

The Bruised Reed

By

Richard Sibbes

1630

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Publishers' Foreword

Our books may come to be seen where ourselves shall never be heard. These may preach where the author cannot, and (which is more) when he is not. This prediction by one of the great Puritans has had many fulfillments. An ungodly Welsh clergyman, shopping at a fair in the eighteenth century, bought an article which happened to be wrapped in a page torn from an old Puritan folio. The reading of that one page led to his sound conversion. As Luther said, "Satan hates the use of pens," and never were pens more powerfully wielded in the cause of God than by the Puritan divines of the seventeenth century. Nor have their books outlived their usefulness. Although the original volumes are worn with age, the truths found in them are as fresh as the new formats in which they are now appearing.

There is no better introduction to the Puritans than the writings of Richard Sibbes, who is, in many ways, a typical Puritan. "Sibbes never wastes the student's time," wrote C. H. Spurgeon, "he scatters pearls and diamonds with both hands."

The facts concerning Sibbes' life can be briefly stated (there is a full account in Volume 1 of the Banner of Truth Trust edition of his Works). He was born at Tostock, Suffolk, in 1577 and went to school at Bury St Edmunds. His father intended Richard to follow his own trade as a wheelwright, but, with the help of friends, he went up to St John's College, Cambridge, in 1595. Here he was converted under the powerful preaching of Paul Bayne, the successor of William Perkins in the pulpit of Great St Andrew's Church. After earning his B.D. in 1610, he was appointed a lecturer at Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge. He was removed from this post five years later, however, because of his Puritan tendencies. Through the influence of powerful friends, he was chosen to be the preacher at Gray's Inn, London, in 1617, and remained there till 1626. In that year he returned to Cambridge as Master of St Catherine's Hall, and later returned to Holy Trinity, this time as its vicar. He was granted a Doctorate in Divinity in 1627, and was thereafter frequently referred to as "the heavenly Doctor Sibbes", on account of both the matter and the manner of his preaching. He continued to exercise his ministry, at Gray's Inn, London, as well as at Holy Trinity, Cambridge, while also remaining Master of St Catherine's, until his death on 6 July 1635, at the age of 58. Of him Izaak Walton later wrote: "Of this blest man, let this just praise be given: heaven was in him, before he was in heaven."

"The Lord took him away," wrote a contemporary, "that his eyes might not see the great evils which were about to break out upon the land." These great evils came to a head in the Civil War of the 1640s. Behind that event lay a movement away from the doctrines and practices of the Reformation on the part of a powerful faction in the Church of England, headed by William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, and backed by royal favor. It was the Puritans who stood together to meet these inroads. To them moderation in maintaining the truth of God's Word was but sinful lukewarmness. "A curse lies upon those", said Sibbes, "that, when the truth suffers, have not a word to defend it." For his boldness, Sibbes was reprimanded in 1627, and in 1632, along with eleven other Puritan ministers, he was sentenced to banishment. The sentence was never carried out, but Sibbes lived to see many of his dear friends, such as Samuel Ward, Thomas Goodwin, John Cotton, Thomas Hooker and others, imprisoned or forced into exile in Holland or New England. Concerning the final issue of this conflict Sibbes was in no doubt. Gardiner, in his History of the Puritan Revolution, writes, "Sibbes is distinguished by his triumphant confidence . . . [while] even Laud and Wentworth acknowledged to themselves that the chances were against them. Eliot in his prison, and Sibbes in his pulpit, are jubilant with exultation."

Sibbes himself says:

A Christian is an impregnable person. He is a person that never can be conquered. Emmanuel became man to make the church and every Christian to be one with him. Christ's nature is out of danger of all

that is hurtful. The sun shall not shine, the wind shall not blow, to the church's hurt. For the church's Head rules over all things and has all things in subjection. Therefore let all the enemies consult together, this king and that power, there is a counsel in heaven which will disturb and dash all their counsels. Emmanuel in heaven laughs them to scorn. And as Luther said, "Shall we weep and cry when God laughs?"

Since its first publication in 1630, *The Bruised Reed* has been remarkably fruitful as a source of spiritual help and comfort. Richard Baxter records: "A poor peddler came to the door . . . and my father bought from him Sibb's Bruised Reed . . . It suited my state . . . and gave me a livelier apprehension of the mystery of redemption and how much I was beholden to Jesus Christ . . . God was pleased to resolve me to himself without any means but books." Such testimonies could be multiplied. Speaking of the preacher's need to suit his reading to the varying conditions he finds within, Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones says in his *Preaching and Preachers*:

You will find, I think, in general that the Puritans are almost invariably helpful . . . I shall never cease to be grateful to one of them called Richard Sibbes who was balm to my soul at a period in my life when I was overworked and badly overtired, and therefore subject in an unusual manner to the onslaughts of the devil. In that state and condition . . . what you need is some gentle, tender treatment for your soul. I found at that time that Richard Sibbes, who was known in London in the early seventeenth century as "the heavenly Doctor Sibbes", was an unfailing remedy. His books *The Bruised Reed* and *The Soul's Conflict* quietened, soothed, comforted, encouraged and healed me.

The complete works of Sibbes were published in seven volumes in the Nichol Series between 1862 and 1864, and again by the Banner of Truth Trust, between 1973 and 1982. The present book is taken from the first volume in that series and is the first of Sibbes' writings to be published separately in the present series. Some of the language and punctuation of the earlier edition have been modernized and headings have been introduced with the intention of making the work more accessible to present day readers.

Sibbes once said to Thomas Goodwin, "Young man, if ever you would do good, you must preach the gospel and the free grace of God in Christ Jesus." *The Bruised Reed* shows us how Sibbes himself did this. May he, by this work, though dead, yet speak (Heb. 11:4), both to readers who are already familiar with his writings and to those who have still to discover him.

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1. The Reed and the Bruising

Christ's calling — How Christ pursues his calling — What it is to be bruised -The good effects of bruising

The prophet Isaiah, being lifted up and carried with the wing of a prophetic spirit, passes over all the time between him and the appearing of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Seeing with the eye of prophecy, and with the eye of faith, Christ as present, he presents him in the name of God to the spiritual eye of others in these words:

“Behold my servant, whom I uphold; my elect, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles. He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed, he shall not break, and the smoking flax, he shall not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth” (Isa. 42:1 3).

These words are alleged by Matthew to be now fulfilled in Christ (Matt. 12:18 20). In these words are propounded, first, the calling of Christ to his office; and secondly, the manner in which he carries out his office.

Christ's Calling

God calls him here his servant. Christ was God's servant in the greatest piece of service that ever was, a chosen and a choice servant who did and suffered all by commission from the Father. In this we may see the sweet love of God toward us, in that he counts the work of our salvation by Christ his greatest service, and in that he will put his only beloved Son to that service. He might well prefix it with “Behold” to raise up our thoughts to the highest pitch of attention and admiration. In time of temptation, apprehensive consciences look so much to the present trouble they are in, that they need to be roused up to behold the one in whom they may find rest for their distressed souls. In temptations it is safest to behold nothing but Christ, the true brazen serpent, the true “Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world”, (John 1:29). This saving object has a special influence of comfort to the soul, especially if we look not only on Christ, but upon the Father's authority and love in him. For in all that Christ did and suffered as Mediator, we must see God in him reconciling the world to himself (2Cor. 5:19).

What a support to our faith this is, that God the Father, the party offended by our sins, is so well pleased with the work of redemption! And what a comfort this is, that seeing God's love rests on Christ as well pleased in him, we may conclude that he is as well-pleased with us if we are in Christ! For his love rests in a whole Christ, in the mystical Christ, as well as in the natural Christ, because he loves him and us with one love. Let us, therefore, embrace Christ, and in him embrace God's love, and build our faith safely on a Savior who is furnished with so high a commission.

See here, for our comfort, a sweet agreement of all three persons: the Father gives a commission to Christ; the Spirit furnishes and sanctifies it, and Christ himself executes the office of a Mediator. Our redemption is founded upon the joint agreement of all three persons of the Trinity.

How Christ Pursues His Calling

This is said here to be done modestly, without making a noise, or raising dust by any pompous coming, as princes are accustomed to doing. “His voice shall not be heard.” His voice indeed was heard, but what voice? “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy-laden” (Matt. 11:28). He cried, but how? “Hear, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters” (Isa. 55:1). And just as his coming was modest, so it was mild, which is set down in these words: “A bruised reed, he shall not break, and smoking flax, he shall not quench.”

We see, therefore, that the condition of those with whom he was to deal was that they were bruised reeds and smoking flax; not trees, but reeds; and not whole, but bruised reeds. The church is compared to weak things: to a dove among the fowls; to a vine among the plants; to sheep among the beasts; to a woman, which is the weaker vessel.

God's children are bruised reeds before their conversion and oftentimes after. Before conversion all (except those who, being brought up in the church, God has delighted to show himself gracious to from their childhood) are bruised reeds, yet in different degrees, as God sees fit. And as there are differences with regard to temperament, gifts and manner of life, so there are in God's intention to use men in the time to come; for usually he empties them of themselves, and makes them nothing, before he will use them in any great services.

What It Is To Be Bruised

The bruised reed is a man who for the most part is in some misery, just as those were who came to Christ for help, and by misery he is brought to see sin as its cause, for, whatever pretences sin makes, they come to an end when we are bruised and broken. He is sensible of his sin and misery, even to his bruising; and, seeing no help in himself, he is carried with restless desire to have supplies from another, with some hope, which raises him a little out of himself toward Christ, though he dare not claim to have gained any present interest of mercy. This spark of hope being opposed by doubts and fears rising from his corruption makes him like smoking flax; so that both these together, a bruised reed and smoking flax, make up the state of a poor distressed man. This is such a person as our Savior Christ terms "poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3), who sees his wants, and also sees himself indebted to divine justice. He has no means of supply from himself or the creature, and thereupon he mourns, and, upon some hope of mercy from the promise, and examples of those that have obtained mercy, he is stirred to hunger and thirst after it.

The Good Effects Of Bruising

This bruising is required before conversion so that the Spirit may make way for himself into the heart by levelling all proud, high thoughts, and so that we may understand ourselves to be what indeed we are by nature. We love to wander from ourselves and to be strangers at home, till God bruises us by one cross or other, and then we "begin to think", and come home to ourselves with the prodigal son (Luke 15:17). It is a very hard thing to bring a dull and evasive heart to cry with feeling for mercy. Our hearts, like criminals, never cry for the mercy of the judge until they are beaten from all evasions.

Again, this bruising makes us set a high price upon Christ. Then the gospel becomes the gospel indeed; then the fig leaves of morality will do us no good. And it makes us more thankful and, from our thankfulness, it makes us more fruitful in our lives; for what makes many so cold and barren except that bruising for their sin never endeared God's grace to them?

Likewise this dealing of God establishes us more in his ways, having had knocks and bruises in our own ways. This is often the cause of relapses and apostasy, because men never smarted from sin at the start; they were not under the lash of the law long enough. Hence this inferior work of the Spirit in bringing down high thoughts (2Cor. 10:5) is necessary before our conversion. And, for the most part, the Holy Spirit, in order to further the work of conviction, joins with it some affliction which, when sanctified, has a healing and purging power.

After conversion we need bruising so that reeds may know themselves to be reeds, and not oaks. Even reeds need bruising, because of the remainder of pride in our nature, and to let us see that we live by mercy. Such bruising may help weaker Christians not to be too discouraged when they see stronger ones shaken and bruised. Thus Peter was bruised when he wept bitterly (Matt. 26:75). This reed, till he met with this bruise, had more wind in him than pith when he said,

“Though all forsake you, I will not” (Matt. 26:33). The people of God cannot be without these examples. The heroic deeds of those great worthies do not comfort the church so much as their falls and bruises do. Thus David was bruised until he came to a free confession, without guile of spirit (Psa. 32:3-5); indeed, his sorrows increased in his own feeling to the exquisite pain of breaking bones (Psa. 51:8). Thus Hezekiah complains that God had “broken his bones” like a lion (Isa. 38:13). Thus the chosen vessel Paul needed the messenger of Satan to buffet him lest he should be lifted up above measure (2Cor. 12:7).

Hence we learn that we must not pass too harsh judgment upon ourselves or others when God exercises us with bruising upon bruising. There must be a conformity to our head, Christ, who “was bruised for us” (Isa. 53:5) so that we may know how much we are bound to him.

Ungodly spirits, ignorant of God’s ways in bringing his children to heaven, censure broken-hearted Christians as miserable persons, whereas God is in fact doing a gracious, good work with them. It is no easy matter to bring a man from nature to grace, and from grace to glory, our hearts being so unyielding and intractable.

2. Christ Will Not Break the Bruised Reed

Christ’s dealings with the bruised reed — For ourselves — Who are the bruised reeds?

In pursuing his calling, Christ will not break the bruised reed, nor quench the smoking flax, in which more is meant than what is spoken, for not only will he not break or quench them, but he will cherish those with whom he deals in this way.

Christ’s Dealings With The Bruised Reed

Physicians, though they put their patients to much pain, will not destroy their nature, but raise it up by degrees. Surgeons will lance and cut, but not dismember. A mother who has a sick and self-willed child will not therefore push it away. Will there be more mercy in the stream than there is in the spring from which it flows? Shall we think there is more mercy in ourselves than in God, who plants the affection of mercy in us?

But for further declaration of Christ’s mercy to all bruised reeds, consider the comfortable relationships he has taken upon himself of husband, shepherd, and brother, which he will discharge to the utmost. Shall others fulfill what he calls them to by his grace, and shall he not also fulfill what he has been called to, the one who, out of his love, has taken upon himself these relationships, so thoroughly founded upon his Father’s assignment, and his own voluntary undertaking? Consider the names he has borrowed from the mildest creatures, such as lamb and hen, to show his tender care. Consider his very name Jesus, a Savior, which was given to him by God himself. Consider that his office corresponds to his name, which is that he should “bind up the broken hearted” (Isa. 61:1). At his baptism the Holy Ghost rested on him in the shape of a dove, to show that he should be dove-like, a gentle Mediator.

See the gracious way he executes his offices. As a prophet, he came with blessing in his mouth, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matt. 5:3), and invited those to come to him whose hearts most suggested exceptions against themselves, “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden” (Matt. 11:28). How his heart yearned when he saw the people “as sheep having no shepherd” (Matt. 9:36)! He never turned away anyone who came to him, though some went away by their own choice. He came to die as a priest for his enemies. In the days of his flesh he dictated a form of prayer to his disciples, and put petitions unto God into their mouths, and put his Spirit in their hearts to intercede. He shed tears for those who shed his blood; and now he makes intercession in heaven for weak Christians, standing between them and God’s anger. He is a meek king; he will admit mourners into his presence, a king of poor and afflicted persons. Just as he has beams of majesty, so he has a heart of mercy and compassion. He is the prince of peace

(Isa. 9:6). Why was he tempted, except that he might “comfort those who are tempted” (Heb. 2:18)? What mercy may we not expect from so gracious a Mediator (1Tim. 2:5) who took our nature upon himself so that he might be gracious? He is a physician who is good at healing all diseases, especially at binding up a broken heart. He died so that he might heal our souls with a plaster of his own blood, and save us by that death which we caused ourselves, by our own sins. And does he not have the same heart in heaven? “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” cried the Head in heaven, when the foot on earth was trodden on (Acts 9:4). His advancement has not made him forget his own flesh. Though it has freed him from passion, yet it has not freed him from compassion towards us. The lion of the tribe of Judah will only tear in pieces those who “will not have him rule over them” (Luke 19:14). He will not show his strength against those who prostrate themselves before him.

For Ourselves

1. What should we learn from this, but to “come boldly to the throne of grace” (Heb. 4:16) in all our grievances? Shall our sins discourage us when he appears there only for sinners? Are you bruised? Be of good comfort, he calls you. Do not conceal your wounds, open everything before him and do not take Satan’s counsel. Go to Christ, although trembling, as the poor woman who said, “If I may only touch his garment” (Matt. 9:21). We shall be healed and have a gracious answer. Go boldly to God in our flesh; he is flesh of our flesh, and bone of our bone for this reason: so that we might go boldly to him. Never fear to go to God, since we have such a Mediator with him; he is not only our friend but our brother and husband. Well might the angel proclaim from heaven, “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy” (Luke 2:10). Well might the apostle stir us up to “rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice” (Phil. 4:4). Paul was well-advised upon what grounds he did it. Peace and joy are two main fruits of Christ’s kingdom. Let the world be as it will, if we cannot rejoice in the world, yet we may rejoice in the Lord. His presence makes any condition comfortable. “Do not be afraid,” he says to his disciples when they were afraid, as if they had seen a ghost, “It is I” (Matt. 14:27), as if there were no cause of fear wherever he was present.

2. Let this support us when we feel ourselves bruised. Christ’s way is first to wound, and then to heal. No sound, whole soul will ever enter into heaven. When in temptation, think “Christ was tempted for me; my graces and comforts will be according to my trials. If Christ is so merciful as not to break me, then I will not break myself by despair, nor will I yield myself to the roaring lion, Satan, to break me in pieces.”

3. See the contrary disposition of Christ on the one hand and Satan and his instruments on the other. Satan sets upon us when we are weakest, as Simeon and Levi set upon the Shechemites, “when they were sore” (Gen. 34:25); but Christ will repair in us all the breaches which sin and Satan have made. He “binds up the broken hearted” (Isa. 61:1). As a mother is tenderest to the most diseased and weakest child, so does Christ most mercifully incline to the weakest. Likewise he puts an instinct into the weakest things to rely upon something stronger than themselves for support. The vine rests itself upon the elm, and the weakest creatures often have the strongest shelters. The consciousness of the church’s weakness makes her willing to lean on her beloved, and to hide herself under his wing.

Who are the bruised reeds?

But how shall we know whether we are such as may expect mercy?

Answer: (1) Bruised here does not mean those who are brought low only by crosses, but those who, by crosses, are brought to see their sin, which bruises most of all. When conscience is under the guilt of sin, then every judgment brings a report of God’s anger to the soul, and all lesser troubles run into this great trouble of conscience because of sin. Just as all corrupt fluids run to the diseased and bruised part of the body, and just as every creditor falls upon the debtor

when he has been arrested, so when conscience is awakened, all former sins and present crosses join together to make the bruise more painful. Now, he that is thus bruised will be content with nothing but mercy from the one who has bruised him. He has wounded, and he must heal (Hos. 6:1). The Lord who has bruised me deservedly for my sins must bind up my heart again. (2) Again, a man truly bruised judges sin to be the greatest evil, and the favor of God the greatest good. (3) He would rather hear of mercy than of a kingdom. (4) He has poor opinions of himself, and thinks that he is not worth the earth he treads on. (5) He is not critical towards others, as if at home, but is full of sympathy and compassion to those who are under God's hand. (6) He thinks that those who walk in the comforts of God's Spirit are the happiest men in the world. (7) He trembles at the Word of God (Isa. 66:2), and honors the very feet of those blessed instruments that bring peace to him (Rom. 10:15). (8) He is more taken up with the inward exercises of a broken heart than with formality, and yet is careful to use all sanctified means to convey comfort.

But how shall we come to this state of mind?

Answer: First, we must conceive of bruising either as a state into which God brings us, or as a duty to be performed by us. Both are meant here. We must join with God in bruising ourselves. When he humbles us, let us humble ourselves, and not stand out against him, for then he will redouble his strokes. Let us justify Christ in all his chastisements, knowing that all his dealing towards us is to cause us to return into our own hearts. His work in bruising tends to our work in bruising ourselves. Let us lament our own perversity, and say: "Lord, what a heart I have that needs all this, so that none of this could be spared!" We must lay siege to the hardness of our own hearts, and aggravate sin all we can. We must look on Christ who was bruised for us, look on him whom we have pierced with our sins. But all directions will not prevail, unless God by his Spirit convinces us deeply, setting our sins before us, and driving us to a standstill. Then we will cry out for mercy. Conviction will breed contrition, and this leads to humiliation. Therefore desire that God would bring a clear and a strong light into all the corners of our souls, and accompany it with a spirit of power to lay our hearts low.

A fixed measure of bruising of ourselves cannot be prescribed, but it must be enough (1) that we may prize Christ above all, and see that a Savior must be had; and (2) that we reform what is amiss, even though to the extent of cutting off our right hand, or pulling out our right eye. There is a dangerous disparaging of the work of humiliation; some do it as a pretence for their casual dealing with their own hearts, so that Christ will not break the bruised reed; but such men must know that every sudden terror and short grief is not what makes us bruised reeds. It is not a little "bowing down our heads like a bulrush" (Isa. 58:5), but working our hearts to such a grief as will make sin more odious to us than punishment, until we offer a "holy violence" against it. Otherwise, favoring ourselves, we will make work for God to bruise us, and for sharp repentance afterwards. It is dangerous, I confess, in some cases, with some sensitive souls, to press this bruising too much and too long, because they may die under the wound and burden before they are raised up again. Therefore it is good in mixed assemblies to mingle comfort that every soul may have its due portion. But if we have this for a foundation truth, that there is more mercy in Christ than sin in us, there can be no danger in dealing with it thoroughly. It is better to go bruised to heaven than sound to hell. Therefore let us not release ourselves too soon, nor pull off the plaster before the cure is worked, but keep ourselves under this work till sin is the sourest, and Christ is the sweetest, of all things. And when God's hand is upon us in any way, it is good to divert our sorrow for other things to the root of it all, which is sin. Let our grief run most in that channel, so that just as sin bred our grief, so grief may consume our sin.

But are we not bruised unless we grieve more for sin than we do for punishment?

Answer: Sometimes our grief from outward grievances may lie heavier upon the soul than grief from God's displeasure because, in such cases, the grief works upon the whole man, both

outward and inward; it has nothing to support it, but a little spark of faith. This faith, by reason of the violent impression of the grievance, is suspended in its exercises. This is most felt in sudden distresses which come upon the soul as a torrent or land flood, and especially in bodily sicknesses which, by reason of the sympathy between the soul and the body, work upon the soul in such a way as to hinder not only the spiritual, but often the natural acts. Therefore, James wishes us to pray ourselves in our affliction, but in case of sickness to “send for the elders” (James 5:14). These elders may, as those in the Gospels did, offer up to God in their prayers the sick person who is unable to present his own case. God will respond to such a plea to be freed from the sharpness and bitterness of the grievance, as he did with David (Psa. 6). The Lord knows our frame; he remembers that we are but dust (Psa. 103:14), and that our strength is not the strength of steel.

