though worn and thin now, speaks of love beyond the grave, and is the cherished pledge of a spiritual union which shall last throughout eternity.”¹⁶ Though Susie understood that human marriage has no part in heaven, the “spiritual union” that believers share with one another on earth is but a beginning,

and it will never end. She realized that, in Charles, she had a partner with whom she would worship God eternally.

The exceptional nature of the Spurgeons' union is worthy of consideration. It was spiritual purposes that brought Susie and Charles together, spiritual means that they employed on the day of their wedding, and spiritual objectives that kept them together throughout the years. They looked to God, sought His help, and joined their hands together in service to Him. Alexander Fletcher prayed at their wedding ceremony that God would "bless them with increasing usefulness, increasing happiness, increasing enjoyment of Thy fellowship!"¹⁷ Charles often recounted God's kindness in bringing Susie to his side. He referred to her as "the ideal wife" and said she was designed by God "to be the greatest of all earthly blessings to him."¹⁸

Biographer Russell Conwell analyzed the Spurgeons' marriage and believed that Susie and Charles were especially suited for one another. Charles invited Susie to help him put away his "uncouth eccentricities" and to "correct his mistakes in language or history." She was able to assist him, and Conwell claimed that Spurgeon "could never have attained the eminence which he reached" without the help of his wife. Though Conwell's perspective may have been exaggerated, Susie's value to Spurgeon was inestimable. Conwell maintained that, had Charles "allied himself with a wife who was less pious and sincere," his reputation and ministry would have been damaged. However, Susie "worked with him, prayed with him, believed in him, and most affectionately loved him through those many years of work."¹⁹

Susie was a loyal friend and helper to Charles. A ministry like her husband's that drew massive crowds was ripe for slander and misunderstanding. Large churches and popular preachers were not rare in London, but Charles's passionate evangelism, Puritan theology, and practical methodology stood in contrast to London's more refined ministers. According to Conwell, Susannah was an encouraging comforter when Spurgeon faced attacks from opponents: "[She] stood like a shield between him and the

arrows of wickedness, quenching their fiery darts most easily with the shield of domestic love.”²⁰

Academician Patricia Kruppa posits, “Spurgeon’s marriage helped sustain him through some very rugged experiences during his early years.”²¹ Perhaps it is not an overstatement to surmise that if Charles Haddon Spurgeon had not met and married Susie Thompson, then his life and ministry would have never reached the heights enjoyed both in his lifetime and ever since. Singleness was not a gift that Charles enjoyed. And, yet, it is not simply that Charles needed *a* wife, he needed a very specific wife; he needed Susie Thompson.

After the wedding ceremony, Charles and Susie were whisked away from the New Park Street Chapel, and they boarded a train to the port at Dover, and from there they caught a boat to Paris for a nine-day honeymoon. They arrived in the romantic city to world-class accommodations at the Hotel Meurice. So grand was this hotel that many wealthy and famous people signed its registry over the years. It was known as “the hotel of kings and queens.”

Meurice was removed in 1835 to “one of the most fashionable locales in the city, overlooking the historic Tuileries Garden.”²² The hotel provided “lavish entertainment” with bountiful dinners and extravagant luncheons. During 1855, just a year before Susie and Charles checked into their fabulous suite at Meurice, Queen Victoria had stayed at the hotel. The composer Tchaikovsky had been a guest there, and near the end of the nineteenth century, Hotel Meurice regularly hosted “the elite aristocracy.”²³ Relevant to Susie and Charles’s stay was the British flavor of the hotel. The hotel teemed with British guests, the hotel staff spoke English, and the luxury hotel was nicknamed “City of London.”

The well-known English author W. M. Thackeray described the Meurice:

If you don’t speak a word of French, if you like English comfort, clean rooms, breakfast, and *maitres d’hotel*: in a foreign land, you

want your fellow countrymen around you, your brown beer, your friend and your cognac—and your water—do not listen to any of the messengers but with your best British accent cry heartily: “Meurice!” and immediately, someone will come forward to drive you straight to the *rue de Rivoli*.²⁴

The newlyweds lodged in luxury. Stunning in its architectural beauty, perfectly situated not far from the Seine River, and near to art galleries and cathedrals of Paris, the hotel served as the perfect romantic oasis for the young lovers. One may wonder how a newly married pastor afforded such accommodations. Susie writes, “We had a cosy suite of rooms (by special favour) in the *entresol* of the Hotel Meurice.”²⁵ Her notation of “by special favor” may indicate that the Spurgeons’ hotel stay was a wedding gift from family, friends, or church. Or perhaps, since Charles’s fame was increasing, the hotel itself may have offered him the suite at a greatly reduced price desiring to curry his favor.

