

**Swallowed Up in God:
The Impact of Samuel Pearce
on Modern Missions**

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Swallowed Up in God: The Impact of Samuel Pearce on Modern Missions

Andrew Fuller once wrote, “It is good to read the lives of holy men; and the more holy they have been the better. Some readers, it is true, are not satisfied unless they discover in others the same low, groveling, half-hearted kind of life which they find in themselves. But satisfaction of this sort is better missed than found. It is good to be reprov’d, and stirred up to labour after greater degrees of spirituality than any which we have hitherto attained.”¹ Without a doubt, Fuller wrote this while reflecting upon the life and ministry of his dear friend, Samuel Pearce. In his relatively short life, Pearce stirred others to greater service for their Creator and their Savior; his impact extends from the heartlands of England to the missionary effort in Baptist life today.

Pearce’s Youth

Samuel Pearce was born on July 20th, 1766, in Plymouth, England to devout Baptist parents. His father was a silver-smith and served many years as a deacon in a Baptist church in Plymouth. His mother passed away while Pearce was still an infant, and thus he spent his early childhood years with his grandfather in Tamerton, where he learned the “principles of religion.”²

Pearce returned to Plymouth around the age of eight to apprentice as a metal-worker under his father. At the age of sixteen, God drew the young man to himself through a message preached by Rev. Isaiah Birt, who would be a mentor and friend to Pearce for the rest of his life. Many categorize Pearce as one who was “naturally strong” of emotion, and such being the case, he embarked upon his journey of faith with all of his heart.³ In a letter he wrote to the Rev. Birt shortly after his conversion, his desire to serve God with all of his heart was unmistakable: “Oh beg of him that he will ever keep me from possessing a lukewarm, a Laodicean spirit! May my affections to the crucified Saviour be continually on a flame!”⁴ His flame for the Lord was fed by the oil of the Spirit.

¹Andrew Fuller, *A Memoir of the Life and Writings of Andrew Fuller*, ed. Thomas Ekins Fuller (London: J. Heaton and Son, 1863), 228.

²Samuel Pearce, *Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel Pearce, A.M.*, ed. Andrew Fuller and W.H. Pearce (London: G. Wightman, 1831), 2.

³After his conversion, he determined formally to commit himself to the Lord’s service. Doddridge’s *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* would prove to be an extraordinary book as Pearce explored his call, and he resolved to prove his solemn devotion to the Lord with a covenant proposed in Doddridge’s book. Pearce signed this covenant in his own blood, and though he would later tear this document up in favor of depending solely on the blood of the cross, Pearce from his earliest days exhibited this extreme devotion to his calling. William C. Conant, *Narratives of Remarkable Conversions and Revival Incidents* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1858), 83.

⁴Pearce, *Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel Pearce*, 4.

Pearce's formal theological education in ministry began at the Baptist Academy in Bristol.⁵ The Bristol Academy has the distinction of being the chief source of a "warmer, more evangelical stream of Calvinism" that would ultimately result in the broad success of the missionary movement in England and the conversion of many souls.⁶ Samuel Pearce and many of his Bristol colleagues would lead their congregations and denomination, by example, away from Antinomian tendencies and toward an acceptance of the responsibility for sharing the gospel with all who would listen.

With a year remaining in his studies at Bristol, Pearce preached at Cannon Street Baptist Church in Birmingham during his summer vacation. It is said that almost "every time he preached he took some spoil for his Master" and during this internship the same was true.⁷ The church was so impressed with this passionate young preacher that they invited him to return and preach during his Christmas vacation, and then to preach in a probationary period which led them to call him as pastor in August of 1790.

