

Contents

Foreword	11
Timeline	15
How to Read This Book	19
Introduction	21
1. A Not So Victorian Romance	27
2. Biblical Spirituality	41
3. Shared Mission	59
4. Mutual Support	77
5. Expressive Communication	97
6. Learning Together	111
7. A Time to Laugh	123
8. Habits of a Creative Couple	133
9. Compassionate Hearts	149
10. Eternal Vision	161
Epilogue: Yours, till Heaven, <i>and Then</i>	183
Acknowledgments	191
Notes	195



CHAPTER 1

A Not So Victorian Romance



SUSIE THOMPSON WAS IN A QUANDARY the first time she laid her eyes upon Charles Spurgeon; she didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She simply couldn't imagine why others at New Park Street Chapel (NPSC) were enthused by the nineteen-year-old country preacher. Nothing about the young man impressed her—not his hair, his clothes, his accent, or even his preaching. Fast-forward just eight months, and Susie is weeping tears of joy that Charles Spurgeon had just declared his love and asked her to marry him.

How did the citified Susannah Thompson ever develop an interest in the rural and unpolished Charles Spurgeon? Two-and-a-half years his senior, she was, by all descriptions, lovely in appearance and refined in demeanor. There must have been many city boys vying for her attention, from London, where she lived, to Paris, where she frequently traveled. Susie was “small and pretty

in a quiet way, with a mass of brown curls and a singularly sweet smile.”¹ Charles on the other hand was “short, plump, and carelessly dressed, with protruding teeth and eyes that did not quite match.”² Some people considered him unattractive, a verdict with which he readily agreed. However, Charles’s friends viewed him differently, appreciating not only his spiritual fervency and mental prowess but also “his twinkling, humorous eyes, his mellow voice, and the charm and graciousness of his personality.”³

Charles and Susie were both Englanders but from two different cultures—as different as the rural Stambourne Meeting House (where Charles’s grandfather ministered) was from London’s St. Paul’s Cathedral, towering majestically over the landscape. In Charles and Susie, country and city meshed, and the merging of their lives is their love story.

Charles arrived in London by train on Saturday, December 17, 1853, the day before he was to preach at the NPSC as a guest preacher. The church had been without a pastor for some time and was in steep decline.

London’s bustling metropolis overwhelmed Charles from the moment he stepped off of the train and his feet hit the ground. He longed to be back at his church in Waterbeach and his apartment in Cambridge, some seventy miles north. The country air he usually breathed was a stark contrast to the industrial smog of London’s waste-filled streets. God had blessed Waterbeach Baptist Chapel with conversions and numerical growth—from about forty people when Charles arrived to around four hundred, and this over the span of only two years. In this regard, the village church was in much better circumstances than the historic city congregation.

The night before he preached, Charles tossed and turned in the tiny room of the dingy and clamoring boarding house in Queen

Square, Bloomsbury, just north of the NPSC. The church's hospitality had left much to be desired in sending him to such a place. Living in the metropolis of the world and marrying a refined London girl were the furthest things from Charles's mind. His objective was to preach on Sunday and then rush back to his village church as quickly as possible. Outside, it was a typical winter's evening in London—cold, damp, and cloudy, three things that worked against Spurgeon's health throughout most of his years there.

Across town at 7 St. Ann's Terrace, Brixton Road, Susie Thompson was cozy in the spacious home she and her parents shared with her uncle, aunt, and their children. She rested comfortably while, a couple miles away, the flickering gas lights and noisy streets just outside of Charles's window kept his sleep at bay. Prior to retiring to his room earlier that evening, Charles had been playfully mocked by some of the other residents of the boarding house for his thick Essex accent and his less-than-dapper appearance. They wagged their tongues and shook their heads as they imagined the young and countrified Spurgeon preaching in a city of polite and educated preachers. Little did they know what awaited NPSC, the city of London, and the world as a result of young Spurgeon's visit that weekend. Spurgeon biographer H. I. Wayland writes,

If anyone had predicted that the young rustic would begin on the next day a ministry of thirty-eight years in the metropolis of the civilized world, a ministry unsurpassed in the history of Christendom; and that at last he would be borne to his grave with the burial of a king, the words would have seemed as idle tales, made of the same stuff as the wildest of the Arabian Nights.⁴

Susie was aware that the NPSC was hosting the "Boy Preacher of the Fens"; however, she had little interest in hearing him, and she

skipped the morning service. Susie and her parents had mostly lost interest in the church since the pastor they loved, James Smith, had resigned and the church had declined. It took a bit of persuasion from respected friends Thomas and Unity Olney to convince her to attend the Sunday evening service.⁵

Both Susie *and* Charles were surprised that he was ever invited to preach at the historic church that had once been served by the likes of Benjamin Keach, John Gill, and John Rippon—three legendary pastors. Charles couldn't imagine why the esteemed London church wanted him, a mere country preacher, to fill their pulpit. In fact, when the invitation had arrived in the mail some weeks earlier, Charles thought the letter had been addressed to the wrong Spurgeon.