This is a branch of his faithfulness to us as his creatures, for which he is called “a faithful Creator” (1Pet. 4:19). “God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above what you are able” (1Cor. 10:13). There were certain commandments which the Jews called the hedges of the law. So as to fence men off from cruelty, God commanded that they should not take the mother with the young, nor “boil a kid in his mother’s milk” (Exod. 23:19), nor “muzzle the mouth of the ox” (1Cor. 9:9). Does God take care of beasts, and not of his more noble creature? And therefore we ought to judge charitably of the complaints of God’s people which are wrung from them in such cases. Job was esteemed by God to be a patient man, notwithstanding those passionate complaints. Faith overborne for the present will gain ground again; and grief for sin, although it comes short of grief for misery in terms of violence, yet it goes beyond it in constancy, just as a running stream fed by a spring holds out, when a sudden swelling brook fails.

For the conclusion of this point, and our encouragement to a thorough work of bruising, and patience under God’s bruising of us, let all know that none are fitter for comfort than those that think themselves furthest off. Men, for the most part, are not lost enough in their own feeling for a Savior. A holy despair in ourselves is the ground of true hope. In God the fatherless find mercy (Hos. 14:3). If men were more fatherless, they would feel more God’s fatherly affection from heaven, for the God who dwells in the highest heavens dwells likewise in the lowest soul (Isa. 57:15). Christ’s sheep are weak sheep, and lacking in something or other; he therefore applies himself to the needs of every sheep. He seeks what was lost, and brings again what was driven a way, and binds up what was broken, and strengthens the weak (Ezek. 34:16). His tenderest care is over the weakest. The lambs he carries in his bosom (Isa. 40:11). He says to Peter, “Feed my lambs” (John 21:15). He was most familiar and open to troubled souls. How careful he was that Peter and the rest of the apostles should not be too dejected after his resurrection! “Go your way, tell his disciples and Peter” (Mark 16:7). Christ knew that the guilt of their unkindness in leaving of him had dejected their spirits. How gently he endured the unbelief of Thomas, and stooped so far to his weakness, as to allow him to thrust his hand into his side.

3. The Smoking Flax

Grace is little at first — Grace is mingled with corruption

In pursuing his calling, Christ will not quench the smoking flax, or wick, but will blow on it till it flames. In smoking flax there is only a little light, and it is weak and unable to flame, and it is mixed a little with smoke. The observations from this are that, in God’s children, especially in their first conversion, there is only a little measure of grace, and that little bit is mixed with a lot of corruption, which like smoke, is offensive; but Christ will not quench this smoking flax.

Grace Is Little At First

There are several ages in Christians, some babes, some young men. Faith may be like “a grain of mustard seed” (Matt. 17:20). There is nothing so little as grace at first, and nothing more

glorious afterward. Things of greatest perfection are longest in coming to their growth. Man, the most perfect creature, comes to perfection little by little; worthless things, like mushrooms and such, like Jonah's gourd,¹ soon spring up, and soon vanish. A new creature is the most excellent creature in all the world; therefore it grows up by degrees. We see in nature that a mighty oak rises from an acorn. It is the same with a Christian as it was with Christ, who sprang out of the dead stock of Jesse, out of David's family (Isa. 53:2), when it was at the lowest; but he grew up higher than the heavens. It is *not* with the trees of righteousness as it was with the trees of paradise, which were created all perfect at the first moment. The seeds of all the creatures in the present goodly frame of the world were hidden in the chaos, in that confused mass at the beginning, out of which God commanded all creatures to arise. In the small seeds of plants lie hidden both bulk and branches, both bud and fruit. In a few, principles lie hidden, all comfortable conclusions of holy truth. All these glorious fireworks of zeal and holiness in the saints had their beginning from a few sparks.

Let us not therefore be discouraged at the small beginnings of grace, but look at ourselves as elected to be "holy and without blame" (Eph. 1:4). Let us look at our imperfect beginning only to encourage further striving toward perfection, and to keep us in a low opinion of ourselves. Otherwise, in case of discouragement, we must consider ourselves as Christ does, who looks on us as those he intends to make fit for himself. Christ values us by what we shall be, and by what we are elected to. We call a little plant a tree, because it is growing up to be so. "Who has despised the day of small things?" (Zech. 4:10). Christ would not have us despise little things.

The glorious angels did not disdain attending to little ones — little in their own eyes, and little in the eyes of the world. Grace, though little in quantity, has much vigor and worth. It is Christ who raises the worth of little and lowly places and persons. Bethlehem was the least (Mic. 5:2; Matt. 2:6), and yet not the least; it was the least in itself, but not the least in respect to the fact that Christ was born there. The second temple (Hag. 2:9) came short of the outward magnificence of the former; yet it was more glorious than the first because Christ came into it. The Lord of the temple came into his own temple. The pupil of the eye is very little, yet sees a great part of the heavens at once. A pearl is little, yet it is much esteemed. Nothing in the world has so good a use as the least grain of grace.

Grace Is Mingled With Corruption

But grace is not only little, but mingled with corruption; therefore a Christian is said to be smoking flax. So we see that grace does not do away with corruption all at once, but some is left for believers to fight with. The purest actions of the purest men need Christ to perfume them; and this is his office. When we pray, we need to pray again for Christ to pardon the defects of our prayers. Consider some instances of this smoking flax:

- Moses at the Red Sea, being in a great perplexity, and not knowing what to say, or which way to turn, groaned to God. No doubt this was a great conflict in him. In great distresses we do not know what to pray, but the Spirit requests with sighs that cannot be expressed (Rom. 8:26). Broken hearts can yield only broken prayers.
- When David was before the king of Gath (1 Sam. 21:13) and disfigured himself in an ugly way, in that smoke there was some fire also. You may see what an excellent psalm he makes upon that occasion, Psalm 34, in which, on the basis of experience, he says, "The LORD is near to those who are of a broken heart" (Psa. 34:18). "I said in my haste, I am cut off from before your eyes." There is *smoke*. "Nevertheless you heard the voice of my supplications" (Psa. 31:22). There is *fire*. "Lord, save us: we perish" (Matt. 8:25), cry the disciples. Here is

¹ Jon 4:6 — probably a castor-oil plant or vine, fast-growing but short-lived.

the smoke of infidelity, yet enough light of faith stirred them up to pray to Christ. “Lord, I believe.” There is *light*.

- “Help my unbelief.” There is *smoke* (Mark 9:24). Jonah cries, “I am cast from your sight.” There is smoke. “Yet I will look again toward your holy temple.” There is *light* (Jon. 2:4).
- “O wretched man that I am!” says Paul, with a sense of his corruption. Yet he breaks out into thanks to God through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 7:24).
- “I sleep,” says the church in the Song of Solomon, “but my heart wakes” (Song of Sol. 5:2). In the seven churches, which for their light are called “seven golden candlesticks” (Rev. 2 and 3), most of them had much smoke with their light.

The reason for this mixture is that we carry about us a double principle: grace and nature. The end of it is especially to preserve us from those two dangerous rocks which our natures are prone to dash upon: security and pride; and its end is to force us to pitch our rest on justification, not sanctification, which, besides its imperfection, has some stains. Our spiritual fire is like our ordinary fire here below, that is, it is mixed. Fire is most pure in its own element above; so shall all our graces be when we are where we want to be, in heaven, which is our proper element.

From this mixture arises the fact that the people of God have such different judgments of themselves, looking sometimes at the work of grace, sometimes at the remainder of corruption; and when they look upon that latter one, they think they have no grace. Though they love Christ in his ordinances, and love his children, yet they dare not claim so near an acquaintance as to be his. Even as a candle in the socket sometimes shows its light, and sometimes its light is lost; so too, sometimes they are well-persuaded of themselves, and sometimes they are at a loss.

4. Christ Will Not Quench the Smoking Flax

The least spark of grace is precious — Support the weak

The second observation concerning the weak and small beginnings of grace is that Christ will not quench the smoking flax. This is so for two principal reasons. First, because this spark is from heaven: it is his own, it is kindled by his own Spirit. And secondly, it tends to the glory of his powerful grace in his children that he preserves light in the midst of darkness, a spark in the midst of the swelling waters of corruption.

The Least Spark Of Grace Is Precious

There is a special blessing in that little spark. “As the new wine is found in the cluster, and one says, ‘do not destroy it for a blessing is in it’: so will I do for my servants’ sakes’ (Isa. 65:8). We see how our Savior Christ bore with Thomas in his doubting (John 20:27), and with the two disciples that went to Emmaus, who wavered as to whether he came to redeem Israel or not (Luke 24:21). He did not quench that little light in Peter which was smothered: Peter denied him, but he did not deny Peter (Luke 22:61). “If you will, you can,” said one poor man in the Gospel (Matt. 8:2). “If you can do anything,” said another (Mark 9:22). Both were smoking flax. Neither of them was quenched. If Christ had stood upon his own greatness, he would have rejected someone who came with his “if.” But Christ answers his “if” with a gracious and absolute grant, “I will: be clean.” The woman that was diseased with an issue of blood only touched with a trembling hand, and only the hem of his garment, and yet she went away both healed and comforted. In the seven churches (Rev. 2 and 3), we see that Christ acknowledges and cherishes anything that was good in them. Because the disciples slept due to infirmity, being oppressed with grief, our Savior Christ frames a comfortable excuse for them, “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41).

If Christ were not merciful, he would miss his own ends: "There is forgiveness with you, so that you may be feared" (Psa. 130:4). Now all are welcome to come under that banner of love which he spreads over his own: "All flesh shall come to you" (Psa. 65:2). He uses moderation and care, "lest the spirit fails before him, and the souls which he has made" (Isa. 57:16). Christ's heart yearned, the text says, when he saw the people without meat, "lest they faint in the pathway" (Matt. 15:32); much more will he have regard to prevent our spiritual fainting.

Support The Weak

Here we see the opposite dispositions in the holy nature of Christ and the impure nature of man. Man, for a little smoke, will quench the light. Christ, we see, always cherishes even the least beginnings. See how he bore with the many imperfections of his poor disciples! If he sharply checked them, it was done in love, and so that they might shine the brighter for it. Can we have a better pattern to follow than this from him by whom we hope to be saved? "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak" (Rom. 15:1). "I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1Cor. 9:22). Oh, that this gaining and winning disposition were more in many of us! Many, so far as it lies in us, are lost for want of encouragement. See how that faithful fisher of men, the Apostle Paul, labors to catch his judge: "I know that you believe the prophets" (Acts 26:27), and then he wishes him all the saving good, but not the bonds. He might have added them too, but he would not discourage the one who responded. He therefore wished Agrippa only that which was good in religion. How careful was our blessed Savior of little ones, so that they might not be offended! How he defends his disciples from malicious imputations of the Pharisees! How careful he was not to put new wine into old vessels (Matt. 9:17), nor to alienate new beginners with the austerities of religion (as some do indiscreetly). Oh, he says, they shall have time to fast when I am gone, and strength to fast when the Holy Ghost has come upon them.

Assailing young beginners with minor matters is not the best way; rather, show them a more excellent way by training them in fundamental points. Then other things will not gain credence with them. It is not amiss to ignore their defects, to excuse some failings, to commend their performances, to encourage their progress, to remove all difficulties from their way, to help them in every way to bear the yoke of religion with greater ease, and to bring them to love God and his service, lest they acquire a distaste for it before they know it. For the most part, we see that Christ plants in young beginners a love which we call their "first love" (Rev. 2:4); it is to carry them through their profession with more delight, and it does not expose them to crosses before they have gathered strength. This is how we treat young plants, fencing them from the weather until they are rooted. Mercy to others should move us to deny ourselves in our liberties oftentimes, in case we offend weak ones. It is the "little ones" who are offended (Matt. 18:6). The weakest are most ready to think they are despised; therefore we should be most careful to satisfy them.

It would be a good contest among Christians for one to labor to give no offense, and for the other to labor to take none. The best men are severe to themselves, and tender toward others. Yet people should not tire and wear out the patience of others: nor should the weaker so far demand moderation from others as to rely upon their indulgence, and so become complacent in their own infirmities; that would present danger to their own souls and scandal to the church.

Nor should they despise the gifts of God in others, which grace teaches us to honor wherever they are found; but instead they should know their roles and place, and not undertake anything above their measure; that might make them and their circumstances obnoxious and subject to scorn. When blindness and boldness, ignorance and arrogance, weakness and willfulness, meet together in men, it renders them odious to God, burdensome in society, dangerous in their counsels, disturbers of better purposes, intractable and incapable of better direction, and miserable in the results. Where Christ shows his gracious power in weakness, he does it by

letting men understand themselves enough to breed humility in them, and to magnify God's love towards such as them. He does it to preserve them from discouragement about their weakness, to bring men closer to grace, to overcome their poverty of spirit, rather than instill a sense of greatness as to their condition and role, which produces from their corrupt nature the fuel for pride. Christ refuses none because of their weakness, so that none would be discouraged; but neither does he accept anyone because of their greatness, so that none should be lifted up with something which has so little account with God. It is no great matter how dull the scholar is when Christ becomes his teacher; for when Christ prescribes what he is to understand, he also gives the understanding, even to the simplest of us.

The church suffers much from weak believers; therefore we may assert our liberty to deal with them, though mildly, yet frankly. The scope of true love is to make the other party better, which concealment often hinders. With some, a spirit of gentleness prevails best, but with some a rod is needed. Some must be "pulled out of the fire" (Jude 23) with force, and they will bless God for us in the day of their visitation (1Pet. 2:12). We see that our Savior multiplies woe upon woe when he has to deal with hard-hearted hypocrites (Matt. 23:13), for hypocrites need stronger conviction than gross sinners; their will is corrupt, and therefore their conversion is usually violent. A hard knot must have an appropriate wedge; otherwise, in a cruel pity, we betray their souls. A sharp reproof is sometimes a precious pearl and a sweet balm. The wounds of secure sinners will not be healed with sweet words. The Holy Ghost came in fiery tongues as well as in the likeness of a dove; and the same Holy Spirit will grant a spirit of prudence and discretion, which is the salt to season all our words and actions (Col 4:6). And such wisdom will teach us "to speak a word in season" (Isa. 50:4), both to the weary, and likewise to the secure soul. And, indeed, he needs "the tongue of the learned" that will either build up or tear down — though here I speak of mildness towards those who are weak and know it. These we must bring on gently, and drive softly, as Jacob did his cattle (Gen. 33:14), according to their pace, and as his children were able to endure.

Weak Christians are like glasses which are damaged by the least violent use, but if gently handled, they will last a long time. We are to give this honor of gentle use to the weaker vessels (1Pet. 3:7), by which we shall both preserve them, and likewise make them useful to the church and ourselves (Phm. 1:11).

In diseased bodies, if all its weaknesses are purged, you may purge life and all. Therefore, though God says that he will "refine them as silver is refined" (Zech. 13:9), yet he said he had "refined you, but not with silver" (Isa. 48:10), that is, not so exactly as that no dross remains, for he considers our weakness. Perfect refining is for another world: for the world of the souls of perfect men.

5. The Spirit of Mercy Should Move Us

Simplicity and humility — Sound judgment — How those in authority should act — We are debtors to the weak

Preachers need to take heed, therefore, how they deal with young believers. Let them be careful not to hold the standard too high, making things necessary evidences of grace which are not in agreement with the experience of many a good Christian, and making salvation and damnation depend on things that are not fit to bear so great a weight. In this way, men are needlessly torn down, and may not soon be built up again by themselves or others. The ambassadors of so gentle a Savior should not be overbearing, setting themselves up in the hearts of people where Christ alone should sit, as in his own temple. Giving too much respect to man was one of the inroads of

popery.² “Let a man so consider us: as ministers of Christ” (1Cor. 4:1), neither more nor less, just so much. How careful Paul was, in cases of conscience, not to lay a snare upon any weak conscience.

Simplicity And Humility

Preachers should take heed likewise that they not hide their meaning in obtuse speeches, speaking in the clouds. Truth fears nothing so much as concealment, and desires nothing so much as to be clearly laid open to the view of all. When it is most unadorned, it is most lovely and powerful. Our blessed Savior, just as he took our nature upon himself, so he took on our familiar manner of speech, which was part of his voluntary abasement. Paul was a profound man, yet he became like a nursing mother to the weaker ones (1Thess. 2:7).

That spirit of mercy that was in Christ should move his servants to be content to abase themselves for the good of the lowliest. What made the kingdom of heaven “suffer violence” (Matt. 11:12) after John the Baptist’s time, except that comfortable truths were laid open with such plainness and evidence, and the people were so affected by them, that they offered a holy violence to obtain them?

Christ chose those to preach mercy who had most felt mercy, such as Peter and Paul, so that they might be examples of what they taught. Paul became all things to all men (1Cor. 9:22), stooping to them for their good. Christ came down from heaven and emptied himself of majesty in tender love toward our souls. Shall we not come down from our high conceits so as to do some poor soul good? Shall man be proud after God has been humble? We see the ministers of Satan turn themselves into all shapes to “make one proselyte” (Matt. 23:15). We see ambitious men study to accommodate the whims of those by whom they hope to be raised up; and shall we not study to put ourselves in service to Christ, by whom we hope to be advanced; indeed, by whom we are already sitting with him in heavenly places? After we have gained Christ ourselves, we should labor to gain others to Christ. Holy ambition and covetousness will move us to put the disposition of Christ upon ourselves. But we must first put off ourselves (Col 3:9-10).

Again we should not rack their wits with curious or “doubtful disputations” (Rom. 14:1), for we will distract and tire them with such things, and cause them to lose their care for all of it. The church age that was most fertile in subtle questions, was most barren in religion; for it makes people think that religion is only a matter of cleverness, of tying and untying knots. The brains of men who are inclined that way are usually hotter than their hearts.

Yet notwithstanding, when we are thrown into times and places where doubts are raised about principal points, people ought to labor to be established in them. God often allows questions to arise to test our love, and to exercise our abilities. Nothing is so certain, as what is certain after having doubts. Shaking settles, and roots us. In a contentious age, it is a wise thing to be a Christian, and to know what to pitch our souls upon. It is an office of love here to remove the stones, and smooth the way to heaven. Therefore, we must take heed that, under pretence of avoiding disputes, we do not allow an opposing party to gain ground on the truth; for in this way, we may easily betray both the truth of God and the souls of men.

Likewise, men fail by too much austerity. They push away troubled souls from being comforted by them; for as a result of this, others smother their temptations, and burn inwardly, because they have no one who is compassionate, to whom they may vent their grief and ease their souls.

We must neither bind where God looses, nor loose where God binds; we must neither open where God shuts, nor shut where God opens. The right use of the keys is always successful. In personal application, great care must be taken; for a man may be a false prophet, and yet speak

² A pejorative term; it refers predominantly to the pre-Reformation practices and rituals of the Roman Catholic Church.

the truth. If it is not a truth to the person to whom he speaks, if he grieves those whom God has not grieved by offering *untimely* truths, or if he comforts in an ill-considered way, then the hearts of the wicked may be strengthened. One man's meat may be another man's poison.

If we look to the general temper of these times, rousing and waking the Scriptures are the best approach; yet there are many broken spirits who need soft and comforting words. Even in the worst of times, the prophets mingled sweet comfort with their warnings, for the good of the hidden remnant of faithful people. God has comfort. The prophet is told, "Comfort my people" (Isa. 40:1), as well as, "Lift up your voice like a trumpet" (Isa. 58:1).

Sound Judgment

And here likewise there needs to be a caveat. Mercy does not rob us of our right judgment, so as to mistake stinking fire brands for smoking flax. No one will seek mercy more from others than those who deserve due severity. This example does not countenance tolerance or indulgence toward those who need enlivening. Cold diseases must have hot remedies. The church at Ephesus received just commendation for not bearing with those who were evil (Rev. 2:2). We should bear with others in such a way as to also manifest a dislike of evil. Our Savior Christ would not withhold sharp reproof where he saw dangerous infirmities in his most beloved disciples. Doing the work of the Lord deceitfully brings a curse (Jer. 48:10), even where it is a work of justified severity, such as sheathing the sword in the bowels of the enemy. Those whom we allow to be betrayed by their worst enemies, their sins, will have just cause to curse us one day.

It is hard to preserve the just bounds of mercy and severity without a spirit above our own, by which we should desire to be led in all things. That wisdom which dwells with prudence (Prov. 8:12) will guide us in these particulars; without that wisdom, virtue is not virtue, and truth is not truth. The rule and the case must be laid together; for if there is not a keen insight, seeming similarity in conditions will give rise to errors in our opinions about them. Those fiery, tempestuous, and destructive spirits in popery, that seek to promote their religion by cruelty, show that they are strangers to that wisdom which comes from above, and which makes men gentle, peaceable, and ready to show that same mercy which they themselves have felt. Prevailing by some forbearance and moderation, is agreeable both to Christ and to man's nature.

And yet often we see a false spirit in those who call for moderation. They do so only to carry on their own schemes with greater strength; and if they prevail, they will hardly show that same moderation to others which they now call for from others. There is a proud kind of moderation likewise, when men take upon themselves to censure both parties, as if they were wiser than both; although, if the spirit is right, an onlooker may see more than those who are in conflict.

How Those In Authority Should Act

In the censures of the church, it is more suitable to the spirit of Christ to incline toward a milder approach, and not kill a fly on the forehead with a mallet, or shut men out of heaven for a trifle. The snuffers (wick trimmers) of the tabernacle were made of pure gold, to show the purity of those censures by which the light of the church is kept bright. The power that is given to the church is given for edification, not destruction. Paul was careful that the incestuous Corinthian (2Cor. 2:7), if he repented, should not be swallowed up with too much grief. Civil magistrates, for civil exigencies and reasons of state, must let the law have its course; yet they should imitate this mild king, so as not to mingle bitterness and passion with authority derived from God. Authority is a beam of God's majesty, and it prevails most where there is the least mixture of what belongs to man. It requires more than ordinary wisdom to manage it correctly. This string must not be too tight, nor too loose. Justice is a harmonious thing. Herbs that are heated or cooled beyond a certain degree are killed. We see that even contrary elements may be preserved in one body by wisely tempering them together. Rigorous justice is often extreme injustice,

where some circumstances ought to incline it toward moderation; and the reckoning will be easier to bend to the situation if it tends more toward moderation than rigor.