Pearce's first pastorate at Cannon Street, lasting roughly nine years, was the only one he would fill in his lifetime. His affection and love for the congregation and ministry in Birmingham would keep his heart tied there, even in the midst of sickness and despite offers made by other churches and denominations to pay him more money and promise a larger congregation. Under the leadership of Pearce, Cannon Street saw 335 people added to the congregation, and at least seven called to full ministry.⁸ The growth in his church was attributed to his consistently preaching the gospel, but also "the promises of God concerning the conversion of the heathen nations."⁹ Pearce's passion to see the "heathen" come to know Christ would become his life-breath and would keep him motivated until the day he died.

Pearce's Missionary Zeal

Pearce wrote in a letter to a friend from Bristol: "Union of sentiment often creates friendship among carnal men, and similarity of feeling never fails to produce affection among pious men, as far as that similarity is known . . . O, how I love that man whose soul is deeply affected with the importance of the precious gospel to idolatrous heathens!"¹⁰

A series of events can be traced through the middle to late eighteenth century that led to the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) in 1792. In 1790, Samuel Pearce met William Carey and they found within each other a kindred spirit.¹¹ Beginning with Fuller's publication of *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* in 1785, to Carey's *Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians* in 1792, the Lord was raising up men of deep conviction who felt the obligation and the universal nature of the Great Commission. The circumstances, which developed independently in the lives of various ministers in England, can only be attributed to the sovereign

⁵This college was proposed at the General Assembly of the Particular Baptists in 1689, to meet the needs of theological training for future ministers in the Midlands of England. The founding of the academy did not come to fruition until 1770. Owen, J.M. Gwynne, *A Memorial Volume of the 250th Anniversary of the Midland Baptist Association*, ed. James Ford and Robert Gray (Birmingham: Atkins & Iffe, 1905), 57.

⁶Brian Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society 1792–1992* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 3.

⁷S. Pearce Carey, M.A., *Samuel Pearce, M.A.: The Baptist Brainerd* (London: The Carey Press, 1913), 105.

⁸*Ibid.*, 105.

⁹*Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁰Pearce, *Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel Pearce*, 41.

¹¹Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society*, 11.

hand of God working to bring about His purposes through men surrendered completely to His guidance.

Pearce was present at the meeting in Kettering when the BMS was formed. This society was formed by members of the Northhamptonshire Association, a Particular Baptist association neighboring Pearce's own Midland Baptist Association. Although he was not part of the association, Pearce was invited as a "welcome guest" and contributed to the first collection drawn by the members participating in the meeting. A small sum of 13l. 2s. and 6d. were raised as the first subscription for this missionary society.¹² Pearce's zeal to see the success of the society was so contagious that within two weeks, when the next meeting of the society was gathered, he had raised £70 for the cause of the BMS and formed an auxiliary society based at Cannon Street.¹³ In Ryland's words, Pearce's enthusiasm "put new spirits into us all" and he was immediately made a member of the committee.¹⁴

From this point forward, Pearce would serve alongside Fuller as a fundraising duo for the cause of the BMS.¹⁵ Pearce's enthusiastic spirit would only cease with his death, and it was in the discharge of this task that his flame was extinguished. As passionate as he was for the task of raising funds, Pearce felt called to join William Carey on the mission field, to see lives changed by the gospel among those who had never heard it. He wrote in one letter, "Great as its blessings are in the estimation of a sinner called in a Christian country, inexpressibly greater must they shine of the newly illuminated mind of a converted pagan."¹⁶

Always of the character of careful consideration and prayerful petition, Pearce designed to know the mind of God before he ever disclosed to the Society his desire to join Carey in the task of preaching to the heathen. He purposed to set aside a certain day in every week for one month to pray and fast about his calling to know the will of God, and resolved at the end of the period he designated to put the case before the Society for them to decide.¹⁷ During this period, Pearce kept a journal of his thoughts and desires, including a biography and timeline of his own inclination to see the gospel spread across the globe. He grew in his desire to serve God, and felt himself "swallowed up in God" at times, so impressed upon his soul was the desire to derive everything from Christ who sustained him.¹⁸ During this period he became overwhelmed by what he recognized as a disproportion of ministers in England in comparison with India.