Susie had similar doubts, and her first impression of Charles did nothing to assuage her concerns. When she first saw and heard him preach, she was shocked that the uncouth, poorly groomed, and unfashionably dressed country boy was standing in the pulpit of the prestigious church. However, church leaders did not share Susie's sentiments, and, concerned about the future of NPSC, they invited the young preacher back numerous times. They rested their hope for church renewal on Charles. Susie just shook her head.

Spurgeon was formally installed as pastor of NPSC in April of 1854. Though young, he was a throwback to an era quickly fading away filled with conscience-piercing preachers such as William Jay and John Angell James. Perhaps more surprising than Charles Spurgeon's installation as pastor was the romance between Charles and Susie that unfolded soon afterward. The two became well acquainted as their individual visits to the home of Thomas and Unity coincided.

Charles ascertained that Susie was unsettled spiritually. Her conversion, just over a year earlier in late 1852, was accompanied by

troublesome doubts. Charles reached out to her in hopes of encouraging her in her faith. When a parcel from Charles containing *The Pilgrim's Progress* reached her home, Susie was curious and surprised.

Outside of the Bible itself, Charles was most helped in his Christian pilgrimage by John Bunyan's classic allegory of the Christian life. Rarely was Charles further than arm's reach from a copy of Bunyan's book, a book he felt might also reassure Susie.

This was a turning point in their evolving friendship. Neither Charles nor his preaching offended Susie any longer, and she now considered his ministry just what she desperately needed. As Susie thumbed through the pages of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, she was impressed by Charles's thoughtfulness in giving her a "precious" and "helpful" gift.⁶ Trembling, Susie met with Charles and detailed to him her vexatious spiritual situation. Charles was gentle in his counsel, leading her to a deeper faith in Christ.⁷

On June 10, less than two months after his installation as pastor, Charles revealed to Susie his growing affection for her, strongly hinting that he imagined a future together. This he did, in cleverness typical to him, by pointing her to a passage on marriage in Martin Tupper's book *Proverbial Philosophy* and asking her if she prayed for her future husband. The message was clear, surprising, and welcomed by Susie. Two months later, on August 2, Charles proposed to Susie in her grandparents' quaint little garden. Susie was delighted, and the unlikely couple was engaged. A bit of historical and cultural context is helpful in further understanding why Charles and Susie were such an "unlikely couple."

SUSIE'S EARLY LONDON LIFE

Susie Thompson's parents, Robert and Susannah, were married April 6, 1831, in London by "banns," indicating that they were likely poor.⁸ On January 15, 1832, nine months after their wedding, their first and only child, Susie, was born. Eventually finances improved for the Thompson family, though with times of noticeable and nearly devastating downfalls.

That same year ushered in developments in their world that were later important to Susie and her parents, as well as to Charles Spurgeon. Carter Lane Baptist Church, where the hymn writer and author John Rippon was then pastor and the Thomas Olney family maintained their church membership, moved to New Park Street, south of the Thames and in the neighborhood where Shakespeare's Globe Theatre had once stood. The church's new location was also near where John Bunyan had preached during his London visits, and near the Marshalsea prison, where the father of Charles Dickens was incarcerated in 1824 for indebtedness.

With the move, the church was renamed New Park Street Chapel. Susie and her parents were regular attendees of the NPSC by the 1840s. This was the name and location of the church when Charles first preached there in December 1853.

Though middle-class Victorian homes were stocked with literature from popular novelists such as Dickens or Thackeray, staple Christian books in Susie's home likely included a King James Version of the Bible, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, *The Book of Common Prayer*, and some guide to morning and evening devotions. Susie almost certainly read the collection of brief devotional sermons, *The Book That Will Suit You; or A Word for Every One*, by her pastor James Smith. Though her childhood was not as robustly saturated

with deep theology as Charles's, she, like most Victorian children, had a religious upbringing.