Insolent behavior toward people in misery, if humbled, is unseemly in anyone who looks for mercy himself. Misery should be a magnet for mercy, not a footstool for pride to trample on. Sometimes it happens that those who are governed by others are most hurtful by their waywardness and harsh criticisms, thus disparaging and discouraging the endeavors of their superiors, which are intended for public good. Knowing the great weakness of man's nature, and especially in this crazy age of the world, we ought to be grateful for any moderate happiness we enjoy by government, and not be like a nail in the wound, worsening things by misconstruing them. Here love should have a cloak to cover the lesser errors of those above us. Oftentimes the poor man is the oppressor by his unjust complaints. We should labor to give the best interpretation to the actions of governors that the nature of their actions will possibly bear.

We Are Debtors To The Weak

Lastly, there is something that private Christians, in fact, all of us in our common relationships should take notice of: we are debtors to the weak in many things.

1. Let us watch our use of liberty, and labor to be inoffensive in our behavior, so that our example does not compel them. There is a commanding force in an example, as there was in Peter (Gal. 2). Looseness of life is cruelty to ourselves and to the souls of others. Though we cannot keep those who will perish from perishing, yet if we do what is apt to destroy the souls of others, then their ruin is imputable to us.

2. Let men take heed of taking up Satan's office, in misrepresenting the good actions of others, as he did Job's case, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (Job 1:9), or slandering them, judging them according to the wickedness that is in their own hearts. The devil gets more by such discouragements and reproaches, cast upon religion, than by fire and wood pile. These, like unseasonable frosts, nip all gracious inclinations in the bud; as far as they can, as with Herod, they labor to kill Christ in young converts. A Christian is a hallowed and a sacred thing; he is Christ's temple; and he that destroys Christ's temple, Christ will destroy (1Cor.3:17).

3. Among things to take heed of, is the tendency among ordinary Christians to boldly usurp the right to censure others, not considering the temptations they are under. Some will un-church and un-brother someone in a fit of passion. But bad tempers do not alter true relations; though the child in a fit of anger might disclaim the mother, yet the mother will not disclaim the child.

There is, therefore, in these times of judgment, a sound basis for James's caveat that there should not be "many masters" (James 3:1), and that we should not strike one another by hasty censures, especially concerning things of an indifferent nature.³ Some things are dependent on the mind of the one who does them, or does not do them; for both may be done to the Lord (Eph. 6:7).

A holy aim in things that are neither clearly right nor wrong diminishes any blame, even though men may have seemingly contrary judgments about them. Christ, to the extent he sees good aims in us, overlooks any bad in them, so that he will not lay anything to our charge. Men must not be too curious in prying into the weaknesses of others. We should labor to see what they have that is made for eternity, and incline our heart to love them; do not look into that weakness which the Spirit of God will consume in time, and which will estrange us. Some think it is strength of grace to endure nothing in the weaker brother; but to the contrary, the strongest are readiest to bear with the infirmities of the weak.

³ That is, matters of indifference; things that do not have an eternal consequence. These are also called '*adiaphora*.'

Where holiness is most evident, there is the most moderation: where it may be exercised without foregoing either piety to God or the good of others. We see in Christ a marvelous tempering of absolute holiness with great moderation. What would have become of our salvation if he had demanded terms, and not stooped so low to help us? We do not need to affect more holiness than Christ. It is not flattery⁴ to do as he does, so long as it is for edification.

The Holy Ghost is content to dwell in smoky, offensive souls. Oh, that that Spirit would breathe into our spirits the same merciful disposition! We endure the bitterness of wormwood, and other distasteful plants and herbs, only because we have experienced some wholesome quality in them; and why should we reject men of useful parts and graces, only because they have a somewhat harsh disposition which, offensive as it is to us, grieves them as well?

Grace, while we live here, is in souls which, because they are imperfectly renewed, dwell in bodies that are subject to various compulsions; and these will incline the soul sometimes to excess in one passion, sometimes to excess in another. Bucer was a deep and a moderate divine. After long experience, he resolved to refuse no one in whom he saw *aliquid Christi*, something of Christ. The best Christians in this state of imperfection are like gold that is a little too light, and needs some allowance to make it pass. You must grant the best their allowance.

We must supply out of our own love and mercy what we see lacking in them. The church of Christ is a common hospital in which all are in some measure sick of some spiritual disease or other, so all of us have an opportunity to exercise the spirit of wisdom and meekness.

So that we may do this better, let us put on the Spirit of Christ. There is majesty in the Spirit of God. Corruption rarely yields to that same corruption in another. Pride will not tolerate pride. The weapons of this warfare must not be carnal (2Cor. 10:4). The great apostles would not begin the work of the ministry until they were “endued with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). The Spirit will only work with his own tools. And we should think what affection Christ would carry to the patient in this case; just as that great physician had a quick eye and a healing tongue, he had a gentle hand and a tender heart.

And further, let us sympathize with the condition of the one with whom we deal. We are, or have been, or may yet be in that condition ourselves. Let us make his case our own, and consider the near relationship we have with him, as a brother, as a fellow member of Christ, and as an heir of the same salvation. And therefore let us take upon ourselves his tender care in every way; and especially in cherishing the peace of his conscience. Conscience is a tender and delicate thing; it must be treated tenderly. It is like a lock: if its workings are faulty, it will be difficult to open.

6. Marks of the Smoking Flax

Our rule is the covenant of grace — The presence of the heavenly fire

To determine whether we are this smoking flax which Christ will not quench, we must remember these rules:

We must have two eyes: one to see imperfections in ourselves and others, and the other to see what is good. “I am black,” says the church, “but attractive” (Song of Sol. 1:5). Those who are given to quarrelling within themselves always lack comfort; and through their infirmities, they are prone to feed on those bitter things which most nourish the disease that troubles them. They delight to look only on the dark side of the cloud.

⁴ Flattery here means catering to their weakness, or enabling them to continue in it.

We must not always judge ourselves according to our present feelings, for in temptations we see nothing but the smoke of untrustworthy thoughts. Fire may be raked up in the ashes, even though it is not seen; life in the winter is hidden in the root.

We must beware of false reasoning, such as thinking that, because our fire does not blaze as brightly as others do, we therefore have no fire at all. By drawing false conclusions, we may sin against the commandment not to bear false witness — against ourselves. The prodigal would not say he was not a son, but that he was not worthy to be *called* a son (Luke 15:19). We must neither trust false evidence, nor deny true evidence; for by doing so we dishonor the work of God's Spirit in us; we lose the help of that evidence which cherishes our love toward Christ, and arms us against Satan's discouragements. Some are as faulty in this way as if they had been hired by Satan, the "accuser of the brethren" (Rev. 12:10), to plead for him in accusing themselves.

Our Rule Is The Covenant Of Grace

We must acknowledge that in the covenant of grace, God requires the *truth* of grace, but not in any particular measure; a spark of fire is as much fire as the flame. Therefore we must look to grace in the spark as well as in the flame. All do not have the same strength of grace, though they have the same precious faith (2Pet. 1:1) by which they lay hold of, and put on, the perfect righteousness of Christ. A weak hand may receive a rich jewel. A few grapes will show that the plant is a vine, and not a thorn bush. It is one thing to be deficient in grace, and another thing to lack grace altogether. God knows we have nothing of ourselves; therefore in the covenant of grace, he requires no more than he gives, but gives what he requires, and accepts what he gives: "If she is not able to bring a lamb, then she shall bring two turtle doves" (Lev. 12:8). What is the gospel itself but a merciful moderation in which Christ's obedience is esteemed ours, and our sins are laid upon him? In this, God turns from being a judge and becomes our Father, pardoning our sins and accepting our obedience, even though feeble and blemished. We are now brought to heaven under the covenant of grace by way of love and mercy.

It will prove a special help to distinctly know the difference between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, between Moses and Christ. Moses, without any mercy, breaks all bruised reeds, and quenches all smoking flax. For the law requires personal, perpetual, and perfect obedience from the heart, under threat of a most terrible curse; but it gives no strength. It is a severe task master, like Pharaoh requiring the whole tale of bricks and yet giving no straw. Christ comes with blessing after blessing, even upon those whom Moses cursed, and with healing balm for those wounds which Moses made.

The same duties are required in both covenants, such as to love the Lord with all our hearts and with all our souls (Deut. 6:5). In the covenant of works, this must be fulfilled absolutely; but under the covenant of grace, it must have an evangelical mitigation. A sincere endeavor that is proportionate to the grace we have received is accepted (and so it must be understood of Josiah and others when it is said that they did what was right in the sight of the Lord — 2Kg 22:2).

The law is sweetened by the gospel, and it becomes delightful to the inner man (Rom. 7:22). Under this gracious covenant, *sincerity* is perfection. This is the death in the pot of the Romish religion, that they confound the two covenants; it deadens the comfort of discouraged ones that they cannot distinguish them. And thus they allow themselves to be held under bondage when Christ has set them free, and to stay in the prison when Christ has opened the doors before them.

We must remember that grace sometimes is so little as to be indiscernible to us. The Spirit sometimes has secret operations in us which we do not know for the present, but Christ knows. Sometimes, in bitterness of temptation, when the spirit struggles with a sense of God's anger, we are apt to think God is an enemy. A troubled soul is like troubled water: we can see nothing in it,

and as long as it is not cleansed, it will cast up mire and dirt. It is full of objections against itself. Yet we may still discern *something* of the hidden life and of these smothered sparks. Even on a gloomy day, there is enough light to know it is day and not night. In the same way, there is something in a Christian who is under a cloud by which he may be discerned as a true believer, and not a hypocrite. There is not just darkness in the state of grace, but some beam of light by which the kingdom of darkness does not wholly prevail.

The Presence Of The Heavenly Fire

Applying these rules, we may say:

First, if there is any holy fire in us, it is kindled from heaven by the Father of lights, who “commanded the light to shine out of darkness” (2Cor. 4: 6). As it is kindled by the use of means, so it is fed. The light in us and the light in the Word spring the one from the other and both from the one Holy Spirit. Therefore, in the case of those who do not regard the Word, it is “because there is no light in them” (Isa. 8:20). Heavenly truths must have a heavenly light to discern them. Natural men see heavenly things, not in their own proper light, but by an inferior light. In every converted man, God puts a light into the eye of his soul proportionate to the light of truths revealed to him. A carnal eye will never see spiritual things.

Secondly, the least divine light has heat with it in some measure. Light in the understanding produces heat of love in the affections. In the measure that the sanctified understanding sees a thing as true or good, in that same measure the will embraces it. Weak light produces weak inclinations; strong light produces strong inclinations. A little spiritual light is strong enough to answer strong objections of flesh and blood, and to see beyond all earthly allurements and opposing hindrances, presenting them to the will as far inferior to those heavenly objects it beholds. All light that is not spiritual lacks the strength of sanctifying grace; and so it yields to every little temptation, especially when the temptation is fitted and suited to one’s personal inclinations. This is why Christians whose quantity of light is little, but whose quality of light is heavenly, manage to persevere when men of larger understanding sink. Light prevails in the soul because, together with the spirit of illumination, there goes a spirit of power in the godly (2Tim. 1:7). It subdues the heart to revealed truth, and puts a taste and relish into the will, suitable to the sweetness of the truth. Otherwise, a will that is merely natural will rise up against supernatural truths, having antipathy and enmity against them. In the godly, holy truths are conveyed because there is a taste for them; gracious men have a spiritual palate as well as a spiritual eye. Grace alters the spiritual taste.

Thirdly, where this heavenly light is kindled, it directs us in the right way. For it is given for that purpose: to show us the best way and guide us in the particular passages of life. Otherwise, it is common light, given only for the good of others. Some have the light of knowledge, yet they do not follow that light; they are guided by carnal reason and policy. These are the ones the prophet speaks of, “All you who kindle a fire . . . walk in the light of your fire, and in the sparks you have kindled. This is what you shall have from my hand: you shall lie down in sorrow” (Isa. 50:11). God delights to confound carnal wisdom as enmity towards him, robbing him who is God only wise of his prerogative. We must therefore walk by his light, not by the blaze of our own fire. God must light our candle (Psa. 18:28) or else we will abide in darkness. Those sparks that are not kindled from heaven are not strong enough to keep us from lying in sorrow, though they make a greater blaze and bigger show than the light from above. Madmen do greater things than sober men, but it is done by a false strength: in the same way, the excess of these men’s joy arises from a false light. “The light of the wicked shall be put out” (Job 18:5). The light which some men have is like lightning which, after a sudden flash, leaves them more in darkness. They can love the light as it shines, but they hate it as it reveals and directs them. A little holy light enables us to keep Christ’s Word and not betray religion, nor deny his name, as Christ speaks of the church of Philadelphia (Rev. 3:8).

Fourthly, where this fire burns, it severs things of diverse natures, and shows a difference between them, such as between gold and dross. It severs flesh from spirit, and shows that one is of nature, and the other of grace. Everything in a bad action is not bad, nor is everything good in a good action. There is gold in ore, which God, and his Spirit in us, can distinguish. A carnal man's heart is like a dungeon, in which nothing can be seen but horror and confusion. This light makes us judicious and humble, as we gain a clearer sight of God's purity and our own uncleanness; and it makes us able to discern the work of the Spirit in another.

Fifthly, the more spiritual a man is, the more light is delightful to him. He is willing to see anything amiss that he may reform, and discover any further service that he may perform, because he truly hates ill and loves good. If he goes against the light he has discovered, he will soon be reclaimed, because light has a friend within him. Therefore, at a glimpse of his error he is soon open to counsel, just as David was open to Abigail's counsel in his intention to kill Nabal; and he blessed God afterwards when he was stopped from his ill way (1 Sam. 25:32).

In the case of a carnal man, the light breaks in on him, but he labors to block its entrance. He has no delight in coming to the light. Before the Spirit of grace has subdued the heart, it is impossible for the heart not to sin against the light, either by resisting it, or by keeping it prisoner under base lusts, and burying it, as it were, in the earth; or by perverting it, and so making it an agent and broker for the flesh, searching out arguments to plead for it; or by abusing that small measure of light which men have, so as to keep out a greater, higher, and more heavenly light. So at length they make the light they have a misleading guide into utter darkness. And the reason is because the light has no friend within them. The soul has a contrary frame, and so light always hinders that sinful peace which men are willing to promise themselves. Hence we see that light often enrages men more, just as the sun in springtime brings on feverish illnesses when it stirs up bodily reactions, rather than overcoming them.

There is nothing in the world more uneasy than the heart of a wicked man who is made to listen to spiritual instruction until, like a thief, he puts out the candle so that he may sin with less restraint. Spiritual light is perceptive. It apprehends spiritual good and applies it to ourselves; but common light is confused, and it lets sin lie quietly. Where any fire is found, it fights everything contrary to it. God put irreconcilable hatred between light and darkness from the first; as he put between good and ill, flesh and Spirit (Gal. 5:17). Grace will never join with sin, any more than fire will join with water. Fire will mingle with nothing contrary to itself, but preserves its own purity; it is never corrupted as other elements can be. Therefore, those who plead and plot for liberties for their flesh, show themselves to be strangers from the life of God. Feeling this conflict, gracious men often complain that they have no grace. But they contradict themselves in their complaints, like a man who sees poorly might complain that he cannot see at all, or that he is asleep. The very complaint he makes, which springs from his own displeasure with sin, shows that there is something in him which opposes sin. Can a dead man complain? Some things, though bad in themselves, still reveal good, just as smoke reveals the presence of fire. A violent reaction in the body shows bodily vigor. Some infirmities show more good in us than some seemingly beautiful actions. Excess passion in opposing evil, though it is not to be justified, still shows a better spirit than being calm when we ought to be moved. It is better that the water runs somewhat muddy, than not run at all. Job had more grace in his ill temper than his friends had in their seemingly wise demeanor. Actions stained with some defects are more acceptable than empty compliments.

Sixthly, fire, where it is present, is in some degree *active*. This is how the least measure of grace works, springing from the Spirit of God who is compared to fire in his operations. Even in sins, when there seems to be nothing active but corruption, there is a contrary principle which breaks the force of sin, so that it is not boundlessly sinful, as it is in those who are carnal (Rom. 7:13).

Seventhly, fire makes metals pliable and malleable. So too, where grace is given, it makes the heart pliable and ready to receive all good impressions. Obstinate spirits show that they are not even smoking flax.

Eighthly, if it can, fire sets everything around it on fire. Grace labors in this same way to produce a gracious impression in others, and make as many good as it can. Grace also makes a gracious use even of natural and civil things: it spiritualizes them. What another man does only in a civil way, a gracious man will do in a holy way. Whether he eats or drinks or whatever he does, he does it all to the glory of God (1Cor. 10:31), making everything serviceable to that ultimate end.

Ninthly, sparks by nature fly upwards. The Spirit of grace likewise carries the soul heavenward and sets before us holy and heavenly aims. As it was kindled from heaven, so it carries us back to heaven. The part follows the whole: just as fire climbs upward, so every spark rises to its own element. Where the aim and bent of the soul is towards God, there is grace, even though it is opposed. The least measure of it is seen in holy desires, springing from faith and love; for we cannot desire anything which we do not first believe exists (Heb. 11:6), and the desire for it issues from love. Hence, in some measure desires are considered part of the thing desired. But these desires must be (1) constant, for constancy shows that their nature is supernatural, and not forced; (2) directed toward spiritual things, such as believing and loving God; these are not born out of a particular emergency, like thinking one might escape some danger if he had grace; but they are born of a loving heart that is carried to the thing it loves, for the sake of its own excellence; (3) accompanied by grief when the desire is hindered, which stirs us to pray: "Oh that my ways were directed, that I might keep your statutes!" (Psa. 119:5); "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me?" (Rom. 7:24); and (4) the kind of desires that drive us onward still: "Oh, that I might serve God with more liberty. Oh, that I were more free from these offensive, unsavory, and hateful lusts!"

Tenthly, fire, if it has any material to feed on, enlarges itself and mounts higher and higher; and the higher it rises, the purer the flame becomes. Where true grace is found, it grows in measure and purity. Smoking flax will grow into a flame; and as it increases, it discards what is contrary to itself, and it refines itself more and more. *Ignis, quo magis lucet, eo minus fumat* (As fire gives more light, it gives less smoke). Therefore, it indicates a false heart when we set ourselves a low standard in grace, and rest in beginnings, alleging that Christ will not quench the smoking flax.⁵ This merciful disposition in Christ is joined with perfect holiness, shown in perfect hatred toward sin; for rather than sin not receiving its deserved punishment, he became a sacrifice for sin. In this, his Father's holiness and his own shone most of all. And besides this, in the work of sanctification, though he favors his work in us, he does not favor sin in us; for he will never remove his hand from his work until he has removed sin from our natures, even in its very being. The same Spirit that purified *his* holy human nature, cleanses *us* by degrees, making us suitable for so holy a Head; he molds the judgment and affections of all those to whom he shows mercy to his own, laboring to further his end of abolishing sin from our natures.

7. Help for the Weak

Temptations which hinder comfort — Weakness should not keep us from duty

By meditating on these rules and signs, great comfort may be brought to the souls of the weakest among us. To increase this comfort, let me add something to help them over a few ordinary objections, and to offset those secret thoughts they may have against themselves; when these get into the heart, they oftentimes keep them low.

⁵ In other words, smoke is not enough, nor is the promise that Christ will not quench it altogether. It must burst into flame at some point, because that is its nature, and the expectation of Christ, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Temptations Which Hinder Comfort

1. Some think they have no faith at all because they do not have full assurance; yet the fairest fire that can be, will still have some smoke. The best actions will still smell of the smoke. The bowl in which garlic has been ground will always smell of it; so too, all our actions will still have some savor of the old man in them.

2. Some think that grace dies in the weakness of their body, because their performance is feeble, because their spirits, which are the instruments of their souls' actions, are weakened. But they do not consider that God esteems the hidden sighs of those who lack the ability to outwardly express them. The one who pronounces that those who consider the poor are blessed, will have a merciful consideration of the poor himself (Mat. 5:3; Ps 82:3)

3. Some again are haunted by hideous images in their imaginations, and with vile and unworthy thoughts of God, Christ, and the Word, which like busy flies, disquiet and molest their peace. These are thrown into the imagination like wildfire, by Satan; this may be discerned (despite our corrupt nature) by their foreign nature, by their strength and violence, and by their horror. A pious soul is no more guilty of these things than Benjamin was guilty when Joseph's cup was put into his sack. Among other helps recommended by godly writers, such as detesting them, and diverting our attention from them to other things, add this: complain to Christ against them, fly under the wings of his protection, and desire him to defend us against his and our enemy. Shall every sin and blasphemy of man be forgiven, and not these blasphemous thoughts? They have the devil for their father; Christ himself was tormented in this way so that he might succor all poor souls who are in this condition. (Mat. 4:1; Heb. 4:15)

But there is a difference between Christ and us in this case. Because Satan had nothing of his own in Christ (Rom. 7:17, 20), his suggestions left no impression at all in his holy nature. Rather, just like sparks falling into the sea, these temptations were shortly quenched. Satan's temptations of Christ were only suggestions on Satan's part, and apprehensions of their vileness on Christ's part. To apprehend the ill suggested by someone else is not ill in itself. It was Christ's grievance, but it was Satan's sin. But he yielded himself to be tempted in this way, so that he might both pity us in our conflicts, and train us up to manage our spiritual weapons as he did. Christ could have overcome him by power, but he did it by argument. However, when Satan comes to us, he finds something of his own in us, which corresponds to and recognizes him. There is, in some degree, the same enmity in our nature toward God and goodness that is in Satan himself. Therefore his temptations, for the most part, taint us. And if there were no devil to suggest them, sinful thoughts would still arise from within us, even though none were thrown in from outside. We have a mint of them within us.

If the soul dwells on these thoughts long enough to suck out or draw any sinful delight from them, and by them, then they will leave a heavier guilt upon the soul. They hinder our sweet communion with God, interrupt our peace, and put a contrary relish into the soul. They dispose it to greater sins. All scandalous actions are only thoughts at the beginning. Ill thoughts are like little thieves which, creeping in at the window, open the door to greater thieves. Thoughts are seeds of actions. These almost make the life of many good Christians a martyrdom, especially when they are helped forward by Satan. In this case, it is unsound comfort to suggest that ill thoughts arise from our nature, and that what is natural is excusable. We must know that nature, as it came out of God's hands in the beginning, had no such thoughts arising out of it. The soul, as inspired of God, had no such unsavory breathings. But ever since the soul betrayed itself by sin, it is in some way natural to forge sinful imaginations, and to be a furnace for such sparks. And this aggravates the sinfulness of our natural corruption that it is so deeply rooted, and so widely spread, in our nature.