As Susie and Charles exited through the fabulous doors of the luxurious hotel, the Louvre was in sight a few blocks to their left, and the Tuileries Garden was just across the street in front of them. Susie delighted in showing Charles the sights and sounds of the city; it was especially enjoyable for her since Charles didn’t speak French, and he had never been to Paris. Susie, however, had often strolled along the streets of the City of Lights. Her previous trips into Paris allowed her to enjoy the high cultural experiences of the city as well as learn French from Pastor Audebez’s daughters. Confidently she asserted: “[I] felt quite at home there, and had the intense gratification of introducing my husband to all the places and sights which were worthy of arousing his interest and admiration.”²⁶ She moved with such ease down the streets and into the galleries, and cathedrals, and to the monuments and palaces that she must have seemed like a resident of the great city to her blissful groom.

Charles’s natural curiosity was heightened even more as he hung on every word from the sweet lips of his beautiful new wife. Susie spared no

enthusiasm as she led him into her favorite cathedral, Sainte Chapelle, with its brilliant displays and multicolored windows. Charles extolled it as “a little heaven of stained glass.”²⁷ Just a short walk from Chapelle was the majestic Notre Dame cathedral, ancient, strong, and towering into the Paris sky.

Three years earlier, Susie had visited the great cathedral and admired its royal beauty draped in lavish décor in anticipation of the wedding of Napoleon III and Eugenie on January 30, 1853.²⁸ Providentially, Susie’s earlier trips to the city had prepared her for a charming honeymoon experience with Charles. In later years, Charles frequently visited Paris and, due to Susie’s earlier influence, was able to serve as an excellent cicerone for his fellow travelers. During those later travels, he emboldened fellow Christians in the city who, though they met in inadequate facilities, nevertheless sought to serve Christ faithfully.²⁹

In Charles’s autobiography, Susie shared an excerpt from a letter Charles wrote to her that further demonstrates the tender love they enjoyed and offers a flashback to their honeymoon: “My heart flies to you, as I remember my first visit to this city under your dear guidance. I love you now as then, only multiplied many times.”³⁰

When Susie recalled their honeymoon, she lamented the loss afterward experienced in Paris due to the communistic destruction.³¹ Charles, writing around 1872, also grieved the sad sight of the ruins “which commemorate the reign of the Commune in Paris.” Everywhere he turned, he saw devastation left by the uprising. He specifically references several sights that he enjoyed with Susie during their honeymoon in 1856 that had been devastated by 1872. “The Hotel de Ville stands a ghastly but classical ruin, in fellowship with the Tuileries, the Palais Royal, the great Granaries, and many other vast and once magnificent public buildings.” Furthermore, he wrote, “Churches, houses, and docks have shared the same fate as palaces and courts of justice.” Charles was sorrowful over “horrors of civil war” that “sadden any heart capable of feeling.”³²

He grieved over suffering residents who lost homes, belongings, and

their livelihoods. Gospel-focused solutions, Charles believed, would positively transform political, moral, and social maladies. Though Paris bore the scars of war and upheaval, it was nevertheless the place where Charles and Susie's romance deepened and the city where they enjoyed the earliest days of their marriage. Along with supporting local church ministry in Paris, the city would always hold a place near the hearts of Charles and Susie. For Susie, the early memories with Charles would later soothe her sadness when many miles separated them and when she could no longer travel with him due to her poor health.

After a delightful trip to Paris, Susie eagerly anticipated the beginning of her married life at their first home at 217 New Kent Road, London, convenient to the New Park Street Chapel. Their first residence together was also where Susie gave birth to twin sons, Charles and Thomas, in September of 1856. She described the anticipation that both she and her husband felt on moving into their own home: "How we thanked and praised the Lord for His exceeding goodness to us in bringing us there, and how earnestly and tenderly my husband prayed that God's blessing might rest upon us then and evermore!"³³ So overcome with happiness was Susie that she described her home as "Love-land."³⁴ On her wedding day, she said that she was living in a "dreamland of excitement and emotion."³⁵ Susie was beside herself with joy as she moved from "dreamland" to "Love-land."

It is delightful to consider how much fun Charles and Susie enjoyed during the early days of their marriage. Susie "never regretted" the decision made early in her marriage to employ the best room in the house for Charles's study.³⁶ The "best room" was just below the upstairs room where their "twin-boys first saw the light of day."³⁷

Susie and Charles had to "practice rigid economy" as newlyweds, for Charles's salary reflected that of a first-year pastor in a church that had, previous to his arrival, been struggling financially (though it was quickly on the road to recovery). In addition, it was his desire, early on, to "help young men to preach the gospel," and to do so required money.