Susie strolled down city streets lined with architectural marvels and bustling with activity—from merchants selling wine and tea, to factory workers laboring in often dark and dangerous conditions just to survive. She had to maneuver around mud and horse manure as she crossed roads, not yet shoveled and swept by the ever-present street cleaners. Susie's London was beautiful and dirty, smoky and dangerous, and prosperous and poor. Its roads were traveled by politicians and orphans, high-society ladies wearing hats and carrying parasols in the daytime and 8,600 women engaged in prostitution at night.⁹ And, London was noisy with “the incessant sound of wheels and horses' hooves clacking over the pavement . . . the bell of the muffin man, and the cries of street peddlers selling such items as dolls, matches, books, knives, eels, pens, rat poison, key rings, eggs and china.”¹⁰

CHARLES'S EARLY RURAL EXPERIENCES

In contrast to Susie's urban upbringing, Charles was born in a small town, and for most of his first nineteen years, he was a boy of the deep country. It was not primarily London that made the great preacher but it was Essex's villages and towns: Stambourne where his grandparents lived, the small town of Colchester in his later childhood and early youth with his parents, and Cambridge's spires and neighboring areas in his mid and later teenage years that helped to form the fabric of Charles's character.

London had its place in shaping the man whose stature towered during his lifetime, but to unearth the context of Charles Spurgeon, one must depart from the city, walk the dirt roads of the countryside,

and sit beneath the trees in the green pastures of Stambourne. One must then climb into the dimly lit attic of pastor James Spurgeon, Charles's grandfather, and examine the rustic old Puritan volumes as Charles himself often did, running his fingers across the bindings even before he could read them. From the shelves of that attic library, nestled somewhere between the writings of Thomas Brooks and Boswell's biography of Samuel Johnson, one must then survey *The Pilgrim's Progress*, penned by John Bunyan, the tinker from nearby Bedford. Bunyan was important to Charles, not only because of his classic allegory, but also because he wrote it while imprisoned for preaching the gospel without license from the Established Church. From boyhood, Charles revered Christians who had heroically suffered for their faith. His admiration sprung in part from reading *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* and learning later that his distant relative Job Spurgeon had, many years prior, been imprisoned for attending a non-sanctioned church meeting.

The village of Bedford, where Bunyan had ministered, was not far removed from the path winding along the green countryside from Stambourne to Colchester, where Charles's parents John and Eliza Spurgeon resided. It was bloodstained Puritan soil, Puritan books, a Puritan-like grandfather, and godly parents who, in large part, molded the child Charles.

Whereas Susie enjoyed the progressing city with its industry, shops, modern inventions, and historic monuments, Charles's world was meandering country paths and country preachers—a more innocent world mostly untouched by the Industrial Revolution. After Charles married Susie, he sought to recreate the world of his youth on a smaller scale. With the exception of their first residence, subsequent homes had gardens, a fernery, and even milk cows.

A BIBLE ON THE TABLE
OF EVERY VICTORIAN HOME

Victorianism characterized most of the nineteenth century, into the early part of the twentieth. It was a time of progress in industry and technology, and London was the seat of its advancement, not only in England but also the world. Early to mid-Victorianism was challenging as people crowded London, seeking opportunities with the Industrial Revolution. Cholera outbreaks and financial disaster befell many of the great city's inhabitants. London smog and London fog were real and problematic for residents. At their worst from November through February, they were often yellow and thick, creating darkness during the daytime and requiring residents and business owners to light lamps. This extended beyond the city for several miles into the suburbs. Numerous health problems resulted—in part from the black smoke that ascended from “thousands of coal fires.”¹¹ There are accounts of people getting lost in the fogs, inadvertently walking into the Thames and drowning.¹²

From the work of famous art critic John Ruskin to the stories of celebrity novelist Dickens, the Victorians were “awash in texts”; but, as scholar Timothy Larsen argues, they were a people of “one book”—the Bible.¹³ It was into this world that Charles Spurgeon and Susie Thompson were born, a world later overrun with novels, magazines, newspapers, and other literature—but, at least on the surface, a world that was most known literarily by the Bible. The Bible was the standard text in Victorian schools, and it was a staple in every home where morning and evening devotions were generally practiced. Larsen notes that even the “polemical agnostic T. H. Huxley threw his strong support behind the Bible as a primary text in the core curriculum for elementary school children—it was the Bible first, then ‘reading, writing, and arithmetic.’”¹⁴

Even a cursory glance at the volumes of Victorian authors reveals the importance of Scripture in their writings. Take Charles Spurgeon's friend John Ruskin, one not known for his commitment to orthodox Christian doctrine. His writings inspired a three-hundred-page book, *The Bible References of John Ruskin* (1898).¹⁵ References to Scripture abounded in the literature of Victorianism, from the Christian poet Christina Rossetti to the atheist P. B. Shelley. Charles Dickens's religious outlook lacked doctrinal precision, and his moral choices sometimes caused the pious to wince, but he was one who nevertheless believed that every Victorian should be familiar with the Bible.¹⁶

Providentially, Charles and Susie were born at a time of growing literary interests and publishing that eventually assisted both of them with their own prolific writing careers. And while the Bible may have fascinated many people in England, it was the singular influence in the lives of Charles and Susie. When Charles Spurgeon burst upon the scene with a Bible in his hand that he believed and preached, there was a spiritual revival in the churches and an awakening in the city.