There are in Birmingham 50,000 inhabitants; and, exclusive of the vicinity, ten ministers who preach the fundamental truths of the gospel. In Hindostan there are twice as many millions of inhabitants, and not so many gospel preachers. Now Jesus Christ had commanded his ministers to go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. Why should we be so disproportionate in our labours? . .

¹²Carey, *Samuel Pearce: The Baptist Brainerd*, 138.

¹³At one point in his career, after preaching in Dublin, Ireland, Pearce was offered of the sum of £80 a year to continue as the preacher in this city on England's sister isle. Arthur S. Langley, *Birmingham Baptist: Past and Present* (London: The Kingsgate Press, 1939), 32. Additionally, to contextualize the significant amount given by the Cannon Street Church, William Carey at his pastorate in Moulton received a yearly salary of £15. Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society*, 8.

¹⁴Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society*, 16.

¹⁵From 1792–1800 no less than £10,000 were raised for the Indian Missions. This enormous sum bears in it the lives of Samuel Pearce and Andrew Fuller who would tirelessly venture across the hills and through the forests of England to raise one more guinea for the cause of taking the gospel to India. Owen, *250th Anniversary of the Midland Baptist Association*, 52.

¹⁶Pearce, *Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel Pearce*, 41.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 85.

. I am bound therefore, if others do not go, to the means more proportionate to the multitude.¹⁹

After spending a month petitioning the Lord's guidance, Pearce revealed the desires of his heart to the Society. Their answer, after a considerable amount of deliberation, was in the negative. "Though they were fully satisfied as to brother Pearce's qualifications, and greatly approved of his spirit, yet were unanimously of opinion that he ought not to go . . . on account of the mission itself, which required his assistance in the station which he already occupied."²⁰ In the time he spent in prayer and fasting, a common theme found in his journal was for God's will to be done in his life. Pearce found joy in obeying God's will, and did not, as many might have had they been in his place, abandon his task or lose his zeal for the position he held. He committed himself all the more strongly to raise funds and promote the cause of the BMS. He writes to his wife, "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."²¹

Pearce's Illness and Death

Samuel Pearce would live less than five more years after the Society turned him down for missionary service, but these were some of the most profitable years of his life. In his 33 years, he oversaw the planting of new churches in England, the implementation of Sunday School in his own church and elsewhere, and numerous souls converted wherever he preached. He edited and prepared the first three volumes of *The Periodical Accounts of the Baptist Missionary Society*, and spent every hour of his day engaged in activity for his precious Savior.

In early October 1798, upon returning from a minister's meeting in Kettering, Pearce took ill from his journey in the rain and cold. He was so weakened by pulmonary tuberculosis that he was unable at times to speak without extreme pain in his lungs until he passed away a year later, in October 1799. Pearce, a man so full of service for God, was now "laid aside from his work, wasting away by slow degrees, patiently enduring the will of God, and cheerfully waiting for his dissolution."²²

A man who had been so animated and passionate in the pulpit was now forced to whisper to communicate with his family, something that would often send him into deep fevers and awful fits of pain. Through the pain, he primarily sought deeper communion with God. He wrote to Dr. Ryland, "I have been laboring lately to exercise more love to God when I have been suffering most severely."²³

In his illness, Pearce praised God. The life of this man of God so inspired those who were privileged to know him that they set about immediately to write his memoirs. Fuller wrote, "Pearce's Memoirs are now loudly called for. I sit down almost in despair, and say, 'That which is crooked cannot be made straight, and that which is lacking cannot be numbered.'"²⁴ Fuller would release Pearce's memoirs in 1800, a short period after he passed into his much anticipated

¹⁹Ibid., 75.

²⁰Samuel Pearce, *Memoirs of the Late Rev'd. Samuel Pearce, A.M.: With Extracts From Some of His Most Interesting Letters*, comp. Andrew Fuller (Cincinnati: Looker, Plamer & Reynolds, Printers, 1820), 32.

²¹Ibid., 32.