The funds that launched the Pastors' College with but one student, T. W. Medhurst, initially came from Charles and Susie's own budget. Susie gladly supported Charles's passion for training pastors and she demonstrated such by her cheerful giving of money from the family budget to finance the work. For her support, she was affectionately known as the "Mother of the College."³⁸ Susie's "motherly interest" in the college provides a context from which her later ministry to poor pastors was birthed.³⁹ A positive outcome from Susie and Charles's monetary sacrifices was that it further helped them to learn how to depend on God to supply all their needs.⁴⁰

In 1885, Susie reflected on the history of the Pastors' College:

God ever bless the Pastors' College! Very tender memories linger round its name and work! When the dear President [Charles] first had it laid upon his heart to train men for the ministry, or rather, to help those who were called of God to preach to prepare themselves for their life work, he began with one young brother. We were but newly-married, and had great difficulty in meeting the expense of maintaining such a full-grown son [the first student, Medhurst]; but the help the Lord sent was so direct and marvelous, that our faith was strengthened to ask and expect great things, and we had the joy of not only seeing our grown-up family still growing apace but of receiving proportionate means for its maintenance. Many moving tales could we tell of anxious hearts, and an apparently failing purse, in those first days of trial; but *always*, yes *always*, our God put our fears to flight, and sent the needed funds to us—sometimes from an utterly unexpected quarter. . . . From the first day [1856] until now [1885] more than seven hundred men have been sent forth to preach the gospel. . . . God bless *our* College, and *our* Pastors, and *our* Students, and—emphatically OUR PRESIDENT.⁴¹

Susie's devotion to her marriage is alluded to in a sermon that Charles preached on November 20, 1870, titled "The Saint One with His Savior." It is not difficult to imagine that he had Susie in view when he declared, "She delights in her husband" and "finds sweetest content and solace in his company, his fellowship, his fondness." He further exhorted, "The domestic circle is her kingdom; that she may there create happiness and comfort, is her life work; and his smiling gratitude is all the regard she seeks." The husband, Charles exclaimed, was one who "lavishes his love on her [his wife]." He continued by saying that both husband and wife enjoy watching "their children growing up in health and strength."⁴²

Charles and Susie were of such oneness of mind that they often thought "the same thoughts" and at times both, at the identical moment, spoke the "same utterance."⁴³ Charles declared of a loving husband and wife that they are "like two stars" who "have shone with such blended rays as to have seemed more one than two."⁴⁴ Furthermore, he stated, "One name, one heart, one house, one interest, one love, they have had also one spirit."⁴⁵

Susie and Charles's perspective on marriage and family may seem antiquated, and some people might be tempted to derogatorily describe them as "Victorian." However, though they were both products of their culture, their primary views about marriage and family came not from the world around them but from their biblical convictions. There is no indication that Susie ever felt oppressed or limited in any way because she was a wife and mother whose primary domain lay in the management of her home. She was dearly loved and cherished by Charles, and he did not dissuade her from her desires, aims, or pursuits. It was just the opposite; Charles challenged Susie to actively pursue faithful service to Christ in various realms. He never discouraged Susie in her endeavors; he cheered her on. Susie was not a frustrated housewife, nor was Charles a domineering husband. Both were happy in their marriage and ministry partnership.

Susie was just over four months pregnant in the late spring of 1856 when she accompanied Charles on a visit to his grandfather's home in

Stambourne. James Spurgeon, the aged preacher and the greatest early influence on Charles, delightfully welcomed Susie to his home, and she was likewise thrilled to visit with Charles's extended family and to see the country scenes that he had often described to her. Almost nothing had changed in Stambourne since Charles's childhood. Susie recalled that the rural folks were "delighted and interested" in the "young Pastor and his wife." She found it "charming to see him in the midst of his own people."⁴⁶

Charles's affection for his grandfather's land never wavered. Even though his feet were planted in London, his heart was still in the soil of Stambourne. Many of his earliest memories were connected to the manse and the church building nearby. Susie rejoiced to discover the roots of her husband's earliest influences. She remembered of Charles that he was "just the child again," walking the grounds and conversing with the rural people.⁴⁷

Susie shared a humorous story about her visit to Stambourne that reveals one of her especial detestations: spiders. Surrounded by her dotting in-laws, she was enjoying a refreshing cup of tea when she spotted something floating in the bottom of the cup, a spider. She was terrified. She remembered that "his black body swollen to a huge size, and his long legs describing a wheel-like circle in the remaining fluid." Even worse, she fretted: "I had been drinking the boiled juice of this monster!"⁴⁸ Such experiences notwithstanding, life was filled with happiness for Charles and Susie as they traveled around, worked in ministry together, and prepared for another significant event in their lives—one that would double the size of their household.

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