It promotes humiliation to know the whole breadth and depth of sin. But the fact that our nature is so unhappily fruitful in ill thoughts (to the extent that our nature is unrenewed), ministers this comfort: that we are not alone in this. It is not as if our condition in this were different from others, as some have been tempted to think, and even to despair about. None, they say, has such a loathsome nature as I have. This thought springs from ignorance about the spread of original sin; for what can come from an unclean thing but what is unclean? "As in water face answers to face, so the *polluted* heart of man *answers* to man" (Prov. 27:19), at least where grace has not made some difference. As with other annoyances from Satan, the best way to deal with this is to lay open our complaints to Christ, and cry with Paul, "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:24). On giving vent to his distress, he shortly found comfort, for he breaks into thanksgiving, "I thank God." And it is good to profit from this, to hate this offensive body of death more, and to draw nearer to God, just as that holy man did after his "foolish" and "bestly" thoughts (Psa. 73:22 and 28). In this way, we keep our hearts closer to God, seasoning them with heavenly meditations in the morning. We store up good material so that our heart may be a good treasury, while we beg of Christ's Holy Spirit to stop that cursed flow of ill thoughts, and to be a living spring of better thoughts in us. Nothing more shames the spirits of holy men who desire to delight in God, after they have escaped the common defilements of the world, than these unclean issues of spirit, because they are most contrary to God, who is a pure Spirit. But their very irksomeness yields material comfort against them. They force the soul into all spiritual exercises, to watchfulness, and to walking nearer with God. They force the soul to raise itself to thoughts of a higher nature, such as those which the truth of God, the works of God, the communion of saints, the mystery of godliness, the terror of the Lord, the excellence of the state of a Christian, and living a life suitable to it all, abundantly minister. They reveal to us the necessity of daily purging, and pardoning grace, and of seeking to be found in Christ; and so they put the best of us on our knees, often.

Our chief comfort is that our blessed Savior, just as he told Satan to depart from him after allowing his insolence for awhile (Matt. 4:10), so he will command him to be gone from us when it is good for us. Satan must be gone at a word. And Christ can and will, in his own time, likewise rebuke the rebellious and excessive stirrings of our hearts, and bring all the thoughts of the inner man into subjection to himself (2Cor. 10:4).

4. Some think that when they become more troubled with the smoke of corruption than before, they are therefore worse than they were before. It is true that corruptions appear now more than they did before, but they are less.

For, first, the more sin is seen, the more it is hated, and therefore it is less. Dust particles are in a room before the sun shines, but they only appear then.

Secondly, the nearer contrary things come to each other, the sharper the conflict between them. Now, of all enemies, the spirit and the flesh are nearest to one another. Both of them are in the soul of a regenerate man, in the faculties of his soul, and in every action that springs from those faculties. Therefore, it is no marvel that the soul, the seat of this battle, is thus divided within itself, like smoking flax.

Thirdly, the more grace we have, the more spiritual life we have; and the more spiritual life we have, the more antipathy we have to whatever is contrary. Therefore, none are so aware of corruption as those whose souls are most alive.

Fourthly, when men surrender to self-indulgence, their corruptions do not trouble them, because they are not bound and tied up; but once grace suppresses their reckless and licentious excesses, then the flesh boils, because it disdains its confinement. Yet they are better now than they were before. What yields smoke was in the torch before it was lighted; but it is not offensive until the torch begins to burn. Let such men know that if the smoke is offensive to them, then it

is a sign that there is light. It is better to enjoy the benefit of light, even though smoke attends it, than to be altogether in the dark.

Nor is smoke so offensive to us as light is pleasant to us, since it yields an evidence of the truth of grace in the heart. Therefore, though it is cumbersome in the conflict it produces in us, yet it is comfortable as evidence. It is better that corruption offends us now, than to lose comfort later by yielding to corruption now, just to gain a little peace. Therefore, let those who are at variance and at odds with their corruptions look at this text as their portion of comfort.

Weakness Should Not Keep Us From Duty

It should encourage us to duty that Christ will not quench the smoking flax, but will blow on it till it flames. Some are loath to do good because they feel their hearts rebelling, and their duties turn out badly. We should not avoid good actions because of the infirmities which attend them. Christ looks more at the good in them which he means to cherish, than he does at the ill in them which he means to abolish. Though eating increases a disease, a sick man will still eat so that nature may gain strength against the disease. So, although sin clings to what we do, let us still do it, since we have to deal with so good a Lord; the more strife we meet with, the more acceptance we will have. Christ loves to taste the good fruits that come from us, even though they will always savor of our old nature.

A Christian complains he cannot pray. "Oh, I am troubled with so many distracting thoughts, and never more than now!" But has he put a desire into your heart to pray? Then he will hear the desires of his own Spirit in you. "We do not know what we should pray for as we should" (nor how to do anything else as we should), but the Spirit helps our infirmities with "groanings which cannot be uttered" (Rom. 8:26), which are not hidden from God. "My groaning is not hidden from you" (Psa. 38:9). God can make sense out of a confused prayer. These desires cry louder in his ears than your sins do. Sometimes a Christian has such confused thoughts that he can only cry out like a child, "O Father", not able to express what he needs; he is like Moses at the Red Sea (Ex 14:15). These stirrings of our spirit touch the heart of God and melt him into compassion towards us when they come from the Spirit of adoption, and from striving to be better.

"Oh, but is it possible", thinks the misgiving heart, "that so holy a God should accept such a prayer?" Yes, he will accept what is his own, and pardon what is ours. Jonah prayed in the fish's belly (Jon. 2:1), being burdened with the guilt of sin, and yet God heard him. Therefore, do not let infirmities discourage us. James takes away this objection (James 5:17). Some might object, "If I were as holy as Elijah, then my prayers might be regarded. But," he says, "Elijah was a man subject to the same passions as we are." He had his passions as well as we do, or do we think that God heard him because he was without fault? Surely not. But look at the promises: "Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver you" (Psa. 50:15). "Ask, and it shall be given you" (Matt. 7:7) and others like these. God accepts our prayers, though weak, because we are his own children, and they come from his own Spirit; and because they are according to his own will; and because they are offered in Christ's mediation; and so he takes them, and mingles them with his own incense (Rev. 8:3).

There is never a holy sigh, never a tear we shed, which is lost. Just as every grace increases by exercising itself, so does the grace of prayer. By prayer we learn to pray. So, likewise, we should take heed of a spirit of discouragement in all other holy duties, since we have so gracious a Savior. Pray as we are able; hear as we are able; strive as we are able; do as we are able; according to the measure of grace we received. God in Christ will cast a gracious eye upon whatever is his own.

Would Paul do nothing because he could not do the good that he would? No, he "pressed toward the mark." (Rom. 7:19; Phil. 3:14)

Let us not be cruel to ourselves when Christ is so gracious. There is a certain meekness of spirit by which we yield thanks to God for any ability at all, and rest quietly with the measure of grace we received, seeing it is God's good pleasure that it should be so. He is the one who gives the will and the deed (Phil. 2:13); and yet it is not given so that we may rest from further endeavors. But when with faithful endeavor, we come short of what we would be, and short of what others are, then know for our comfort that Christ will not quench the smoking flax, and that sincerity and truth, as we said before, along with our endeavor to grow, is our perfection.

What God says of Jeroboam's son is comforting, "only he will come to the grave, because some good thing toward the LORD God of Israel is found in Jeroboam's house" (1 Kings 14:13), even though it is only "some good thing." "Lord, I believe" (Mark 9:24) with a weak faith, and yet with faith; I love you with a faint love, and yet with love; I endeavor in a feeble manner, and yet I endeavor. A little fire is still fire, even though it only smokes. Since you have taken me into your covenant to be yours, and away from being an enemy, will you cast me off for these infirmities which, just as they displease you, are the grief of my own heart as well?

8. Duties and Discouragements

We should persist in duties — Overcoming discouragements — The source of discouragements — Some scruples removed — What are sins of infirmity?

From what has been said, it will not be difficult, with a little further discussion, to resolve that question which some require help in: namely, whether we ought to perform duties when our hearts are completely averse to them? To be satisfied on this point, we must take account of certain things.

We Should Persist In Duties

1. Our hearts of themselves are reluctant to give up their liberty, and only with difficulty are they brought under the yoke of duty. The more spiritual the duty is, the more reluctance there is. Corruption gains ground, for the most part, in every neglect. It is like rowing against the tide: one neglected stroke is not regained by three; and therefore it is good to keep our hearts close to duty, and not to listen to the excuses they are ready to frame.

2. As we set about our duty, God strengthens the influence that he has in us. We find a warmth of heart and an increase in strength; the Spirit goes along with us and raises us up by degrees until he leaves us, as it were, in heaven. God often delights to take advantage of our averseness, so that he may manifest his work more clearly, and so that all the glory of the work may be his, just as all the strength is his.

3. Obedience is most direct when there is nothing else to sweeten the action. Although the sacrifice is imperfect, yet the obedience with which it is offered is accepted.

4. What is won as a spoil from our corruptions, will comfort us as much afterwards as it obstructs us presently. An emotional and spirited release is often reserved until our duty is discharged; reward follows work. In and after our duty, we experience God's presence in a way that, without obedience, we may long await but never enjoy. This does not hinder the Spirit's freedom to blow when he pleases upon our souls (John 3:8); we are speaking only of a soul that has no wind for its sails and must row, as it were, against the stream. As in sailing, the hand must be on the helm, and the eye on the star. Likewise, here we must apply what little strength we have to our duty and look up for assistance, which the Spirit will freely and seasonably afford us.

Yet in those duties that require the body as well as the soul, our duties may cease until our strength is restored. Whetting a tool does not hinder its work, but prepares it. In sudden

passions too, there should be a time to compose and calm the soul, and to tune the strings. The prophet asked for a minstrel to bring his soul into that frame (2 Kings 3:15).

Overcoming Discouragements

Suffering brings discouragement because of our impatience. “Alas!” we lament, “I shall never get through such a trial.” But if God brings us into the trial, he will be with us in the trial, and at length he will bring us out of it, more refined. We shall lose nothing but dross (Zech. 13:9). From our own strength we cannot bear the least trouble; but by the Spirit’s assistance we can bear the greatest. The Spirit will add his shoulders to help us bear our infirmities. The Lord will give his hand to lift us up (Psa. 37:24). “You have heard of the patience of job,” says James (James 5:11). We have heard of his impatience too, but it pleased God to mercifully overlook that. When we find ourselves in desolate conditions such as contagious sickness, times in which we are more immediately under God’s hand, it is a comfort to us to know that Christ has a throne of mercy at our bedside, and that he numbers our tears and our groans. We now come to the matter of the Sacrament, which was not ordained for angels, but for men; and not for perfect men, but for weak men; and not for Christ, who is truth itself, in order to bind him, but because we are ready, by reason of our guilty and unbelieving hearts, to call truth itself into question.

Therefore, it was not enough for his goodness to leave us many precious promises; but he gives us confirming tokens to strengthen us. And even if we are not as prepared as we should be, let us still pray as Hezekiah did: “The good LORD pardon everyone who prepares his heart to seek God, the LORD God of his fathers, even though he is not cleansed according to the purification of the sanctuary” (2Chr. 30:18,19). Then we may come comfortably to this holy sacrament, and with much fruit. This should carry us through all our duties cheerfully: that if we hate our corruptions, and strive against them, they will not be counted against us. “It is no more I that do it,” says Paul, “but sin that dwells in me” (Rom. 7:17). For what displeases us shall never hurt us, and we shall be esteemed by God to be what we love, and desire, and labor to be. What we desire to be, we *shall* be; and what we truly desire to conquer, we *shall* conquer; for God will fulfill the desires of those who fear him (Psa. 145:19). The desire is a pledge of the thing desired. How little encouragement is needed to support us in the affairs of this life! And yet all the helps God offers will hardly persuade our backward natures.⁶

The Source Of Discouragements

Where, then, do these discouragements come from?

1. *No discouragements come from the Father*, for he has bound himself in covenant to pity us, just as a father pities his children (Psa. 103:13), and to accept us, just as a father accepts our weak endeavors. What we lack in strength of duty, he allows us to make up in his gracious indulgence. In this way, we will honor that grace in which he delights as much as he delights in more perfect performances. *Possibilitas tua mensura tua* (What is possible for you, is what you will be measured by).

2. *No discouragements come from Christ*, for in his office he will not quench the smoking flax. We see how Christ bestows the best fruits of his love on people who are poor in condition, weak in abilities, and offensive for their infirmities — no, for their more conspicuous falls. And he does this, first, because it pleases him to confound the pride of the flesh which usually measures God’s love by some outward excellence; and secondly, because he delights to show the freedom of his grace, confirming his royal prerogative that “one who glories” must “glory in the Lord” (1Cor. 1:31).

⁶ A marginal note in early editions reads, ‘This was preached at the Sacrament’

In the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, among that cloud of witnesses, we see Rahab, Gideon, and Samson ranked with Abraham, the father of the faithful (Heb. 11:31,32). Our blessed Savior, just as he was the image of his Father, so he was of the same mind as his Father, glorifying him for revealing the mystery of the gospel to simple men, and neglecting those with a reputation of being wise in the world (Matt. 11:25, 26).

It is worth noting what Augustine said of a simple man in his time that was almost entirely destitute of reason. He was most patient with any insults to himself, but because of his reverence for religion, he would not endure any injury done to the name of Christ. His reverence was so great, that he would cast stones at those who blasphemed, not sparing even his own governors. This shows that no one has abilities too meager to be beneath the gracious regard of Christ. Where it pleases him to make his choice, and to exalt his mercy, he overlooks no degree of understanding, however simple.

3. *Nor do discouragements come from the Spirit.* He helps our infirmities, and his office is that of a comforter (Rom. 8:26; John 14:16). If he convicts us of sin, and humbles us, it is so that he may open a way for his office of comforting.

Discouragements, then, must come from ourselves, and from Satan who labors to fasten on us a loathing of duty.

Some Misgivings Removed

Among other causes of discouragement, some are greatly aggravated by doubts, even about the best performance of their duties; partly this is from physical disease, helped by Satan's malice in throwing dust in their eyes on their way to heaven; and partly from some remainder of ignorance which, like darkness, breeds fear — this ignorance is especially of Christ's merciful disposition. If they could only be persuaded of his mercy, it would easily banish any false fears. But they think of him as someone watching for anything to hold against them; in doing so, they wrong not only themselves, but his goodness. This scrupulousness, for the most part, is a sign of a godly soul, just as some weeds are a sign of good soil. Therefore they are all the more to be pitied, for it is a heavy affliction. The ground of it, mostly, is not so much a troubled conscience as a disordered imagination. The purpose of Christ's coming was to free us from all such groundless fears. Some believers are still so ignorant of the comfortable condition we are in under the covenant of grace, that they are greatly discouraged. Therefore we must understand that:

1. Weaknesses do not break our covenant with God, for they do not break the covenant between husband and wife; and shall we make ourselves more pitied than Christ, who is a pattern of love for all other husbands?
2. Weaknesses do not preclude us from mercy; rather they incline God toward us all the more (Psa. 78:39). Mercy is part of the church's marriage inheritance. Christ betroths the Church to himself "in mercy" (Hos. 2:19). The husband is bound to bear with the wife as being the "weaker vessel" (1Pet. 3:7); do we think Christ will exempt himself from his own rule, and not bear with his weaker spouse?
3. If Christ were not merciful toward our weaknesses, he would not have a people to serve him. Suppose therefore we are *very* weak; so long as we are not numbered with malicious opponents and those who undermine God's truth, let us not give way to despairing thoughts; we have a merciful Savior.

But lest we flatter ourselves without good grounds, we must know that weaknesses are to be considered either imperfections which cling to our best actions, or actions which proceed from our immaturity in Christ while we are babes; or they are the effects of lack of strength, where our ability is small; or they are sudden unintended outbreaks that are contrary to our general bent

and purpose; they occur while our judgment is overcast with the cloud of a sudden temptation — afterward, however, we sense our infirmity, and grieve for it; and from our grief, we complain; and with our complaining, we strive and labor to reform; and finally, in laboring to reform, we make some progress against our corruption.

Weaknesses considered in this way, though matters of humiliation, and the object of our daily mortification, may yet be consistent with boldness with God. Good works are not extinguished or tainted by them so as to lose all acceptance with God. But to justify an infirmity is more than an infirmity; to overlook our weaknesses is more than a weakness. The defense of evil shuts our mouths, so that the soul cannot call God “Father” with childlike liberty, or enjoy sweet communion with him, until peace is made by shaming ourselves, and renewing our faith. Those who have ever been bruised for sin, if they fall, are soon recovered. Peter was recovered with a gracious look of Christ, and David by Abigail’s words. If you tell a thief or a vagrant that he is out of the way, he pays no heed, because his aim is not to walk in any particular way, except as it suits his purpose.

What are sins of infirmity?

To clarify this further, we must understand that:

1. Wherever sins of infirmity are found in a person, the life of grace must have begun. There can be no weakness where there is no life.
2. There must be a sincere and general bent toward the best things. Though a godly man may suddenly be drawn or driven aside in some particulars, yet, because of that interest the Spirit of Christ has in him, and because his aims are mainly right, he will either recover by himself, or he will yield to the counsel of others.
3. There must be a right judgment, allowing for the best ways; otherwise, the heart is rotten. If so, it will infuse corruption into the whole conduct of life, so that all men’s actions become infected at the fountainhead. Then they justify their own looseness, and they condemn God’s ways as too strict. The principles by which they live are not good.
4. There must be a conjugal love toward Christ, so that there are no terms on which they will change their Lord and husband, and absolutely yield themselves to be ruled by their own lusts, or the lusts of others.

A Christian’s behavior towards Christ may be very offensive in many things, and cause some alienation; yet he will own Christ, and Christ will own him; he will not resolve to take any path in which he knows he must break with Christ. Where the heart is thus qualified in these respects, there we must know this: that Christ counts it his honor to overlook many infirmities — no, to perfect his strength in our infirmities. There are some almost invincible infirmities, such as forgetfulness, depression, or sudden passions and fears which, though natural, are for the most part tainted with sin. If the life of Christ is in us, we are weary of these, and we would willingly shake them off, as a sick man would be rid of his fever; otherwise it should not be considered weakness so much as willfulness — and the more will there is, the more sin. And little sins, when God awakens the conscience and “sets them in order” before us (Psa. 50:21), will prove great burdens; they will not only bruise a reed, but shake a cedar. Yet God’s children never sin with full will, because there is a contrary law in their minds by which the dominion of sin is broken; it always works secretly against the law of sin (Gal. 5:17). Nevertheless, there may be so much will in a sinful action, that it may destroy our comfort to a remarkable degree afterwards. It will keep us on the rack of a disquieted conscience for a long time: God in his fatherly dispensation suspends the sense of his love. To the extent that we surrender to our will

in sinning, we distance ourselves from comfort. Sin against conscience is like a thief ⁷ in the candle, which spoils our joy, and thereby weakens our strength. We must know, therefore, that willful breaches in our sanctification will greatly hinder the sense of our justification.⁸

What course can such people take to recover their peace? They must condemn themselves sharply, and yet they must throw themselves upon God's mercy in Christ, just as they did at their conversion. Now they must embrace Christ all the more firmly, as they see more need in themselves. And let them remember the mildness of Christ here, *that he will not quench the smoking flax*. Often we see that, after a deep humiliation, Christ speaks more peace than before, to witness to the truth of this reconciliation, because he knows Satan's enterprise to pull them down even lower. They are most abased in themselves, and they are ashamed to look Christ in the face because of their ingratitude.

We see that God not only pardoned David but, after much bruising, he gave him wise Solomon to succeed him in the kingdom. We see in *Song of Solomon* 6:4 that, after the church has been humbled for slighting Christ, he sweetly entertains her again, and begins to commend her beauty.⁹ We must know for our comfort that Christ was not anointed to this great work of being our Mediator only for lesser sins, but for the greatest of them, if we just have a spark of true faith to lay hold of him. Therefore, if there is anyone who is a bruised reed, let him not make an exception of himself when Christ does not make an exception of him. "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy-laden" (Matt. 11:28). Why should we not make use of so gracious a disposition? We are only poor for this reason: that we do not know our riches in Christ. In time of temptation, believe Christ rather than the devil. Believe truth from truth itself. Do not listen to a liar, an enemy, and a murderer.

9. Believe Christ, Not Satan

How we should think of Christ — When Christ seems to be an enemy — When doubt assails us

Since Christ is thus comfortably presented to us, let us not believe Satan's representations of him. When we are troubled in conscience for our sins, Satan's way is to present Christ to the afflicted soul as a most severe judge, armed with justice against us. At that point, let us present Christ to our souls as he is presented by God himself: holding out a scepter of mercy, and spreading his arms to receive us.

How We Should Think Of Christ

When we think of Joseph, Daniel, and John the Evangelist, we conceive of them with delight, as mild and sweet people. Much more when we think of Christ, we should conceive of him as a mirror of all meekness. If the sweetness of all flowers were combined in one, how sweet would that flower be? In Christ all the perfections of mercy and love meet. How great then must that mercy be, that lodges in so gracious a heart? Whatever tenderness is scattered in husband, father, brother, and head, it is all one beam from him; it is contained in him in the most eminent manner. We are weak, but we are his; we are deformed, yet we carry his image upon us. A father does not look so much at the blemishes of his child, as at his own nature in him. So Christ finds things of love in what is his own in us. He sees his own nature in us: we are diseased, yet we are his members. Which of us ever neglected his own members because they were sick or weak? No one ever hated his own flesh (Eph. 5:29). Can the head forget the members of its body? Can Christ forget himself? We are his fullness, just as he is ours. He was love itself, clothed with man's nature, which he united to himself so that he might more freely communicate his

⁷ A flaw in a candle wick which causes guttering (*flickering*).

⁸ That is, willful sin will cause us to doubt our salvation, and so we lose our conviction of eternal security.

⁹ **Song 6:4** O my love, you *are as* beautiful as Tirzah, Lovely as Jerusalem, Awesome as *an army* with banners!

goodness to us. And he did not take our nature at its best, but abased, with all the natural and common infirmities it was subject to.