²²Pearce, *Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel Pearce*, 137.

²³Pearce, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce*, 243.

²⁴Andrew Fuller, *A Memoir of the Life and Writings of Andrew Fuller*, 97.

glorification. Pearce's *Memoirs* would sell many copies both in Britain and in the United States, and Pearce's son notes that in the early nineteenth century many of those who were called by God to missionary service ascribed "their desire for labour among the Heathen, under God, to the reading of this volume."²⁵

Characteristics of a Life Worth Emulating

Fuller wrote that "the great ends of Christian biography are instruction and example," and it is with the example of the greatest characteristics of Samuel Pearce's life this paper will conclude.

Submission to the Will of God

Pearce exhibited a singular devotion and submissiveness to the will of God in all circumstances of his life. When his daughter was ill with a fever while he was away preaching, he wrote to his wife that she should fear not the death of their child.

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."²⁶

During the period Pearce spent in prayer and fasting about proposing his own departure to serve with Carey in India, he was drawn more and more to submit to the will of God, something which he attained and which softened the blow when he was asked to remain in England. In his diary he would sometimes write, in his more fleshly moments, that he could not bear the thought of remaining in England. The final entry in his diary, however, was resigned to let the Lord lead him. "One thing, however, I am resolved upon, that, the Lord keeping me, if I cannot go abroad, I will do all I can to serve the mission at home."²⁷

He also submitted to the authority of the men in his life whom he trusted were themselves submitted to the will of God. In a letter to Carey, he says that while he was waiting on the decision of the committee, "I felt all anxiety forsake me, and an entire resignation of will to the will of God, be it what it would, together with a satisfaction that so much praying breath would not be lost."²⁸ Pearce was content to be used in the service of his Lord, no matter the geographic location. "May my spared life be wholly devoted to the service of my dear Redeemer! I do not care where I am, whether in England or in India, so that I am employed as He would have me."²⁹

Even in the period of his painful and slow death, Pearce was surrendered to God's will and His glory. He feared death by consumption most of all, but when it came time to allow God to use him, he surrendered completely. Few men take satisfaction in the knowledge that God appoints the means by which they will die, but for Pearce, it was only a logical outpouring of his submission to the will of God. "Of all the ways of dying, that which I have dreaded most was by

²⁵Pearce, *Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel Pearce*, viii.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 128.

²⁷Pearce, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce*, 50.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 68.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 72.

consumption. But, my dear Lord, if by this death I can most glorify Thee, I prefer it to all others.”³⁰

Time Spent With God Was Never Wasted

Spending an adequate amount time in the preparation of sermons was one of the keys to Pearce’s success in preaching. He undertook the expositing of God’s Word in the pulpit every week with the utmost care. In a sermon delivered upon the ordination of Reverend W. Belsher, Pearce reminded the congregation that they should allow their newly-called pastor enough time to prepare his sermons during the week. “Nothing, next to the honor of Christ, and the interest of souls, is so dear to a studious pastor as time; and a minister who thinks lightly of its value, betrays an ignorance and indolence, which, if indulged, will eventually debase both his character and labors.”³¹

Even in his college days, Pearce observed strictly regimented days in order to be of the greatest service to his Lord. In a letter to a young man who asked his advice before going to the Bristol Academy, Pearce underlined his letter with a strict order in all pursuits. “Let every hour have its proper pursuit; from which let nothing, but a settled conviction that I can employ it to better advantage, ever cause me to deviate. Let me have a fixed time for prayer, meditation, reading, languages, correspondence, recreation, sleep, &c.”³²

Pearce was never a recluse, in fact he seemed most content when surrounded by godly friends, but he constantly kept in view that which would have the greatest impact upon the kingdom of God. In this way he gave glory to God. In a similar letter to another college student, he emphasized the importance of balancing time spent with friends and with God. “You will gain more by a half hour’s intercourse with God than the friendship of the whole college can impart. Too much acquaintance would be followed with a waste of that precious time, on the present improvement of which your future usefulness and respectability in your profession depend.”³³

These regulations of Pearce’s time may seem strict to some, especially in our day, but the adherence to these habits of devotion likely made this man of God into a *great man* of God.

Preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ as Most Important

The gospel and promise of Jesus Christ deeply penetrated every aspect of Samuel Pearce’s life. It was his motivation to missions, even from the first week of his salvation. He wrote to Rev. Birt, days after his conversion, “On Jesus alone then I must depend for salvation. Here I rest. Hence I draw all my hope. Jesus Christ has died, and Jesus shall not die in vain.”³⁴

He encouraged a friend, “Let your strength be employed in exalting the Savior. Aim at that and that only in your sermons. It will give us more pleasure one day that He was exalted by us than that we exalted ourselves.”³⁵

Samuel Pearce was characterized by a commitment to preaching Christ, and despite the hyper-Calvinist theological whirlwinds that were all about him at the time, his reading of Scripture affirmed the application of God’s universal call. Pearce was often accused of being an Ar-

³⁰Carey, *Samuel Pearce: The Baptist Brainerd*, 210.

³¹Samuel Pearce, “The Duty of Churches to Regard Ministers as the Gift of Christ” (Birmingham, England, 1794), 51.

³²Pearce, *Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel Pearce*, 139–140.

³³Carey, *Samuel Pearce: The Baptist Brainerd*, 206.

³⁴Pearce, *Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel Pearce*, 6.

³⁵Carey, *Samuel Pearce: The Baptist Brainerd*, 99.

minian, to the point that some questioned if he even preached the gospel at all. In a circular letter sent out in 1794 he wrote that:

We cheerfully avow our abhorrence of a doctrine which asserts, that an infinitely good GOD, created a number of immortal beings capable of such strong sensations of misery as man, merely to gratify himself in filling them with the fullness of torment forever: such a sanguinary Deity we could never love; nor would faith in such a being promote that disposition to gentleness, tenderness, and affection for all mankind, which are everywhere represented in the gospel as the genuine fruits of a spiritual acquaintance with the true character of GOD: on the contrary, such views of the Almighty would rather cherish the spirit of a bloody Mahomet than a bleeding Jesus.³⁶

His own gentleness, tenderness and affection for all men to be saved flowed directly out of Pearce's doctrine of the cross. He was convinced that "if the gospel of Christ be true, it should be heartily embraced" and that speculations about election were negated by the reality of Christ's work on the cross.³⁷

Conclusion

Samuel Pearce is an often overlooked figure in the history of the BMS. His passion for the salvation of souls was not contained to the British Isles, and his influence has had an impact on generations of missionaries and missionary societies both in England and the United States.

In his death, he longed for nothing more than God to be glorified and he hoped to see the shores of India if his spirit was allowed to tarry before being taken up to his Lord. In a letter addressed to several new missionary appointees, he wrote:

Long as I live, my imagination will be hovering over you in Bengal; and should I die, if spirits be allowed to visit the world they have left, mine would soon be at Mudnabatty, watching your labours, your conflicts, and your pleasures, whilst you are "always abounding in the work of the Lord."³⁸

Surely Pearce was comforted in life by Revelation 7:9, when he would finally be given a chance to speak Bengalee to one whom his exertions had helped lead to Christ. On that final day, when the earth shall be no more and God will call before Him his people, there will be a "great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" and among them will be Englishmen and Indians, who were led to Christ through a man known to his colleagues as "the Seraphic." And he will turn with them and cry out in eternity, as he did in life, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!" (Rev 7:9).

³⁶Samuel Pearce, "Circular Letter of 1795 on the The Doctrine of Salvation By Free Grace Alone," *The Founders Journal*, 57 (Summer 2004): 28.

³⁷Pearce, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce*, 168.

³⁸Carey, *Samuel Pearce: The Baptist Brainerd*, 204.

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