ENGAGEMENT YEARS AND MARRIAGE

During Charles and Susie's engagement (August 1854 to January 1856), they became better acquainted in the midst of Charles's busy ministry. They didn't engage in the types of activities enjoyed by the upper classes, such as balls and other social events. Even if Charles and Susie had held the societal status that would garner an invitation to a ball, Charles was opposed to dancing. But they found sufficient happiness in just being together. They met once a week at the Crystal Palace, and walked in public, hand-in-hand;

they even made a trip to Colchester together to meet Charles's extended family.

When Charles and Susie were married on January 8, 1856, their wedding ceremony was not an elaborate one, despite Charles's growing popularity. Instead it was the common morning service for a nonconformist Christian couple in 1856 Victorian England. The Scriptures were read, the gospel was proclaimed, and the minister blessed the couple. After the wedding, it was customary for couples to visit with the bride's family for a celebratory breakfast prepared by the bride's mother.¹⁷ Though Susie's wedding dress is nowhere described, there were norms concerning wedding attire.

White gowns did not become especially common until the 1870s; most middle-class brides were married in a colored dress. It would be new for the wedding but made in a style that could be used for going to church and making calls during the following year. Pastels were sometimes preferred, but other wedding dresses seen in museums are bronze taffeta, wine velvet, and deep purple silk. Whatever the color of her dress, the bride wore a delicate white veil covering her head and upper body.¹⁸

Susie may have even worn an orange blossom wreath on her head, traditional from 1840.¹⁹

Charles and Susie's wedding, though simple, nevertheless took on a life of its own, exceeding in attendance and energy, if not in pomp and circumstance, the weddings of the courtly in Victorian culture. This was not by design, but simply a result of Spurgeon's popularity by that time. It seemed that everyone in London was interested in their wedding. Newspapers carried the story as thousands of curiosity seekers thronged the streets on that damp and foggy morning. The chapel itself was packed beyond capacity with

2,000 people in attendance; some five hundred ladies arrived hours before the doors opened in hopes of securing excellent seating. Extra policemen were commissioned to patrol as people pressed for just a glimpse of the bride and groom and their wedding party. All of this for a simple Baptist preacher and his bride-to-be—it almost seems hard to believe. But many of Charles and Susie’s experiences together defy imagination. Susie was not swayed by all of the attention that day; she simply said, “God Himself united our hearts in indissoluble bonds of true affection and gave us to each other forever.” She was happy.²⁰

After Susie cut the wedding cake and the breakfast at her parents’ home was finished, the newlyweds departed for Paris for their ten-day honeymoon. There, Susie, fluent in French and well acquainted with the city from her earlier travels, delighted her new husband and first-time visitor to the City of Light as his tour guide to the majestic cathedrals, art galleries, and historical sites of Paris.

The gleeful young couple were free from any consciousness of the future and all of the challenges that it would bring. Charles and Susie laughed, touched, and strolled the streets together in romantic Paris. They were jubilant. Upon visiting Sainte Chapelle, Charles thought the stained glass was heavenly. Susie agreed: “Its loveliness looked almost celestial, as we stood enwrapped in its radiance, the light of the sinking sun glorifying its matchless windows into a very dream of dazzling grace and harmony of colour.”²¹

The couple would carry the spirit of that splendor into the next phase of their journey together.

Upon returning to London, Susie set up their first home together at 217 New Kent Road, very near where Susie was born and not far from NPSC and from the future Metropolitan Tabernacle. Susie “admired everything in the house”²² and considered it “delightful.”

Charles prayed for God's blessing on their simple little home.²³ The house had three stories with several rooms, the best room was on the second floor and it was set aside, at Susie's insistence, as Charles's study.²⁴ On the third floor, just above the study, twin boys, Charles Jr. and Thomas, were welcomed on September 20, 1856. Such marked the happy days of the first year of Charles and Susie's marriage.

Charles and Susie had a joyful marriage, but not an effortless one. But for the newlyweds, future complications were unknown as they reveled in one another's love. They were allowed a blissful but brief season of unhindered happiness before storm clouds of trouble rolled into their home. Susie later wrote, "The strongest saint, the firmest believer, would never dare to gaze upon the untrodden pathway which lies before him; and we thank God that He has put such knowledge utterly out of our reach."²⁵

Heights of fame and depths of suffering came to their doorstep in short order. However, Charles and Susie had a robust spirituality, cultivated by spiritual disciplines, that steeled them against the dangers of popularity and heartbreaking tragedy and helped them to thrive in their marriage and ministry.

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