Let us therefore abhor all suspicious thoughts, as either thrown in or cherished by that damned spirit who, just as he labored to divide Father and Son with jealousy by saying, “If you are the Son of God” (Matt. 4:6), so he makes his daily study to divide the Son and us by breeding false opinions in us of Christ — as if there were no such tender love in him toward such as we. It was Satan’s art from the beginning to discredit God with man, by calling God’s love into question with our first father Adam. His success back then makes him ready with that weapon still.

When Christ Seems To Be An Enemy

“But for all this, I do not feel Christ so loving toward me,” says the smoking flax, “but rather the opposite. He seems to be an enemy to me. I see and feel evidences of his just displeasure.”

Christ may act the part of an enemy a little while, as Joseph did toward his brothers, but it is to make way for acting out his own part of mercy at a more seasonable time. He cannot restrain his heart of mercy long. He seems to wrestle with us, as he wrestled with Jacob, but he supplies us with hidden strength to prevail at length. Faith pulls away the mask from his face and sees a loving heart under a contrary appearance. *Fides Christo larvam detrahit* (Faith pulls away the mask from Christ). At first he did not say a word to the woman of Canaan who was crying after him. Then he denied her. After that he reproached her, calling her a dog, as being outside the covenant (Mat. 15:27). Yet she would not be beaten off, for she considered the purpose of his coming. His Father was never nearer to him with strength to support him, than when he was furthest off in sense of his favor to comfort him (Mat. 27:46). So Christ is never nearer to us in power to uphold us than when he seems most to hide his presence from us. The influence of the Son of righteousness pierces deeper than his light. In such cases, whatever Christ’s present bearing towards us, let us hold up his nature and his office against the distance we feel. He cannot deny himself; he can only discharge the office his Father has laid upon him. We see here that the Father has undertaken not to “quench the smoking flax”; and Christ has also undertaken to represent us to the Father, appearing before him on our behalf until he presents us blameless before him (John 17:6,11). The Father has given us to Christ, and Christ gives us back again to the Father.

When Doubt Assails Us

“This would be good comfort,” says one, “if only I were like smoking flax.”

It is well that this objection pinches you, and not Christ. It is well that you give him the honor of his mercy towards others, though not to yourself. Yet do not wrong the work of his Spirit in your heart. Satan, just as he slanders Christ to us, so he slanders us to ourselves. If you are not so much like smoking flax, then why do you not renounce your interest in Christ, and disclaim the covenant of grace? This you dare not do. Why do you not give yourself up wholly to other pleasures? This your spirit will not allow you to do. Where do these restless groanings and complaints come from? Put your present state under the office of Christ, and do not despise the consolation of the Almighty, nor refuse your own mercy. Cast yourself into the arms of Christ, and if you perish, perish there. If you do not, you are sure to perish. If mercy is to be found anywhere, it is there.

Christ’s care for you appears in this: he has given you a heart that is to some degree sensitive. He might have given you up to hardness, security, and profaneness of heart, the worst of all spiritual judgments. Will the one who died for his enemies, refuse those whose soul desires him? He desires us to be reconciled by his messengers; will he put us off when we earnestly seek it by his own hand? No, doubtless; when he goes before us by kindling holy desires in us, he is ready to meet us in his own ways. When the prodigal decided to return to his father, his father did not

wait for him, but met him on the way. When he prepares the heart to seek, he causes his ear to hear (Psa. 10:17). He cannot find it in his heart to hide himself from us very long. If God were to put us into such a dark condition that we would see no light from him or from the creature, then let us remember what he says by the prophet Isaiah: "Who is among you . . . that walks in darkness, and has no light?" (no light of comfort, no light of God's countenance) "let him trust in the name of the LORD, and rely on his God" (Isa. 50:10). We can never be in such a condition that there will be just cause for utter despair. Therefore let us do as mariners do, drop anchor in the dark. Christ knows how to pity us in this case. Look what comfort he felt from his Father when he was broken (Isa. 53:5). This is what we will feel from him in our own bruising.

The sighs of a bruised heart carry a report in them, both of our affection for Christ, and of his care for us. The eyes of our souls cannot be turned towards him unless he has first cast a gracious look upon us. The least love we have for him is only a reflection of his love first shining upon us. In his example to us, Christ did whatever he charges us to do; he personally suffered whatever he calls us to suffer; so that he might better learn to relieve and pity us in our sufferings. In his desertion in the garden and on the cross, he was content to be without that unspeakable solace which the presence of his Father gave. He did so for a time, both to bear the wrath of the Lord for us, and likewise to better know how to comfort us in our greatest extremities. God sees fit that we should taste of that same cup from which his Son drank so deeply, so that we might feel a little of what sin is, and what his Son's love was. But our comfort is that Christ drank the dregs of the cup for us, and will assist us, so that our spirits may not utterly fail under that little taste of his displeasure which we may feel. He became not only a man of sorrows, but a curse for us. He was broken, so we would not be broken; he was troubled, so we would not be desperately troubled; he became a curse, so we would not be cursed.

Whatever may be wished for in an all-sufficient comforter, is all found in Christ:

1. Authority from the Father: all power was given to him (Matt. 28:18).
2. Strength in himself: his name is "The mighty God" (Isa. 9:6).
3. Wisdom from his own experience: how and when to help (Heb. 2:18).
4. Willingness by being bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh (Gen. 2:23; Eph. 5:30).

10. Do Not Quench the Spirit

False despair of Christ's mercy — False hope of Christ's mercy — Resisting Christ's mercy — Presuming on Christ's mercy — Seeking another source of mercy — Mistreating the heirs of mercy — Strife among the heirs of mercy — Taking advantage of the bruised — Despising the simple means of mercy

We will now take note of various sorts of men who deeply offend against this merciful disposition of Christ.

False Despair Of Christ's Mercy

There are those who go on in all their ill courses of life on this pretence: that it would be useless to go to Christ because their lives have been so bad; and yet, as soon as we look to heaven, all encouragements are ready to meet us, and draw us forward. Among others, one allurements is that Christ is ready to welcome us and lead us further. None are damned in the church except those who are determined to be damned, including those who persist in having thoughts of Christ as being hard. They want some reason to find their contentment from other things, as did that unprofitable servant in Matt. 25:30 who thought his master was a hard man. For that reason, he sought to excuse his unfruitful ways, in not increasing the talent he had been given.

False Hope Of Christ's Mercy

There are those who take up a hope of their own, that Christ will allow them to walk in ways that lead to hell, and yet bring them to heaven. To the contrary, all comfort should draw us nearer to Christ, not away. Otherwise it is a lying comfort, either in itself or in our application of it.

Resisting Christ's Mercy

There are those who take it on themselves to throw water on those sparks which Christ labors to kindle in them, because they do not want to be troubled by their light. Such men must know that the Lamb can be angry, and that they who will not come under his scepter of mercy will be crushed to pieces by his scepter of power (Psa. 2:9). He will graciously tend and maintain the least spark of true grace. But where he does not find it, and instead finds opposition to the striving of his Spirit in them, his wrath is kindled; and once kindled, it will burn to hell. There is no more just provocation than when kindness is churlishly refused.

When God desired to cure Babylon, and she would not be cured, she was given up to destruction (Jer. 51:9). When Jerusalem would not be gathered under the wing of Christ, then their habitation was left desolate (Matt. 23:37,38). When wisdom stretches out her hand and men refuse it, then wisdom will laugh at men's destruction (Prov. 1:26). Salvation itself will not save those who spill the medicine and throw away the bandage. It is a pitiful case when this merciful Savior will delight in destruction; when the one who made men will have no mercy on them (Isa. 27:11).

"Oh," say the rebels of the time, "God has not made us to damn us." Yes, if you will not meet Christ in the ways of his mercy, it is fitting that you should "eat the fruit of your own ways, and be filled with your own devices" (Prov. 1:31). This will be the hell of hell: when men realize that they have loved their sins more than their souls; when they realize that love and mercy have been forced on them, and yet they want to perish. The more they become an accessory to drawing judgment upon themselves, the more their conscience will be confounded. Then they will acknowledge that Christ is without any blame, and they are without any excuse.

If men appeal to their own conscience, it will tell them that the Holy Spirit has often knocked at their hearts, willing to kindle some holy desires in them. How else can they be said to resist the Holy Ghost, unless the Spirit was readier to draw them to further goodness than their own wills would allow? Therefore those in the church who are damned are self-condemned beforehand. We need not look for further causes, when men carry sufficient cause in their own hearts.

Presuming On Christ's Mercy

The best of us may offend against this merciful disposition if we do not guard against the license which our carnal disposition is ready to take from it. Thus we reason that if Christ will not quench the smoking flax, why should we be afraid that any neglect on our part can bring us into a comfortless condition? If Christ will not do it, then what can?

You know the apostle's prohibition, "Do not quench the Spirit" (1Th. 5:19). Such cautions not to quench are sanctified by the Spirit as the very *means* of not quenching him. Christ performs his office by stirring up suitable endeavors in us, so that we *will* not quench him; and no one is more anxious to use the means provided, than those who are most certain of their good success. The reason is this: the means that God has set apart to effect anything, are included in the purpose for which he brings that thing to pass. This is a principle taken for granted even in civil matters; for if someone knows beforehand that it will be a fruitful year, will he hang up his plough and neglect to till?

And so the apostle stirs us up to the certain expectation of a blessing (1Cor. 15:57,58). This encouragement from the good results of victory is intended to stir us up, and not to put us off. If

we are negligent to exercise the grace received, and to use the means prescribed, and if we allow our spirits to be oppressed with the many and varied cares of this life, and if we do not take heed of the discouragements of the times — then because of this kind of neglect, God in his wise care will often allow us to fall into a worse depression than those who were never so enlightened. Yet, in mercy, he will not allow us to become such enemies to ourselves as to wholly neglect these sparks once they have been kindled. If it were possible for us to be wholly given up to abandon all endeavors, then we could expect no other result than quenching. But Christ will tend this spark, and cherish this small seed, so as to always preserve in the soul some degree of care.

If we would make a comfortable use of this, we must consider all those means by which Christ preserves the grace he has begun in us. First, there is holy communion by which one Christian warms another. “Two are better than one” (Eccles. 4:9). “Did our hearts not burn within us?” asked the disciples (Luke 24:32). Secondly, communion with God in holy duties, such as prayer and meditation, will not only kindle the soul but add luster to it. Thirdly, we feel by experience the breath of the Spirit, along with the breath of his ministers. For this reason, the apostle knits these two together: “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophesy” (1Thess. 5:19,20). Nathan, by a few words, inflamed the decaying sparks in David. Rather than allowing his fire to die in us, God he will send some Nathan or other to us. Something is always left in us to join with the Word, having its same nature, just as a waning ember will quickly burst into flame next to another burning coal; smoking flax will easily catch fire. Fourthly, grace is strengthened by its exercise: “Arise therefore and do, and the LORD be with you” David said to his son Solomon (1Chr. 22:16). Stir up the grace that is in you, for in this way holy activity turns into resolutions, resolutions turn into practice, and practice turns into a prepared readiness to do every good work.

However, let us remember that grace is increased in its exercise, not by virtue of the exercise itself, but as Christ by his Spirit flows into the soul bringing us nearer to himself, to the fountain, instilling in us such comfort that the heart is further enlarged. The heart of a Christian is Christ’s garden, and his graces are like so many sweet spices and flowers which, when his Spirit blows on them, release a sweet aroma. Therefore keep the soul open to entertain the Holy Ghost, for he will bring in continually fresh forces to subdue corruption. This is true most of all on the Lord’s Day. John was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day even in Patmos, the place of his banishment (Rev. 1:10). That is when the gales of the Spirit will blow stronger and sweeter.

As we look, therefore, for the comfort of this doctrine, let us not favor our natural sloth; rather let us exercise ourselves toward godliness (1Tim. 4:7), and labor to keep this fire always burning on the altar of our hearts. Let us trim our lamps daily, and put in fresh oil, and wind up our souls higher and higher still. Resting in a good condition is contrary to grace; it only encourages more rest. Let no one turn this grace “into lasciviousness” (Jude 4). Infirmities are a basis for humility, not a plea for negligence, nor an encouragement to presumption. Because Christ is good, we should be so far from being evil that those coals of love should melt us. Therefore, those in whom the consideration of this mildness of Christ does not work in this way, may well be suspicious of themselves. Surely where grace is, corruption is “like vinegar to the teeth, and like smoke to the eyes” (Prov. 10:26). And therefore they will labor as much for the credit of religion and the glory of God as for their own comfort, so that their light may break forth. If a spark of faith and love is so precious, what an honor will it be to be rich in faith! Who would not rather walk in the light, and in the comforts of the Holy Ghost, than live in a dark, perplexed state? And who would not rather be carried with full sail to heaven than be constantly tossed by fears and doubts? The present trouble we have in our conflict against a sin is not so much as that disquiet which any favored corruption will bring upon us afterward. True peace is found in conquering, not in yielding. The comfort intended in this text is for those who would be willing to do better, but find their corruptions clog them; for those who are in such a mist, that often they cannot tell what to think of themselves; who would be willing to believe, and yet often fear

that they do not believe; and who think that it cannot be true that God would be so good to such sinful wretches as they are, and yet they will not permit these fears and doubts in themselves.

Seeking Another Source Of Mercy

Among others, those who want a mediator with God other than Christ, badly wrong themselves and him! Are any more pitying than Christ who became man to that end, so that he might show pity to his own flesh? Let all of us, at all times, turn to this meek Savior, and lift up all our petitions in his prevailing name. What need do we have to knock at any other door? Can anyone be more tender over us than Christ? What encouragement we have to commend to him, by our prayers, the state of the church in general, or the state of any broken-hearted Christian. Of these, we may speak to Christ as they did of Lazarus: “Lord, the church which you love and gave yourself for is in distress”; “Lord, this poor Christian for whom you were bruised, is bruised himself and brought very low.” (Isa. 53:5) It must touch his heart when the misery of those so dear to him is spread before him.

Mistreating The Heirs Of Mercy

Again, considering this gracious nature in Christ, let us think to ourselves, “when he is so kind to us, will we be cruel toward him in his name, in his truth, and in his children?” How will those who delight in being so terrible to “the meek of the earth” (Zeph. 2:3) hope to look so gracious a Savior in the face? Those who are so violent towards his Bride shall know one day that they were dealing with him in his church. So it can only cut the heart of those who have felt this love of Christ, to hear him wounded, the one who is the life of their lives and the soul of their souls. This makes those who have felt mercy weep over Christ, whom they have pierced with their own sins. There can only be a mutual and quick sympathy between the head and his members. When we are tempted to commit any sin, if we will not pity ourselves, we should at least spare Christ, in not putting him to new torments.¹⁰ The apostle could not find out a more heart-breaking argument to compel us to sacrifice ourselves to God than to appeal to us “by the mercies of God” in Christ (Rom. 12:1).

Strife Among The Heirs Of Mercy

This mercy of Christ should also move us to commiserate the state of the poor church, torn by enemies without, and rending itself by divisions at home. It must affect any soul who ever felt comfort from Christ to consider what an affectionate entreaty the apostle makes to mutual agreement in judgment and affection. “Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affections and mercies, fulfill my joy: that you be like minded” (Phil. 2:1), as if he had said, “Unless you disclaim all consolation in Christ, labor to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” What a joyful spectacle this is to Satan and his faction: to see those who are separated from the world fall into pieces among themselves! Our discord is our enemy’s melody.

More to blame are those who, for private aims, provoke differences with others, and will not allow the wounds of the church to be closed. This does not imply that men should cloak their judgment in any truth where there is just cause to express themselves; for the least truth is Christ’s truth and not ours. Therefore we are not to take liberty to affirm or deny truth at our pleasure, for there is something due on a penny as well as on a pound; thus we must be faithful in the least truth when the season calls for it. Then our words are “like apples of gold in pictures of silver” (Prov. 25:11). One word spoken in season will do more good than a thousand spoken out of season. But in some cases, keeping our peace, through keeping our faith before God

¹⁰ This is predominantly a Roman Catholic view; Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was an infinite sacrifice, and a historical sacrifice, meaning there is nothing more that can be added to it, and it is not an ongoing or retroactive atonement that can be increased or decreased by our present sins or lack of them. It was a completely sufficient payment on our behalf — WHG.

(Rom. 14:22),¹¹ has a better outcome than openly revealing some things we may believe are true. Consider that the weakness of man's nature is such that we can hardly have a difference of opinion without estranging someone else. To the extent that men are not of one mind, they will hardly be of one heart, except where grace and the peace of God extensively rule in the heart (Col. 3:15). Therefore an open display of our differences is only good when it is necessary. Although some, from a desire to be somebody, ignore this and yield to a spirit of contradiction. Yet, if Paul is any judge, such men "are still carnal" (1Cor. 3:3). If being argumentative is wise, then it is wisdom from beneath: for just as the wisdom from above is pure, so it is peaceable (James 3:17). When he was about to leave the world, what did our blessed Savior press upon his disciples more than peace and love? And in his last prayer, did he not beg of his Father with earnestness that "they all may be one" just as he and the Father were one (John 17:21)? But what he prayed for on earth, we shall only enjoy perfectly in heaven. Let this make our meditations concerning that time sweeter to us.

Taking Advantage Of The Bruised

To further expose offenders of this kind, what spirit must those have who take advantage of men with bruised and infirm spirits, seeking to relieve them with false peace, and doing so for their own worldly ends? A wounded spirit will part with anything. Most of the profitable points of popery, such as confession, satisfaction, merit, and purgatory, spring from this motive; but these are physicians of no value, or worse, they are tormentors and not physicians at all. It is a greater blessing to be delivered from the sting of these scorpions (Rev. 9:5) than we are thankful for. Spiritual tyranny is the greatest tyranny, especially when it is exercised where mercy should be shown the most; yet even there, some are like cruel surgeons who delight in making their cures long to serve themselves through the misery of others. It brings men under a terrible curse that they "did not remember to show mercy, but persecuted the poor and needy man", so that they might "slay even those who are broken in heart" (Psa. 109:16).

In the same way, to those who create a temporal advantage for themselves out of the spiritual misery of others, we must add those who create personal estates by betraying the church; and we must add those who are unfaithful in the trust committed to them when the children cry for the bread of life and there is none to give them. Thus, they bring upon the people of God a heavy judgment of spiritual famine, starving Christ in his members. Shall we repay so good a Savior in this way? Is he not the one who considers the love and mercy shown in feeding his lambs (John 21:15) they same as if shown to him? (Matt. 25:40)

Despising The Simple Means Of Mercy

Lastly, there are those who carry themselves very unkindly towards Christ because they stumble at his stooping low to us in his government and ordinances; they are ashamed of the simplicity of the gospel; and they count preaching foolishness. Out of the pride of their heart, they think that they may do well enough without the help of the Word and sacraments. They think Christ was not dignified enough. Therefore they want to mend the matter with their own devices so they may give better satisfaction to flesh and blood, just as in popery. What greater unthankfulness can there be than to despise any help that Christ in his mercy has provided for us? In the days of his flesh, the proud Pharisees took offense at Christ's familiar conduct with sinful men, though he only did so as a physician to heal their souls. Paul was driven to make defenses for himself, for his plainness in unfolding the gospel. The more that Christ, in himself and in his servants, descends to exalt us, the more we should, with all humility and readiness, entertain that love and magnify the goodness of God, who has put the great work of our salvation and laid our government upon so gentle a Savior: one who carries himself so mildly in

¹¹ NIV **Romans 14:22** So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves.

all things with which he deals between God and us, and between us and God. The lower Christ comes down to us, let us lift him up all the higher in our hearts. So will all those do who have ever experienced Christ's work in their hearts.

11. Christ's Judgment and Victory

Christ's judgment established in us — Christ's mildness and his government — Pardon leads to obedience — Justification leads to sanctification

We come now to the last part of our text, concerning the constant progress of Christ's gracious power, until he has set up an absolute government in us which shall prevail over all corruptions. It is said here that he will cherish his beginnings of grace in us until he brings forth "judgment unto victory" (Matt. 12:20).

Christ's Judgment Established In Us

Judgment here means the kingdom of grace in us. It is that government by which Christ sets up a throne in our hearts. Governors among the Jews were first called judges, then kings, which is why this inward rule is called judgment; and also because it agrees with the judgment of the Word, which the Psalmist often calls judgment (as in Psalm 72:1,2); and because it agrees with God's judgment. Men may read their doom in God's Word. What it judges of them, God judges of them. By this judgment which is set up in us, good is discerned, allowed, and performed; and sin is judged, condemned, and executed. Our spirit, being under the Spirit of Christ, is governed by him; and so far as it is governed by Christ, it governs us graciously.

Christ and we are of one judgment, and of one will. He has his will in us, and his judgments are so invested with authority in us, that they are turned into our judgment; we carry his law in our hearts, written there by his Spirit (Jer. 31:33). The law in the inner man, and the written law, answer to each other as counterparts.

The meaning then is that the gracious frame of holiness set up in our hearts by the Spirit of Christ will go forward until all contrary power is subdued. The spirit of judgment will be a spirit of burning (Isa. 4:4), consuming whatever opposing corruption eats into the soul like rust. If God's builders fall into errors and build stubble on a good foundation, God's Spirit, as a spiritual fire, will reveal this in time (1Cor. 3:13), and destroy it. By a spirit of judgment, the builders will condemn their own errors and courses. The whole work of grace in us is set out under the name of judgment, and sometimes under the name of wisdom. That is because judgment is the chief and leading part in grace, so that the gracious work of repentance is called a change of mind, and an after-wisdom. On the other hand, in the learned languages, the words that express wisdom also imply a general relish and savor of the whole soul. They express more the judgment of taste than of sight or any other sense, because taste is the most necessary sense, and it requires a closer application of the object than all other senses. So too in spiritual life, it is most necessary that the Spirit alters the *taste* of the soul, so that it might savor the things of the Spirit so deeply that all other things lack relish by comparison.

As it is true of every particular Christian, that Christ's judgment in him shall be victorious, so it is likewise true of the whole body of Christians, the Church. The government of Christ, and his truth, by which he rules as with a scepter, will at length be victorious in spite of Satan, and in spite of antichrist, and in spite of all his enemies. Christ, riding on his white horse (Rev. 6:2), has a bow; and he goes forth conquering in the ministry so that he may overcome his enemies, either by bringing them to conversion, or to confusion. Yet I take judgment principally to refer to Christ's kingdom and government within us. I say this, first, because God especially requires the subjection of the soul and conscience as his proper throne; and secondly, because if judgment is to prevail in all others around us but not in our own hearts, it would not bring

comfort to us. Therefore it is the first thing that we desire when we pray, “Thy kingdom come”: that Christ would first come and rule in our hearts. The kingdom of Christ in his ordinances only serves to bring Christ home into his own place, which is in our hearts.

The words being thus explained (that judgment here includes the government of the mind, will and affections), there are various conclusions that naturally spring from them.

Christ’s Mildness And His Government

The first conclusion from the connection of this part of the verse with the former is that Christ is mild in the way that we have seen, so that he may then set up his government in those whom he is so gentle and tender over. He pardons in this way so as to be obeyed as a king; he takes us to be his spouse so as to be obeyed as a husband. The same Spirit that convinces us of the necessity of his righteousness to cover us, also convinces us of the necessity of his government to rule us. His love towards us moves him to frame us to be like himself; and our love towards him stirs us to be such that he may take delight in us; nor do we have faith or hope beyond our concern to be purged and pure, just as he is pure. He makes us subordinate governors, indeed, kings under himself, giving us grace not only to fight but to subdue in some measure our base affections. It is one main fruit of Christ’s exaltation that he may turn every one of us from our wickedness (Acts 3:26). “For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived: that he might be Lord both of the dead and the living” (Rom.14:9). God has bound himself by an oath that he would grant us purity that “we might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before *him*” (Luke 1:75), and not just before the *world*.

Pardon Leads To Obedience

This may serve as a test to discern who may lay just claim to Christ’s mercy. Only the following may make this claim to Christ’s mercy: those who will take his yoke and consider it a greater happiness to be under his government than to enjoy any liberty of the flesh; those who will take Christ whole, and not single out of him what agrees with their present condition; those who will not divide Lord from Jesus, and so make a Christ of their own. No one ever truly desired mercy for pardon, without desiring mercy for healing. David prays for a new spirit, as well as for a sense of pardoning mercy (Psa. 51:10).

Justification Leads To Sanctification

This also shows that those who only take Christ as our righteousness but not our sanctification (except by imputation) are misled. To the contrary, it is a great part of our happiness to be under such a Lord. He was not only born for us, and given to us, but our government is likewise upon his shoulder (Isa. 9:6,7). He is our Sanctifier as well as our Savior: he is our Savior by the effectual power of his Spirit from the *power* of sin, as well as by the merit of his death from the *guilt* of sin; provided these things are remembered:

1. The first and main ground of our comfort is that Christ as a priest offered himself as a sacrifice to his Father for us. The guilty soul flies first to Christ crucified, who was made a curse for us. From there Christ has the right to govern us; from there he gives us his Spirit as our guide to lead us home.
2. In the course of our life, after we are in a state of grace, if we are overtaken with any sin, we must remember to take recourse *first* to Christ’s mercy to pardon us, and *then* to the promise of his Spirit to govern us.
3. And when we feel ourselves cold in affection and duty, the best way to recover is to warm ourselves at this fire of his love and mercy in giving himself for us.
4. Again, remember this: that Christ rules us by a spirit of love, from a sense of his love, for which reason his commandments are easy for us. He leads us by his free Spirit, a Spirit of

liberty. As his subjects, we serve him voluntarily. The constraint that he lays upon his subjects is that of love. He draws us sweetly with the cords of love. Yet remember also that he draws us strongly by a Spirit of power. It is not enough that we have motives and encouragements to love and obey Christ from that love of his by which he gave himself for us to justify us; but Christ's Spirit must likewise *subdue* our hearts, and *sanctify* them to love him, without which all other motives will be ineffectual.

Our disposition must be changed. We must be new creatures. Those who seek for spiritual love in an unchanged heart, seek for heaven in hell. When a child obeys his father, it is done from reasons which persuade him to obey; and likewise, a child-like nature gives strength to these reasons. It is natural for a child of God to love Christ so far as he is renewed; this is not only from an inducement of reason so to do, but it is likewise from an inward principle and work of grace that those reasons gain their main force. First we are made partakers of the divine nature, and then we are easily induced and led by Christ's Spirit to our spiritual duties.¹²

12. Christ's Wise Government

Judgment and wisdom — The need for heavenly light — Where Christ's government is set up — How Christ governs us — The effects of this in practice

The second conclusion from the final part of the text is that Christ's government in his church and in his children is a wise and well-ordered government, because it is called "judgment";¹³ and judgment is the life and soul of wisdom. There are two branches from this conclusion: first, the spiritual government of Christ in us is joined with judgment and wisdom; and secondly, wherever true spiritual wisdom and judgment are found, there the Spirit of Christ has likewise brought in his gracious government.

Judgment And Wisdom

As to the first, a life well-guided by the rules of Christ stands with the strongest and highest reason of all; and therefore holy men are called "wisdom's children" (Luke 7:35). They are able to justify, both by reason and experience, all the ways of wisdom. Opposite courses are folly and madness to them. On this basis, Paul says that "one who is spiritual, judges all things" (1Cor. 2:15) that pertain to him, and he is judged by no one of an inferior rank because they lack the spiritual light and sight to judge. Yet this sort of unenlightened man will judge and "speak evil of the things they do not understand" (2Pet. 2:12); they step from ignorance to prejudice and to rash censure, without taking right judgment with them on their way; therefore their judgment comes to nothing. But the judgment of a spiritual man, so far as he is spiritual, will stand, because it is agreeable to the nature of things. As things are in themselves, so they are in his judgment. As God is infinite in goodness and majesty in himself, so he is to the spiritual man; he ascribes to God in his heart his divinity and all his excellences. As Christ is the only Mediator in himself, and all in all in the church (Col. 3:11), so he is to the spiritual man, for he has made Christ so in his heart. As all things are dung in comparison to Christ (Phil. 3:8), so they are to Paul, a sanctified man. As the very worst thing in religion, "the reproach of Christ", is better than "the pleasures of sin for a season" (Heb. 11:25-26), so it is to Moses, a man of a right consideration. As one day in the courts of God is better than a thousand elsewhere (Psa. 84:10), so it is to David, a man of reformed judgment. A good man's judgment is conformed to things as they are in themselves; according to how they differ or agree with God's judgment of such things, so does the spiritual man's judgment differ or agree.

¹² Reading the word (Neh 8:18; Ps 119:11), performing our vows (Ps 61:8), praying (Ps 88:9; Eph 6:18), watching (Prov 8:34; Mt 26:41), bearing our cross (Lk 9:23), spreading the Gospel (Mt 28:18-20), exhorting one another (Heb 3:13), loving one another (John 13:34), serving one another (Mk 9:35; Gal 5:13; 1Pet 4:10), loving our enemies (Lk 6:27-28,35), etc. — WHG

¹³ Isa 42:13 — "he shall bring forth judgment unto truth"

Truth is truth, and error is error; and what is unlawful is unlawful whether men think so or not. God has put an eternal difference between light and darkness, good and bad, which no creature's conceit can alter; and therefore no man's judgment is the measure of things further than it agrees with the truth stamped upon those things by God. For this reason, because a wise man's judgment agrees with the truth of things, a wise man may in some sense be said to be the measure of things; and the judgment of one holy wise-man is to be preferred above a thousand others. Such men usually are immovable as the sun in its course, because they think, and speak, and live by rule. Joshua and his house will serve God (Josh. 24:15), whatever others do; they will run a course contrary to the world because their judgments lead them a contrary way. It is for this reason that Satan is malevolent toward the eye of the soul, the judgment, to put it out by ignorance and false reason; for Satan cannot rule in anyone until he has either taken away or perverted a person's judgment. He is a prince of darkness, and he rules in the darkness of the understanding. Therefore he must first be cast out of the understanding by planting truth in the soul and prevailing there. Therefore, those who are enemies of knowledge help Satan to erect his throne, and they likewise help antichrist whose kingdom, like Satan's, is a kingdom of darkness.

Hence, Christ promises that the Holy Ghost will convince the world of righteousness or judgment (John 16:8); that is, he is resolved to set up a throne of government, because the great lord of misrule, Satan, "the prince of this world", is judged by the gospel and by the Spirit accompanying it. His impostures are discovered and his enterprises are laid open. Therefore, when the gospel was spread, the oracles ceased. Satan fell from heaven like lightning (Luke 10:18). Men were transported out of his kingdom into Christ's. Where something prevails by lies, revealing them is victory: "they will proceed no further: for their folly will be made evident to all men" (2Tim. 3:9). So revealing error puts a stop to it, for no one will be willingly deceived. Let truth have its full scope without check or restraint, and let Satan and his instruments do their worst, *they shall not prevail*. Jerome says of the Pelagians in his time: "The revealing of your opinions is the vanquishing of them; your blasphemies appear at the first blush."¹⁴

The Need For Heavenly Light

From this we learn the necessity that, for a well-ordered Christian life, the understanding should be grounded in knowledge which is above nature. There must be light to discover an end beyond nature, an end for which we are Christians. A rule suitable to direct us toward that end, which is the will of God in Christ, will lead us to discover his good pleasure towards us, and our duty towards him. By virtue of this discovery, we do all we can do which may in any way further what we reckon to be true. The eye of the soul must first be single, and then the whole body and frame of our conduct will be light (Matt. 6:22); otherwise both we and our course of life are nothing but darkness. The whole conduct of a Christian is nothing more than knowledge reduced to will, affection, and practice. If the digestion of food in the stomach is not good, the working of the liver cannot be good; so if there is error in the judgment, it mars the whole of our practice, just as an error in the foundation mars a building. God will have no blind sacrifices, and no unreasonable services (Isa. 1:13); but he will have us love him with all our mind (Rom. 12:2), that is, with our understanding, as well as with all our hearts (Luke 10:27), that is, with the feeling part of the soul.

¹⁴ 1 Jerome (c.347-419) in his Epistle to Ctesiphon (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.v.CXXXIII.html>) — this is probably a conclusion from the Latin. Sibbes may be referring to this passage: "5. *The better to deceive men, they have added to the maxim given above the saving clause 'but not without the grace of God;'* and this may at the first blush take in some readers. However, when it is carefully sifted and considered, it can deceive nobody. For while they acknowledge the grace of God, they tell us that our acts do not depend upon His help. Rather, what they understand by the grace of God is free will and the commandments of the Law. They quote Isaiah's words: 'God has given the law to aid men,' Isa. 8:20 LXX, and say that we ought to thank Him for having created us such that, of our own free will, we can choose the good and avoid the evil. Nor do they see that in alleging this, the devil uses their lips to hiss out an intolerable blasphemy." — WHG

This ordering of Christ's government by judgment is agreeable to the soul; and God delights to preserve the manner of working that is specific to man. That is, God delights to do what he does out of judgment: just as grace presupposes our nature and is founded upon it, so the frame of grace preserves the frame of nature in man. Therefore Christ brings about all that is good in the soul through judgment. He does that so sweetly that many, by a dangerous error, think that the good which is in them, and which issues from them, is from themselves, and not from the powerful work of grace. So it is in evil that men think Satan had no hand in their sin either; this is where the devil so subtly leads us according to the stream of our own nature. But here a mistake is made with little peril, because we are evil *of ourselves*, and the devil only promotes the bad he finds in us. But there are no seeds of supernatural goodness in us at all. God finds nothing in us but enmity, except that he has engraved in our nature an inclination in general toward what we judge to be good. Now when he clearly reveals what is good *in particular*, we are attracted to it; and when he shows us convincingly what is evil, we abhor it as freely as we embraced it before.

From this we may know whether we work as we should or not: that is, when we do what we do out of inward principles, and when we do not choose what is good only because we were brought up that way, or because such and such a person whom we respect does so, or because we take sides and thus make a faction of our religion. But we work as we should when out of judgment, what good we do we first judge in ourselves to be good; and what we abstain from that is bad, we first judge to be bad from an inward judgment. A sound Christian enjoys the better part when he has made it his first choice, like Mary (Luke 10:42). He establishes every purpose by counsel (Prov. 20:18). God indeed uses carnal men to very good service, but he does so without a thorough altering and conviction of their judgment. He works *by* them, but not *in* them. Therefore, they neither approve the good they do, nor do they hate the evil they abstain from.

Where Christ's Government Is Set Up

The second branch of this conclusion is that, wherever true wisdom and judgment are found, there Christ has set up his government. This is because where wisdom is found, it directs us not only to understand, but to order our ways aright. Where Christ as a prophet teaches by his Spirit, he likewise as a king subdues the heart by his Spirit to obey what is taught. This is the teaching that is promised by God: when not only the brain but the heart itself is taught; when men do not only know what they *should* do but are taught to *do* it. They are not only taught that they should love, fear, and obey, but they themselves are taught to love, and fear, and obey. Christ sets up his throne in the very heart and alters its direction, thus making his subjects good, in addition to teaching them to be good. Other princes can make good laws, but they cannot write them in their people's hearts (Jer. 31:33). This is Christ's prerogative: he infuses into his subjects his own Spirit. There not only rests upon him the spirit of wisdom and understanding, but likewise the spirit of the fear of the Lord (Isa. 11:2). The knowledge which we have of Christ from himself is a transforming knowledge (2Cor. 3:18). The same Spirit who enlightens the mind inspires gracious inclinations into the will and affections, and he infuses strength into the whole man. As a gracious man judges as he should, so he inclines toward and does as he judges. His life is a commentary on his inward man. There is a sweet harmony among God's truth, his judgment, and his entire conduct.

How Christ Governs Us

The heart of a Christian is like Jerusalem when it was at its best, a city compact within itself (Psa. 122:3), where the thrones of judgment are set up (Psa. 122:5). Judgment should have a throne in the heart of every Christian — not that judgment alone will work a change; there must be grace to alter the bent and sway of the will before it will yield to be worked upon by the understanding. But God has so joined these together that whenever he savingly shines on the understanding, he gives a soft and pliable heart. For without a work upon the heart by the Spirit

of God, the heart will follow its own inclination toward that which it loves, whatever judgment says to the contrary. There is no natural proportion between an unsanctified heart and a sanctified judgment. The unaltered heart will not allow the judgment to coldly and soberly conclude what is best. It is like a sick man who, while his feverish illness corrupts his taste, rather desires to please his taste than hearken to what the physician may say.

Judgment has no power over itself where the will is unsubdued. For the will and affections bribe it to give them their desired sentence; this is true when any profit or pleasure competes with what the judgment only thinks in general is good. Therefore, the judgment in the heart, for the most part, is what the *understanding* judges and determines in particular things. And so, where grace has subdued the heart, unruly passions do not cast such a mist before the understanding that it fails to see what is best in particular cases; base considerations springing from self-love do not alter the case and bias the judgment in a contrary way. Rather, what is good in itself will be seen as good by us, even though it may conflict with our particular worldly interests.

The Effects Of This In Practice

The right understanding of this has an influence on our practice, which draws me to further explain. This will teach us the right method of godliness: to begin with judgment, and then to beg of God, in addition to illumination, to incline our will and affections toward holiness. This is so that a perfect government may be set up in our hearts, and so that our knowledge may be “in all judgment” (Phil. 1:9), that is, exercised with experience and feeling. When the judgment of Christ is set up in our judgments, and from there it is brought into our hearts by the Spirit of Christ, then it is in its proper place and throne. Until then, truth does us no good, but only helps to condemn us. The life of a Christian is a regular life: peace will be upon the one who walks by the rule of the new creature (Gal. 6:16). One who despises God’s way and loves to live at large, seeking all liberty for the flesh, will die (Prov. 19:16). And this is affirmed by Paul, “If you live after the flesh, you shall die” (Rom. 8:13).

We learn likewise that men of an ill-governed life have no true judgment. *No wicked man can be a wise man.* Without Christ’s Spirit, the soul is in confusion; it is without beauty and form, just as all things were in the chaos before the Creation. The whole soul is out of joint until it is set right again by Christ, whose office is to “restore all things.” The baser part of the soul, which should be subject to the Spirit, instead rules all. It subdues what little truth is in the understanding, holding it captive to our base affections. And Satan, by corruption, gets hold of the soul until Christ, who is stronger than he, comes and drives him out; he takes possession of all the powers and parts of our soul and body, making them weapons of righteousness, to serve him. Then this becomes true: “New lords, new laws.”¹⁵ Christ as a new conqueror changes the fundamental laws of old Adam and establishes a government of his own.

13. Grace Shall Reign

Why Christ’s kingdom must prevail — Why the enemy seems victorious — Consolation for weak Christians — Evidences of Christ’s rule in us

The third conclusion from the final part of the text is that Christ’s government will be victorious. Let us see the reasons for this.

Why Christ’s Kingdom Must Prevail

1. Christ has conquered all in his own person first, and he is “over all, God-blessed forever” (Rom. 9:5); therefore he is over sin, death, hell, Satan and the world. And as he has overcome them in himself, so he overcomes them in our hearts and consciences. We commonly say that

¹⁵ Cf. [a 1450 *St. Editha* (1883) 96] Willyham Conquerour was made here kyng, And made newe lordus and eke new lawe.

conscience makes a man kingly or contemptible, because it is planted in us to judge for God, either with us or against us. Now if natural conscience is so forcible, what will it be when, besides its own light, it has the light of divine truth put into it? It will undoubtedly prevail, either to make us hold up our heads with boldness, or to abase us beneath ourselves. If it subjects itself by grace to Christ's truth, then it boldly faces death, hell, judgment and all spiritual enemies, because then Christ sets up his kingdom in the conscience and makes it a kind of paradise.

The sharpest conflict which the soul has is between the conscience and God's justice. Now if the conscience, sprinkled with the blood of Christ, has prevailed over the assaults brought upon it from the justice of God, charges which are now satisfied by Christ, then it will prevail over all other opposition whatsoever.

2. We are to encounter accursed and damned enemies; therefore, if they begin to fall before the Spirit in us, they shall finally fall. And if they rise up again, it is only to have a greater fall.

3. The Spirit of truth, to whose instruction Christ has committed his church, and the truth of the Spirit, which is the scepter of Christ, abide forever. Therefore, the soul begotten by the immortal seed of the Spirit (1Pet. 1:23), and by this truth, must not only live forever, but also prevail over all that oppose it. For both the Word and the Spirit are mighty in operation (Heb. 4:12). And, if the wicked spirit is never idle in those whom God has delivered up to Satan, we cannot think that the Holy Spirit will be idle in those whose leading and government is committed to the Spirit. No, just as he dwells in them, so he will drive out all who rise up against him, until Christ is all in all (1Cor 15:28; Eph 1:23).

What is spiritual is eternal. Truth is a beam of Christ's Spirit, both in itself and as it is grafted into the soul. Therefore it and the grace worked by it, though little, will prevail. A little thing in the hand of a giant will do great things. A little faith strengthened by Christ will work wonders.

4. "To everyone who has shall be given more" (Matt. 25:29). The victory over corruption or temptation is a pledge of final victory. As Joshua said when he set his foot upon the five kings whom he conquered, "Thus shall the LORD do to all your enemies" (Josh. 10:25). Heaven is ours already, only we strive till we have full possession.

5. Christ as king brings a commanding light into the soul and bows the neck, and softens the iron sinew of the inner man; and where he begins to rule, he rules forever, for "of his kingdom there shall be no end" (Luke 1:33).

6. The purpose of Christ's coming was to destroy the works of the devil, both for us and in us; and the purpose of the resurrection was not just to seal to us the assurance of his victory, but also (1) to enliven our souls from death in sin; (2) to free our souls from those snares and sorrows of spiritual death which accompany the guilt of sin; (3) to raise them up more comfortable, just like the sun breaks forth more gloriously out of a thick cloud; (4) to raise us out of particular slips and failings stronger; (5) to raise us out of all troublesome and dark conditions of this life; and (6) at length to raise our bodies out of the dust. For the same power that the Spirit showed in raising Christ our Head from the sorrows of death, and the lowest degree of his abasement, that power obtained by the death of Christ from God who is now appeased by Christ's sacrifice, will be shown by the Spirit in the church, which is his body, and in every particular member of it.

This power is conveyed to us by faith, after union with Christ in his estates both of humiliation and of exaltation. By faith, we see ourselves not only dead with Christ, but risen and sitting together with him in heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). Now, understanding ourselves to be dead and risen, and therefore victorious over all our enemies in our Head, and understanding that his aim in all this is to conform us to himself, we are by this faith changed into his likeness (2Cor. 3:18). And so we become conquerors over all our spiritual enemies, just as he is, by that power which we derive from him who is the storehouse of all spiritual strength for all his people. Christ at

length will fulfill his purpose in us, and faith rests assured of it; and this assurance is very operative, stirring us up to join with Christ in his purposes.

And so, by Christ the church in general will have its victory. Christ is that little “stone cut out without hands” which broke in pieces the goodly image (Dan. 2:34), that is, it broke into pieces all opposing government until it became “a great mountain, and filled the whole earth” (Dan. 2:35). Thus the stone that was cut out of the mountain becomes a mountain itself at length. Who are you, then, O mountain, who thinks to stand up against this mountain? All shall lie flat and level before it. He will bring down all mountainous, high, and exalted thoughts, and lay low the pride of all flesh. When chaff strives against the wind, or stubble strives against the fire, when the heel kicks against the goads (Act 26:14), when the clay strives with the potter, when man strives against God, it is easy to know which side the victory will be on. The winds may toss the ship in which Christ is found, but it cannot overturn it. The waves may dash against the rock, but they will only break themselves against it.

Why The Enemy Seems Victorious

Objection: If this is so, then why does the victory seem to be with the enemy, as it thus seems to be with the church of God, and with many a gracious Christian?.

To understand this, we should remember, first, that God’s children usually overcome their troubles by suffering. Here lambs overcome lions and doves overcome eagles, by suffering. In this they may be conformed to Christ who conquered most when he suffered most. Together with Christ’s kingdom of patience, there was a kingdom of power.

Secondly, this victory is by degrees. Therefore those who would conquer as soon as they strike the first blow are too hasty; they want to be at the end of their race at their first stride forward. The Israelites were sure of their victory in their journey to Canaan, yet they had to fight it out. God would not have us quickly forget what cruel enemies Christ has overcome for us. “Do not slay them, lest my people forget,” says the Psalmist (Psa. 59:11). By the experience of that annoyance we have from them, we may be kept in fear of coming under their power.

Thirdly, God often works by contrary means: when he means to give victory, he will allow us to be foiled at first; when he means to comfort us, he will terrify us first; when he means to justify us, he will condemn us first; when he means to make us glorious, he will abase us first. A Christian conquers, even when he is conquered. When he is conquered by some sins, he gets victory over others that are more dangerous, such as spiritual pride and security.

Fourthly, Christ’s work, both in the church and in the hearts of Christians, often goes backward so that it may go forward better. Just as seed rots in the ground in the winter time, but afterward comes up better, and just as the harder the winter is, the more flourishing the spring becomes, so we learn to stand by our falls; we get strength by discovering our weakness: *virtutis custos infirmitas* (weakness is the keeper of virtue). We take deeper root by being shaken. And just as torches grow brighter by moving them, so it pleases Christ, out of his freedom, to maintain his government in us in this way. Let us labor in this to exercise our faith, so that it may respond to Christ’s way of dealing with us. When we are foiled, let us believe we shall overcome; when we have fallen, let us believe we shall rise again. Jacob, after he received a blow which made him lame, he would not give up wrestling till he had obtained the blessing (Gen. 32:25). In the same way, let us never give up, but in our thoughts let us knit the beginning, the progress, and the end together. Then we will see ourselves in heaven out of the reach of all enemies. Let us assure ourselves that God’s grace, even in this imperfect state, is stronger than man’s free will in the state of original perfection. It is founded now in Christ who, just as he is the author of our faith, so will he be the finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:2). We are under a more gracious covenant.

Some say that rooted faith, *fides radicata*, continues, while weak faith may come to nothing. This seems to be contradicted by this Scripture; for just as the strongest faith may be shaken, so the weakest faith, where truth is found, is so far rooted that it will also prevail. Weakness with watchfulness will stand, when strength with too much confidence will fail. Weakness with acknowledgement of its weakness, is the fittest seat; and it is subject for God to perfect his strength in it; for being conscious of our infirmities drives us out of ourselves to the One in whom our strength lies.

From this it follows that weakness may be consistent with the assurance of our salvation. The disciples, notwithstanding all their weaknesses, are bid to rejoice that their names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20). Failings in sanctification caused by conflict should not weaken the peace of our justification, nor the assurance of our salvation. It does not matter so much what ill is in us, as it does what good is in us; it not what corruptions are in us, but how we regard them; it is not what our particular failings are so much as what the thread and tenor of our lives are; for Christ's dislike of what is amiss in us does not turn into hatred of our persons, but into the victorious subduing of all our infirmities.

After conflict, some have wondered at the goodness of God: that so little faith and such trembling faith should have upheld them in such great combats, when Satan had almost caught them. And, indeed, it is to be wondered at. It is a wonder how much a little grace will prevail with God for acceptance, and will prevail over our enemies for victory — if the heart is upright. Such is the goodness of our sweet Savior that he still delights to show his strength in our weakness (2Cor 12:7-9).

Consolation For Weak Christians

The first use of this truth is for the great consolation of poor and weak Christians. Let them know that a spark from heaven, even though kindled under greenwood that pops and smokes, yet it will consume it all at last. Love once kindled is as strong as death. Many waters cannot quench it; therefore it is called a vehement flame, or the flame of God (Song of Sol. 8:6); it is kindled in the heart by the Holy Ghost. The little that is in us is fed with an everlasting spring. Just as the fire that came down from heaven in Elijah's time licked up all the water to show that it came from God (1 Kings 18:38), so will this fire consume all our corruption. No affliction from without, or corruption from within, shall quench it. In the morning, we often see clouds gather around the sun, as if they would hide it; but the sun overcomes them little by little, till it comes to its full strength. At first, fears and doubts keep this fire from breaking out, until at length it gets above them all, and Christ prevails. Then he upholds his own graces in us. Grace conquers us first, and then by grace we conquer all else: whether corruptions within us, or temptations outside us.

The church of Christ, begotten by the Word of truth, has the doctrine of the apostles for her crown. It tramples the moon "under her feet" (Rev. 12:1), that is, the world and all worldly things. Everyone who is "born of God overcomes the world" (1John 5:4). Faith, by which Christ especially rules, sets the soul so high that it looks down on all other things as far below itself; the Spirit of Christ presents to it riches, honor, beauty and pleasures of a higher nature.

Evidences Of Christ's Rule In Us

Now, so that we may not fall short of the comfort intended, there are two things to especially take notice of: first, whether there is such a judgment or government set up in us to which this promise of victory is made, and secondly, how we are to conduct ourselves so that the judgment of Christ in us may indeed be victorious.

These are the evidences by which we may come to know that Christ's judgment in us is such that it will be victorious:

1. Being able from experience to justify all Christ's ways, whatever flesh and blood say to the contrary, and to willingly subscribe to that course which God has taken in Christ to bring us to heaven, still approving a further measure of grace than we have attained to, and projecting and planning for it. No other men can justify their courses when their conscience is awakened.
2. Having reasons of religion as our strongest reasons, prevailing over reasons fetched from the world.
3. Being so true to our ends and steadfast to our rule of faith that no hopes or fears can sway us another way, yet continuing to enquire what agrees with or differs from our rule.
4. Being able to "do nothing against the truth, but for the truth" (2Cor. 13:8), the truth being dearer to us than our lives. Truth does not have this sovereignty in the heart of any carnal man.
5. If we had liberty to choose whose government under which we would live, we choose Christ above any other to rule us, out of a delight in the inner man toward Christ's government. This argues that we are like-minded with Christ; we are a free and a willing people, and not compelled to Christ's service other than by the sweet constraint of love. When we are so far satisfied with the government of Christ's Spirit that we are willing to resign ourselves to him in all things, then his kingdom has come to us, and our wills are brought to his will. It is the bent of our wills that makes us good or bad.
6. Having a well-ordered, uniform life, not consisting of fits and starts, shows a well-ordered heart; as in a clock when the hammer strikes well, and the hand of the dial points well, it is a sign that the wheels are rightly set.
7. When Christ's will competes with any earthly loss or gain, then in that particular case, having a heart that is willing to bow to Christ is a true sign; for the truest trial of the power of grace is in those particular cases which touch us closest, for that is where our corruption makes the greatest headway. When Christ came closest to home with the young man in the gospel, he lost him as a disciple (Matt. 19. 22).
8. Being able to practice duties that are pleasing to Christ, even though they are contrary to the flesh and to the course of the world; being able to overcome ourselves in that evil to which our nature is prone and stands so much inclined, and which agrees with the ruling passion of the times, those under which others lie enthralled, such as a desire for revenge, hatred of enemies, private ends, etc. — this shows that the grace in us is above our nature, just as heaven is above the earth, and that we will have the victory.

To make this clearer, and help us in our trial, we must know that there are three degrees of victory: *first*, when we resist, even though we are foiled; *second*, when grace gets the better of the conflict; and *third*, when all corruption is perfectly subdued. When we have strength only to resist, we may know Christ's government in us will be victorious, because what is said of the devil is true of all our spiritual enemies: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7); and because "Greater is he that is in you", the one who takes sides with his own grace, "than he that is in the world" (1John 4:4). And if we may hope for victory from mere resistance, what may we not hope for when the Spirit has gained the upper hand?

14. Means to Make Grace Victorious

Rules for right judgment — Keeping our judgment clear — Reasons for seeming lack of progress — All should side with Christ

As to directions on how we are to conduct ourselves so that the judgment of Christ in us may indeed be victorious, we must know that even though Christ has undertaken this victory, he accomplishes it by training us up to fight his battles. He overcomes in us by making us "wise

unto salvation” (2Tim. 3:15). To the extent that we believe *Christ* will conquer, we will endeavor by his grace so that *we* may conquer: for faith is an obedient and a wise grace. Christ makes us wise to ponder and weigh things, and to rank and order them accordingly, so that we may make the more appropriate choice of what is best. Some rules to help us in judging are these:

Rules For Right Judgment

We should judge things as to whether they help or hinder our main purpose; whether they further or hinder our judgment; whether they make us more or less spiritual, and thus bring us nearer to the fountain of goodness, God himself; whether they will bring us peace or sorrow at the end; whether they commend us more or less to God, and whether they are the thing in which we will most approve ourselves to him. We should also judge things now as we will judge them hereafter when the soul will be best able to judge, such as when we are under any public calamity, or at the hour of death, when the soul draws itself away from all other things. We should look back to our former experience and see what is most agreeable to it, and what was best in our worst of times. If grace is or was best then, it is still best now. We should also labor to judge things as he who must judge us will do, and as holy men judge who are led by the Spirit. More specifically, we should judge according to what is judged by those who have no interest in any benefit that may come from the thing in question: for outward things blind the eyes even of the wise. We see that papists are most corrupt in those things where their honor, ease, or profit is involved; but in the doctrine of the Trinity, which does not touch on these things, they are sound. But it is not sufficient that our judgment is *right*. It must also be *ready*, and *strong*.

Keeping Our Judgment Clear

1. Where Christ establishes his government, he inspires care to keep the judgment clear and fresh. For while the judgment stands straight and firm, the whole frame of the soul continues strong and impregnable. True judgment in us advances Christ, and Christ will advance true judgment. All sin comes from false principles, or ignorance, or thoughtlessness, or unbelief of what is true. By lack of consideration and weakness of assent, Eve lost her hold at first (Gen. 3:6). It is good, therefore, to store up true principles in our hearts, and to refresh them often, so that in their virtue, our affections and actions may be more vigorous. When judgment is fortified, evil finds no entrance; instead, good things have found favor within us to entertain them. While true convincing light continues, we will not do the least ill of sin because of the greatest ill of punishment.¹⁶ “In vain the net is spread in the sight of any bird” (Prov. 1:17). While the soul is kept aloft, there is little danger of snares below. We must lose our high estimation of good things before we can be drawn into any sin.

2. And because knowledge and affection are mutually helpful, it is good to maintain our affections of love and delight by using every sweet inducement and divine encouragement; for what the heart likes best, the mind studies most. Those who can bring their hearts to delight in Christ know his ways most. Wisdom loves the one who loves her. Love is the best entertainer of truth. When truth is not entertained by the love of truth (2Thess. 2:10), as lovely as truth is, it will stay no longer, and it leaves the heart. A successful way to corrupt the judgment is to begin by withdrawing love; because as we love, so we tend to judge. Therefore it is hard to be both affectionate and wise in earthly things. But in heavenly things, where the judgment has been rightly informed *beforehand*, then the more our affections grow, the better and clearer our judgments become. This is because our affections alone, though strong, can never rise high enough to reach the excellence of the things. But in the martyrs, once the sweet *doctrine* of Christ had gained their hearts, we see that it could not be removed again by all the torments the

¹⁶ The threat of punishment cannot keep us obedient, or Adam might not have fallen. Sibbes is merely saying that keeping a high and present awareness of God’s precepts and grace, and of the snares of sin, we are less likely to fall into sin.

wit of cruelty could devise. So, if Christ is the one who possesses our *affections*, there is no dispossessing him again. A fire within the heart overcomes all fires without.

3. Wisdom also teaches us where our weakness lies, and where our enemy's strength lies. By this means, a jealous fear is stirred up in us from which we are preserved; for out of this godly jealousy we keep those provocations which are active and working, from those which are passive and halting in us, just as we keep fire away from gunpowder. Those who wish to hinder the generation of noisome creatures will first hinder them from conceiving, by keeping male and female apart. This jealous care will be greatly furthered by strictly observing what has helped or hindered a gracious temperament in us; and that will make us take heed that we do not consult with flesh and blood, whether ourselves or others. Otherwise, how can we think that Christ will lead us out to victory, when we take counsel with his enemies and ours?

4. Christ also makes us careful to use all means by which fresh thoughts and affections may be stirred up and preserved in us. Christ so honors the use of means, and the care he bestows on us, that he ascribes both preservation and victory to our care in keeping ourselves: "One who is begotten of God keeps himself" (1John 5:18) — though not by himself but by the Lord, depending on God in the use of means. We are only safe when we wisely make use of all good advantages that we have access to. By going out of God's ways, we go out of his government, and so we lose our good frame of mind and find ourselves quickly overspread with a contrary disposition. When we draw near to Christ in his ordinances (James 4:8), he draws near to us.

5. We must keep exercising grace. It is not sleepy habits, but exercised grace that preserves us. While the soul is in some civil or sacred employment, corruptions within us are greatly suppressed and Satan's ways of approaching us are stopped. The Spirit then has a way open to enlarge his influence in us; and likewise, the protection of angels is then closest to us. This course often prevails more against our spiritual enemies than direct opposition will do. Christ is honor-bound to maintain those who are in his work.

6. In following all these directions, we must look up to Christ, the quickening Spirit, and make our resolutions in his strength. Though we are exhorted to cleave to the Lord with full purpose of heart (Acts 11:23), yet we must pray with David, "Keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts toward you." (1 Chron. 29:18). Of themselves, our hearts are very loose and unsettled. "Unite my heart to fear your name" (Psa. 86:11); or else, without him, our best purposes will fall to the ground. It is a pleasing request to beg such a frame of heart from him, made out of love to God so that he may take delight in it. And therefore, in the use of all the means, we must send up to him our desires for strength, and pleadings for help. Then we may be sure that he will "send forth judgment unto victory."

7. Lastly, it furthers the state of the soul to know what frame it should be in, so that we may order our souls accordingly. We should always be fit for communion with God, and be heavenly minded in earthly business, and be willing to be taken off from our earthly business to redeem our time for better things. We should be ready at all times to depart from it, and to live in such a condition as we would be content to die in. We should have hearts prepared for every good duty, open to all good opportunities, and shut to all temptations, keeping our watch, and always being ready-armed. To the extent we come short of these things, we have just cause to be humbled; and yet we should press forward, so that we may gain more of these things for ourselves, and make them more familiar and lovely to us. And when we find our souls at all declining, it is best to raise them up quickly by some type of awakening meditation, such as meditating on the presence of God; the strict reckoning we are to make of ourselves; the infinite love of God in Christ, and the fruits of that love; the excellence of a Christian's calling; the short and uncertain time of this life; how all those things that steal our hearts will do us little good before long; and however we spend this short time, whether for good or ill, it will be with us forever after. The more we make room for such considerations to sink into our hearts, the more we will rise nearer

to that state of the soul which we will enjoy in heaven. When we grow careless of keeping our souls, then God recovers our taste for good things again by sharp crosses. Thus David, Solomon, and Samson were recovered: this taste of good things is much easier *kept* than *recovered*.

Reasons For Seeming Lack Of Progress

Objection: But, notwithstanding my striving, I seem to remain at a standstill.

1. Grace grows, just as the seed in the parable grows, but we do not know how. Yet at length, when God sees fittest, we will see that all our endeavor has not been in vain. The tree falls at the final stroke, yet all the previous strokes helped the work forward.

2. Sometimes victory is suspended because some Achan is not found out (Josh 7); or because we are not humble enough, just as Israel lost against the Benjamites until they fasted and prayed (Judg. 20:26); or because we betray our helps and do not stand guard; or we do not quickly yield to the motions of the Spirit who always reminds us of the best things, if we only pay attention to his prompting. Our own consciences will tell us, if we allow them to speak, that the cause is some sinful favoring of ourselves. The way to prevail in these cases is first, to get the victory over the pride of our own nature by taking shame to ourselves, in humble confession to God; and then, secondly, to overcome the unbelief of our hearts by yielding to the promise of pardon; and then, thirdly, being confident of Christ's assistance, set ourselves against those sins which have prevailed over us. So prevailing over ourselves, we will easily prevail over all our enemies and conquer all those conditions into which we are brought.

All Should Side With Christ

The second use of the truth that Christ will have the victory, is to establish the fact that the best course for nations and states is to "kiss the Son" (Psa. 2:12), and to embrace Christ and his religion: to side with Christ and to own his cause in the world. His side will prove the stronger side in the end. We are happy if Christ so much as honors us by using our help to fight his battle "against the mighty" (Judg. 5:23). True religion in a state is like the main pillar of a house, or the post of a tent, which holds everything up. This is true for families too, if Christ is the chief governor of the family. And it is true for everyone who is like a house in which Christ dwells familiarly and rules. Where Christ is, all happiness must follow. If Christ goes, then all will go. Where Christ's government is, in his ordinances and his Spirit, all subordinate government will prosper. Religion inspires life and grace in all other things. All other virtues without religion are like an attractive picture without a head. Where Christ's laws are written in the heart, all other good laws are obeyed the best. No one despises man's law except those who despise Christ's first. *Nemo humanam auctoritatem contemnit, nisi qui divinam prius contempsit* (No one despises human authority unless he first despises divine authority). Of all persons, a man guided by Christ is the best; and of all creatures in the world, next to the devil, a man guided merely by his will and affection is the worst. The happiness of weaker things consists in being ruled by stronger things. It is best for a blind man to be guided by one who has sight. It is best for sheep and other feckless creatures to be guided by man. And it is happiest for man to be guided by Christ. That is because his government is so victorious that it frees us from the fear and danger of our greatest enemies, and it tends to bring us to the greatest happiness that our nature is capable of enjoying. This should make us rejoice when Christ reigns in us. When Solomon was crowned, the people rejoiced so much that the city rang (1Kings 1:45); and we should we rejoice in Christ our king much more.

Likewise, for those whose souls are dear to us, our endeavor should be that Christ may reign in them also, and that they may be baptized by Christ with this fire (Matt. 3:11), and that these sparks may be kindled in them. Men labor to cherish the "spirit and mettle" (as they term it) of those they train up, because they think they will be able to make use of it in the manifold affairs

and troubles of this life. Let us instead cherish the sparks of *grace* in them; for in great troubles a natural spirit will fail, but these sparks will make them conquerors over the greatest evils.

The third use of the truth of Christ's victory is to observe that if Christ's judgment will be victorious, then popery must fall: it has an opposite frame set up by the wit of man to maintain stately idleness. It has already fallen in the hearts of those on whom the light of Christ has shone. It is a lie, and founded on a lie, on the infallible judgment of a man subject to sin and error. When what is taken for a principle of truth becomes a principle of error, the more reliance there is on it, the more danger there is.

15. Christ's Public Triumph

The open glory of Christ in his members — Follow sincerity and truth — Christ alone advances this government — We must not look to ourselves — Christ makes us feel our dependence — The triumph of grace

It is not only said that judgment will be victorious, but that Christ will bring it forth openly to victory. From this we observe that grace will become glory, and that it will come forth into the sight of all. Christ now conquers and achieves his own ends, but he does so to some extent invisibly. His enemies in us and outside us seem to prevail. But he will bring forth judgment unto victory in full view of all. The wicked who now shut their eyes to this will see it to their torment. It will not be in the power of insidious men to see or not see what they wish. Christ will have power over their hearts. Just as his wrath will immediately seize their souls against their wills, so he will have power over the eyes of their souls so that they may see and know what will increase their misery. Grief will be fastened to all their senses, and their senses to grief.

Then all the false glosses which they put on things will be wiped off. Men desire to have the reputation of being good, and yet they desire the sweetness of evil; nothing is so cordially opposed by them as that truth which bares them to themselves and to the eyes of others. Their chief care is how to deceive the world and their own consciences. But the time will come when they will be driven out of this fools' paradise; the more subtle their manipulation of things has been, the more will be their shame.

The Open Glory Of Christ In His Members

Christ, whom God has chosen to bring forth the chief glory of his excellences, is now veiled in relation to his body, the church. But before long he will come to be glorious in his saints (2Thess. 1:10), and he will not lose the clear manifestation of any of his attributes. He will declare what he is to all the world, and then there will be no glory but that of Christ and his spouse. Those who are like smoking flax now, will then shine like the sun in the firmament (Matt. 13:43), and their judgment will be brought forth like the noonday sun (Psa. 37:6).

The image of God in Adam had a commanding majesty in it so that all creatures revered him. Much more will the image of God in its perfection command respect from all. Even now there is a secret awe put into the hearts of the greatest towards those in whom they see any grace shining. So it was that Herod feared John the Baptist; but what will this be on the day they are presented, which is called "the manifestation of the sons of God" (Rom. 8:19)?

There will be more glorious times when the kingdoms of this world will be the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ (Rev. 11:15), and he will reign forever. Then judgment and truth will have their victory. Then Christ will plead his own cause. Truth will no longer be called heresy and schism, nor will heresy be called catholic doctrine. Wickedness will no longer go masked and disguised. Goodness shall appear in its own luster, and shine in its own beams. Things shall be what they are, "for there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed" (Matt. 10:26).

Iniquity will not be carried on in mystery any longer (2Th 2:7). Deep dissemblers, who think to hide their counsels from the Lord, will no longer walk invisibly as in the clouds. Christ will not quench the least spark kindled by himself, but he will dampen the fairest blaze of goodly appearances which are not from above.

Follow Sincerity And Truth

If this were believed, men would take more account of sincerity which alone will give us boldness. They would not seek covers for their shame; confidence in such covers makes men more presumptuous now, but it will expose them to greater shame hereafter.

If judgment will be brought forth to victory, then those who have been ruled by their own deceitful hearts and by a spirit of error will be brought forth to disgrace. The God that has joined grace and truth with honor has joined sin and shame together at last. All the wit and power of man will never be able to sever what God has coupled together. Truth and piety may be trampled upon for a time. But just as the two witnesses rose again after they were slain, and stood upon their feet (Rev. 11:11), so whatever is of God will at length stand upon its own foundation. There will be a resurrection not only of bodies, but of reputations. Can we think that God, who threw angels out of heaven, will allow dust and worms' meat to take a different course, and to continue so always? No, as truly as Christ is "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev. 19:16), he will dash every piece of earth which rises up against him, "like a potter's vessel" (Psa. 2:9). Was there ever anyone who fiercely opposed God and prospered (Job 9:4)? No, doubtless the wrath of man will turn to Christ's praise (Psa. 76:10). What was said of Pharaoh shall be said of all defiant enemies who would rather lose their souls than their wills: that they are only raised up for Christ to be glorified in their confusion.

Let us, then, be careful not to follow the ways of those men whose ends we will tremble at. There is not a more fearful judgment that can befall the nature of man than to be given up to a reprobate judgment of persons and things, because that judgment comes under a woe: "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil" (Isa. 5:20).

Those who abuse the judgment of others by sophistry and flattery, by "deceiving and being deceived" (2Tim. 3:13), will be laden with curses another day. Then the excuse of our first mother Eve will be adopted, but fruitlessly: "The *serpent* beguiled me" (Gen. 3:13); *Satan* has deceived me; *sin* has deceived me; a *foolish heart* has deceived me. It is one of the highest points of wisdom to consider on what grounds we risk our souls. Those who have a right judgment of things by Christ's light, and allow that judgment to prevail over their hearts, will be happy men.

The souls of most men are drowned in their senses, and carried away with weak opinions rising from vulgar mistakes and shadows of things. Satan is ready to enlarge our imaginings of what is outwardly good and evil, and to make them greater than they are; he is ready to make spiritual things less than they are, and to present them through false glasses. And so men, trusting in vanity, vanquish themselves in their own apprehension of things. It is a woeful condition when both we and what we highly esteem vanish together. And this will happen, as truly as Christ's judgment will come to victory. To the extent that the *vain heart* of man is enlarged to conceive a greater good in the things of this world than there actually is, so the soul is enlarged to be more aware of misery when it sees its error. This is the difference between a godly, wise man and a deluded worldling: what the one now judges to be vain, the other will hereafter judge, when it is too late. But the vanity of our natures is that, although we avoid above all else being deceived and mistaken in present things, yet in the greatest matters of all, we are willingly ignorant and misled.

Christ Alone Advances This Government

A further conclusion is this: that this government is set up and advanced by Christ alone. He is the one who “brings judgment to victory.” We both fight and prevail “in the power of *his* might” (Eph. 6:10). We overcome by the Spirit, obtained by “the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 12:11).¹⁷

It is he alone who teaches our hands to war and our fingers to fight (Psa. 144:1). Nature, because it is corrupted, favors its own existence, and it will maintain itself against Christ’s government. Nature, simply considered, cannot raise itself above itself to actions which are spiritual and of a higher order and nature. Therefore the divine power of Christ is necessary to carry us above our own strength, especially those in duties in which we meet with greater opposition; for there, not only will nature fail us, but ordinary grace will fail us, unless there is a stronger and a new supply of it. In lifting a burden that is weightier than ordinary, unless there is greater strength than weight, the one who undertakes to lift it will fall under the burden; thus for every strong encounter there must be a new supply of strength. This was the case for Peter. When he was assaulted with a stronger temptation, not being upheld and shored up with a mightier hand, and despite his former strength, he shamefully fell (Matt. 26:69, 74).¹⁸ And being fallen, it is Christ who must do the work to raise us up again, by (1) removing, or (2) weakening, or (3) suspending any opposing hindrances; and (4) by advancing the power of his grace in us to a further degree than we had before we fell. Therefore, when we have fallen, and have been bruised by our falls, let us go to Christ *immediately* to bind us up again.

We Must Not Look To Ourselves

Let us know, therefore, that it is dangerous to look to ourselves for what we must have from Christ. Since the Fall, all our strength lies in him, just as Samson’s strength lay in his hair (Judg. 16:17). We are only subordinate agents, moving as we are moved, working as we are first worked upon, free in so far as we are freed, neither wiser nor stronger than Christ makes us for the present in anything we undertake. It is his Spirit who actuates and enlivens us, and who applies whatever knowledge and strength we have; otherwise, it fails and lies useless within us. We work best when we work from a present strength; therefore, dependent spirits are the wisest and the ablest. Nothing is stronger than humility which moves out of itself; nothing is weaker than pride, which rests on its own foundation. *Frustra nititur qui non innititur* (He strives in vain who is not dependent). And this should be especially observed because by nature we aspire to a kind of divinity, setting about acting in the strength of our own abilities. By contrast, Christ says, “Without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5); he was speaking to the apostles who were in a state of grace. He does not say, “you can do a little,” but “nothing.” Of ourselves, how easily we are overcome! How weak we are to resist! We are like reeds shaken with every wind. We shake at the very noise and thought of poverty, disgrace, or losses. We give in immediately. We have no power over our eyes, tongues, thoughts, or affections; instead, we let sin pass in and out. How soon we are overcome by evil, whereas we are supposed to overcome evil with good.¹⁹ How many good purposes are stuck in birth, and have no strength to come forth. All of this shows that we are nothing without the Spirit of Christ. We see how weak the apostles themselves were till they were endued with strength from above. Peter was blasted with the speech of a damsel (Matt. 26:69). But after the Spirit of Christ fell upon them, the more they suffered the more they were *encouraged* to suffer. Their comforts grew with their troubles. Therefore in everything, and especially in difficult encounters, let us lift up our hearts to Christ who has Spirit enough for us all, and in all our exigencies. Let us say with good Jehoshaphat, “We have no might . . . nor do we know what to do: but our eyes are upon you” (2 Chron. 20:12); the battle we fight is yours,

¹⁷ **John 16:7** Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is expedient for you that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send him to you.

¹⁸ Peter’s denial of Christ in the courtyard.

¹⁹ Rom 12:21

and the strength by which we fight must be yours. If you do not go out with us, we are sure to be foiled. Satan knows that nothing can prevail against Christ, or against those that who on his power. Therefore what Satan studies is how to keep us in ourselves, and in the creature. But we must carry this always in our minds: that what is begun in self-confidence will end in shame.

Christ Makes Us Feel Our Dependence

The manner of Christ's bringing forth judgment to victory is by letting us see the necessity of our dependence on him. From this proceed all those spiritual desertions in which he often leaves us to ourselves, apart from his grace and comfort, so we may know that the source of these is outside ourselves. Hence it is that in the pinnacle, in the extremities of our distress, God is seen most (Gen. 22:14). Hence it is that we are saved by the grace of faith which carries us out of ourselves to rely upon another; faith works best alone, when it has the least outward support. Hence it is that we often fail in lesser conflicts and stand firm in greater ones, because in the lesser ones we rely more on ourselves; while in the greater ones we fly to the rock of our salvation, which is higher than we are (Psa. 61:2). Hence it is that we are stronger after defeats, because hidden corruption, which was undiscerned before, is now discovered; and from there we are drawn to make use of God's mercy pardoning us, and his power supporting us.

One main reason for this dispensation is that we should know it is Christ who gives both the will and the deed, and he does so as a voluntary work according to his own good pleasure. Therefore we should work out our salvation in a jealous fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12), lest by irreverent and presumptuous conduct we give him cause to suspend his gracious influence, and leave us to the darkness of our own hearts.

The Triumph Of Grace

Those who are under Christ's government have the spirit of revelation by which they see and feel a divine power sweetly and strongly enabling them to preserve their faith when they feel the contrary; and to hope in a state which is hopeless; and to extend love towards God under signs of his displeasure; and to be heavenly-minded in the midst of worldly affairs and allurements which draw us a contrary way. They feel a power preserving their patience, no, their *joy* in the midst of causes for mourning, and preserving their inward peace in the midst of assaults. Why else do we stand firm when we are assaulted with temptation and encompassed with troubles, unless it is from a secret strength that upholds us? To make so little grace so victorious over so great a mass of corruption, requires a spirit that is more than human. This is like preserving fire in the sea, and a part of heaven, as it were, even in hell. Here we know where to obtain this power, and to whom to return the praise of it. And it is our happiness that it is so safely hidden in Christ, in one who is so near to God and to us. Since the Fall, God will not trust us with our own salvation. Instead, it is both purchased and kept for us by Christ, and we are purchased and kept for it through faith, worked by the power of God which we lay hold of. This power is gloriously set forth by Paul: it is (1) a great power; (2) an exceeding power; (3) a working and a mighty power; and (4) the same power that raised Christ from the dead (Eph. 1:19, 20). Grace which is only a persuasive offer, and which is in our power to receive or refuse, is not the grace which brings us to heaven.²⁰ Rather than this, God's people feel a powerful work of the Spirit, not only revealing to us our misery and our deliverance through Christ, but emptying us of ourselves, as if being redeemed from ourselves; and infusing new life into us, and afterwards strengthening us, and invigorating us when we droop and hang the wing, never leaving us until the conquest is perfect.

²⁰ This is a rejection of the Arminian view of salvation in which we have the power to accept or refuse an "offer" of grace.

16 . Through Conflict to Victory

Why Christ's government is opposed — We must expect opposition — Our victory in Christ is certain — Treasure the least degree of grace — Encouragement to come to Christ — Christ is the hope of the church — Faith will prevail

The text also implies that the prevailing of Christ's government will not be without fighting. There can be no victory where there is no combat. In Isaiah it is said, "He shall bring forth judgment unto truth" (Isa. 42:3). In Matthew it is said that he shall "send forth judgment unto victory" (Matt. 12:20). The word "send forth" has a stronger sense in the original: to send forth with force; this shows that where his government is in truth, it will be opposed until he gets the upper hand. Nothing is so opposed as Christ and his government, both within us and outside us; and within us it is most opposed in our conversion. Though corruption does not prevail so far as to make void the powerful work of grace, there is not only a possibility of opposing it, but a proneness to oppose it; and there is not only a proneness to oppose it, but an actual withstanding of the working of Christ's Spirit; and that opposition is found in every action. Yet resistance will not prevail so far as to make void the work of grace; rather, our corruption yields to grace.

It takes great effort to bring Christ into the heart, and to set up a tribunal for him to judge there. There is an army of lusts that are in mutiny against him. The utmost strength of most men's endeavors and abilities is directed to keeping Christ from ruling in the soul. The flesh still labors to maintain its own government. Therefore it discredits whatever crosses it, such as God's blessed ordinances; and it highly prizes anything, no matter how dead and empty it is, if that thing will allow the liberty of the flesh.

Why Christ's Government Is Opposed

It is no wonder that the spiritual government of Christ is so opposed:

First, because it is *government*, and that limits the course of the will, and it throws a bridle on its wanderings. Everything natural resists what opposes it; so the corrupt will labors to tear down all laws; and it considers it a noble thing not to be awed, and it argues that it is a weak spirit to fear anyone, even God himself, until unavoidable danger seizes men. Then those who feared least when out of danger, fear most when they are in danger, as we see in Belshazzar (Dan. 5:6).²¹

Secondly, it is *spiritual government*, and therefore the flesh will endure it even less. Christ's government brings the very thoughts and desires, which are the most immediate and free issue of the soul, into obedience (2Cor 10:4). Even if a man had such controlled behavior that his whole life was free from outward offenses, yet in Christ's eyes, to be carnally or worldly-minded is death (Rom. 8:6). He looks on a worldly mind with greater detest than any particular offense.

One may say, "But Christ's Spirit is in those who are in some degree earthly-minded." True, but not as one who allows and maintains it, but as one who opposes, subdues, and in the end conquers it. Carnal men would like to have Christ and the flesh together; they could be content to submit to Christ, with reservations. But Christ will not be an underling to any base affection. Therefore, where we allow ourselves any sinful lust, it is a sign that the keys were never given to Christ to rule us.

Thirdly, this judgment is opposed because it is *judgment*, and men do not like to be judged and censured. Now Christ, in his truth, arraigns men, sentences them, and binds them over to the latter judgment of the great day. Therefore they take it upon themselves to judge that truth

²¹ **Daniel 5:6** Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosened, and his knees struck against one another.

which must judge them. But truth will then be too strong for them. Man has a day now, which Paul calls “man’s day” (1Cor. 4:3 “man’s judgment”), in which he gets up on his judge’s bench and usurps the right to judge Christ and his ways. But God has a day in which he will set everything straight, and his judgment shall stand. And the saints will have their time when they shall sit in judgment on those who judge them now (1Cor. 6:2). In the meantime, Christ will rule in the midst of his enemies (Psa. 110:2), even in the midst of our hearts.

We Must Expect Opposition

Therefore, it is not a sign of our good condition to find everything quiet and with no opposition; for can we think that corruption, which is the older element in us, and Satan, the strongman who has many holds over us, will yield possession of us quietly? No, there is not so much as a thought of goodness disclosed by him; rather he joins with our corruption to kill goodness at birth. Just as Pharaoh’s cruelty was especially directed against the male children, so Satan’s malice is especially directed against the most religious and manly resolutions.

This, then, we are always to expect: that wherever Christ comes, there will be opposition. When Christ was born, all Jerusalem was troubled; so when Christ is born in any man, the soul is in an uproar, and it is all because the heart is unwilling to yield itself to Christ to rule it.

Wherever Christ comes he brings division, not only between man and himself, but between man and man, and between church and church; Christ is no more the cause of this disturbance than medicine is the cause of trouble in a diseased body. Harmful agents are the real cause, for the purpose of medicine is to bring health. But Christ thinks it fit to reveal the thoughts of men’s hearts, and he is prepared for the fall as well as the rising of many in Israel (Luke 2:34).

Thus the desperate madness of men is laid bare: that they would rather be under the guidance of their own lusts and, because of Satan, to suffer the consequence of their endless destruction, than to put their feet into Christ’s fetters and their necks under his yoke — though, indeed, serving Christ is the only true liberty. His yoke is an easy yoke, and his burden is like the burden of wings to a bird which make her fly all the higher. Satan’s government is more a bondage than a government, to which Christ gives up those who shake off his own government; for then he gives Satan and his agents power over them. Since they will not “receive the love of the truth” (2Thess. 2:10), then take him Jesuit, take him Satan, blind him and bind him, and lead him to perdition. Those who take the most liberty to sin are the greatest slaves, because they are the most voluntary slaves. The will is either the best or the worst part in anything. The further men go on in a willful course, the deeper they sink in rebellion. The more they oppose Christ by doing what they will, the more they will one day suffer what they would not. In the meantime, they are prisoners in their own souls. They are bound over in their consciences to the judgment after death of the one whose judgment they would not accept during their lives. Is it not just that they find him as a severe judge to condemn them, when they would not have him as a mild judge to rule them?

Our Victory In Christ Is Certain

In conclusion, and as a general application to ourselves of all that has been said, we see the conflicting yet sure and hopeful state of God’s people. The victory does not lie with us, but with Christ, who has taken on himself both to conquer for us and to conquer in us. The victory lies neither in our own strength to get it, nor in our enemies’ strength to defeat it. If it lay with us, we might justly fear. But Christ will maintain his own government in us, and take our part against our corruptions. They are his enemies as well as ours. Let us therefore be “strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might” (Eph. 6:10). Let us not look so much at who our enemies are as at who our judge and captain is; nor let us look at what they threaten, but at what he promises. We have more for us than against us. What coward would not fight when he is sure of victory? None

is overcome here except one who will not fight. Therefore, when any base fainting seizes us, let us lay the blame where it ought to be laid.

Discouragement rising from unbelief, and from the bad report brought upon the good land by the spies, moved God to swear in his wrath that they would not enter into his rest. Let us take heed that a spirit of faint-heartedness, rising from the seeming difficulty and disgrace involved in God's good ways, does not provoke God to keep us out of heaven. We see here what we may look for from heaven. O beloved, it is a comfortable thing to conceive of Christ rightly, to know what love, mercy, and strength we have laid up for us in the breast of Christ. A good opinion of the physician, we say, is half the cure. Let us make use of this mercy and power of his every day in our daily combats: "Lord Jesus, you have promised not to quench the smoking flax, nor to break the bruised reed. Cherish your grace in me; leave me not to myself; the glory shall be yours." Let us not allow Satan to transform Christ to us, and to make him other than he is to those who are his. Christ will not leave us until he has made us like himself, all glorious within and without, and until he has presented us blameless before his Father (Jude 24).

What a comfort this is in our conflicts with our unruly hearts: that it will not always be this way! Let us strive a little while, and we will be happy forever. Let us think when we are troubled with our sins that Christ has this charge from his Father: that he shall not "quench the smoking flax" until he has subdued all. This puts a shield into our hands to beat back "all the fiery darts of the wicked" (Eph. 6:16). Satan will object, "You are a great sinner." We may answer, "Christ is a strong Savior." But he will object, "You have no faith, no love." "Yes, a spark of faith and love." "But Christ will not regard that." "Yes he will; he will not quench the smoking flax: "But this is so little and weak that it will vanish and come to nothing." No, but Christ will cherish it until he has brought judgment to victory. And this much we already have for our comfort: that even when we first believed, we overcame God himself, as it were, by believing the pardon of all our sins, despite the guilt of our own consciences and despite his absolute justice. Now, having prevailed with God, what will stand against us if we can learn to make use of our faith?

Oh, what a confusion this is to Satan: that he labors to blow out a poor spark, and yet he is not able to quench it; that a grain of mustard seed is stronger than the gates of hell; that it is able to remove mountains of oppositions and temptations that are thrown up by Satan and by our rebellious hearts between God and us. Abimelech could not endure it to be said that, "a woman slew him" (Judg. 9:54); and it must likewise be a torment to Satan that a weak child, a woman, and a decrepit old man should, by a spirit of faith, put him to flight.

Treasure The Least Degree Of Grace

Since there is such comfort where there is a little truth of grace (that grace will be so victorious), let us test often what God has worked in us, and search our good as well as our ill, and then be more thankful to God for the least measure of grace than for any outward thing. It will be of more use and comfort than all this world which passes away and comes to nothing. Indeed, let us be thankful for that promised and assured victory which we may rely on without presumption; as Paul writes: "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1Cor. 15:57). See a flame in a spark, a tree in a seed. See great things in little beginnings. Do not look so much to the beginning as to the perfection, and so we shall be in some degree joyful in ourselves, and thankful to Christ.

Nor must we reason from the denial of a great measure of grace to the denial of any grace at all in us; for faith and grace do not consist in an indivisible amount such that someone who does not have such and such a measure must therefore have none at all. But just as there is a great difference between a spark and a flame, so there is a great difference between the least measure of grace and the greatest measure; someone who has the least measure is within the compass of

God's eternal favor. Though he is not a shining light, he is still a smoking wick, which Christ's tender care will not allow him to quench.

Encouragement To Come To Christ

Let all that has been spoken allure those that are not yet in a state of grace to come under Christ's sweet and victorious government. For though we will have much opposition, yet if we strive, he will help us. If we fail, he will cherish us. If we are guided by him, we will overcome. If we overcome, we are sure to be crowned. As for the present state of the church, we see now how forlorn it is. Yet let us comfort ourselves that Christ's cause will prevail. Christ will rule, till his enemies become his footstool (Psa. 110:1), not only to trample upon, but to help him up to mount higher in glory. Babylon shall fall, "for strong is the Lord God who judges her" (Rev. 18:8). Christ's judgment, not only in his children, but also against his enemies, shall be victorious, for he is "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev. 19:16). God will not always suffer antichrist and his supporters to revel and swagger in the church as they do.

Christ Is The Hope Of The Church

If we look to the present state of the church of Christ, it is like Daniel in the midst of lions, like a lily among thorns, like a ship not only tossed but almost covered with waves. It is so low that the enemies think they have buried Christ in the grave, with respect to his gospel, and there they think to keep him from rising. But just as Christ rose in his person, so he will roll away all stones and rise again in his church. How little support the church and the cause of Christ have at this day! How strong a conspiracy is against it! The spirit of antichrist is now lifted up and marches furiously. Things seem to hang on a small and invisible thread. But our comfort is that Christ lives and reigns, and stands on Mount Zion in defense of those who stand for him (Rev. 14:1); and when states and kingdoms dash one against another, Christ will have care of his own children and cause, seeing there is nothing else in the world that he esteems much. At this very time, the delivery of his church and the ruin of his enemies are in progress. We see nothing in motion till Christ has done his work, and *then* we shall see that the Lord reigns.

Christ and his church, when they are at the lowest, are nearest to rising. His enemies, when at their highest, are actually nearest their downfall. The Jews have not yet come in under Christ's banner; but God who has persuaded Japheth to come into the tents of Shem, will persuade Shem to come into the tents of Japheth (Gen. 9:27). The "fullness of the Gentiles" has not yet come in (Rom. 11:25), but Christ, who has the uttermost parts of the earth given to him for his possession (Psa. 2:8), will gather all the sheep his Father has given him into one fold, so that there may be one sheepfold and one shepherd (John 10:16). The faithful Jews rejoiced to think of the calling of the Gentiles; why should we not rejoice to think of the calling of the Jews?

The gospel's course has up to now been like that of the sun, from east to west; and so in God's time it may proceed yet further west. No creature can hinder the course of the sun, nor stop the influence of heaven, nor hinder the blowing of the wind. Much less can any creature hinder the prevailing power of divine truth, until Christ has brought all under one head. Then he will present all to his Father: "These are those you have given to me; these are those who have taken me for their Lord and King, and who have suffered with me. My will is that they may be where I am and reign with me: And then he will deliver up the kingdom, even to his Father, and put down all other rule, and authority, and power" (1Cor. 15:24).

Faith Will Prevail

Let us then bring our hearts to holy resolutions, and set them on what is good, and against what is ill, whether in ourselves or others, according to our callings; and let us do so with this encouragement: that Christ's grace and power will go along with us. What would have become of that great work of reformation of religion in the latter spring of the gospel if men had not been

armed with invincible courage to overcome all hindrances, if they had not been armed with this faith: that the cause was Christ's and that he would not fail to help his own cause? Luther ingenuously confessed that he often acted inconsiderately and was moved by various passions. But when he acknowledged this, God did not condemn him for his errors. But because the cause was God's, and Luther's aims were holy to promote the truth, and because he was a mighty man in prayer and strong in faith, God kindled by him that fire which all the world will never be able to quench. According to our faith, so is our encouragement to all our duties. Therefore let us strengthen our faith, so that it may strengthen all other graces. The very belief that faith shall be victorious is a means to make it victorious indeed. Believe it, therefore, that although it is often like smoking flax, yet it shall prevail. If it prevails with God himself in trials, shall it not prevail over all other opposition? Let us wait awhile, "stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD" (Exod. 14:13).

May the Lord reveal himself more and more to us in the face of his Son Jesus Christ; and may he magnify the power of his grace in cherishing those beginnings of grace in the midst of our corruptions; and may he sanctify the consideration of our own infirmities to humble us, and the consideration of his tender mercy to encourage us. And may he persuade us that, since he has taken us into the covenant of grace, he will not cast us off for those corruptions which make us vile in our own eyes, just as they grieve his Spirit. And because Satan labors to obscure the glory of his mercy, and to hinder our comfort by discouragements, may the Lord add this to the rest of his mercies: that, since he is so gracious to those who yield to his government, we may make the right use of this grace, and not lose any portion of comfort that is laid up for us in Christ. And may he grant that the prevailing power of his Spirit in us would be an evidence of the truth of grace having begun in us, and a pledge of its final victory at that time when he will be all in all, in all his own, for all eternity.²²

Amen

²² 1Cor 15:28; Eph 1:23