

THE BRUISED
REED
AND SMOKING
FLAX

BY RICHARD SIBBES

With an Introduction by Tim Chester

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INTRODUCTION

In 1610 the congregation of Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge, England, raised the funds to pay a preacher to provide a weekly public lecture or sermon. Their first appointment was a young academic called Richard Sibbes. It proved an inspired choice. Sibbes was able to combine his learning with deep pastoral warmth. Soon Sibbes was drawing a large congregation and a new gallery had to be added to the building.

The same thing happened in London. In 1617 Sibbes was appointed as the lecturer or preacher at Gray's Inn, one of the leading professional associations for lawyers in England. Again, Sibbes drew such large numbers that the auditorium had to be enlarged.

SOUL-MELTING GOSPEL-SERMONS

What Sibbes offered that drew the crowds of Cambridge and London was “soul-melting gospel-sermons.” The layman Humphrey Mills, for example, describes how for three years he struggled with a lack of assurance of salvation, what he calls being “wounded for sins.” He threw himself into religious activity in the hope

of finding heaven. “I was so precise for outward formalities,” he wrote later, “that I censured all to be reprobates that wore their hair anything long, and not short above their ears.” But none of his efforts brought any comfort until he heard the preaching of “that sweet saint ... Doctor Sibbes, by whose means and ministry I was brought to peace and joy in my spirit.” “His sweet soul-melting gospel-sermons,” Mills wrote, “won my heart and refreshed me much, for by him I saw and had much of God and was confident in Christ.”¹ This is what Sibbes continues to offer us today: much of God and confidence in Christ.

Richard Sibbes was born in Suffolk, England, perhaps in 1577, though the exact date is unclear. His education was almost curtailed prematurely when his father, a wheelwright, grew weary of the expense involved in mere book-learning and instead bought a set of tools to set Richard up in trade. But friends implored Sibbes senior to let Richard continue his studies, and in 1595 Richard went to Cambridge University. It was in Cambridge that Sibbes came to saving faith. Sibbes himself would often speak of conversion as a gradual process and this may reflect his own experience. But one of his early biographers identifies the influence of the ministry of Paul Baines, a preacher at St Andrew’s Church, as a key factor. Shortly after completing his degree, Sibbes was offered a fellowship at St John’s College and over the coming years fulfilled a number of academic roles in Cambridge. He never married, giving himself instead to his work, but also cultivating a wide circle of friends. In 1626 Sibbes was appointed as head (a position still known as “master”) of St Catherine’s College in Cambridge. He continued his position as preacher in Gray’s Inn, dividing his time between London and Cambridge.

1. John Rogers, ed., *Obel or Bethshemesb, A Tabernacle for the Sun* (London, 1653), 410; cited in R. N. Frost, *Richard Sibbes: God’s Spreading Goodness* (Vancouver, WA: Cor Deo Press, 2012), 137.

Sibbes preached his final sermon at Gray's Inn on Sunday 28 June 1635. That evening he fell ill. He remained mentally alert and was able to finish the preface to his book, *The Soul's Conflict*. Asked how his soul was, he replied, "I should do God much wrong if I should not say very well." Nevertheless his physical health deteriorated over the coming week and he died the following Sunday, 4 July.

A MODERATE IN TURBULENT TIMES

Sibbes had a couple of brushes with authority during his lifetime. In 1625 he was part of the formation of a charity to buy up 'livings.' Each parish in England had an associated fund or estate from which a stipend (a 'living') was paid to the parish priest. Taking control of these livings enabled the charity to appoint godly ministers whose preaching would be faithful to the Bible. By 1633 they had raised £6,000 and were funding eighteen ministers in eight different English counties. At this point, however, they fell foul of the authorities and the charity was dissolved on the grounds that it had no royal charter. A couple of years later Sibbes added his name to a letter calling for aid to destitute Protestant ministers in Europe. The signatories of the letter were reprimanded by Archbishop Laud for what was perceived to be a private intervention in government foreign policy.

In truth, though, these are fairly minor infringements in a century in which Puritans like Sibbes would be involved in violent revolution. The fact is Sibbes was a moderate who avoided confrontation and controversy. While other Puritans left for America or escaped to the Continent, Sibbes remained loyal to the Church of England. The first generation of Puritans had been intent on creating a godly church according to what they regarded as the biblical pattern modeled in Calvin's Geneva. But Queen Elizabeth I had frustrated their aspirations, preferring to steer a middle path between traditionalists and radicals. The Puritans then hoped that King James's ascent to

the throne in 1603 would be their moment, coming as he did from Presbyterian Scotland. But it quickly became clear that James had no appetite for radical church reform. Various measures designed to enforce religious conformity followed. Some Puritans chose to separate from the established church including Sibbes's friend Thomas Goodwin. Others opted for exile or emigration (most famously the Pilgrim Fathers). But others like Sibbes chose to submit and remain. Instead of pursuing the rule of Christ over the church or state, Sibbes focused on establishing the government of Christ within the heart. Sibbes believed that in this world the church would always include both faithful and unfaithful members, so the pursuit of perfection in ecclesiastical institutions was a fool's errand. The battle for Sibbes was to capture hearts for Christ.

THE BRUISED REED AND SMOKING FLAX

The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax was written in 1631, four years before his death. It was one of only three volumes of his works whose publication Sibbes authorised during his lifetime. The book is strongly pastoral in tone and intent, and has always been his most frequently reprinted work. The influential Puritan pastor Richard Baxter describes how a pedlar once came to the door of his father's house, offering some ballads and a few books. His father bought a copy of *The Bruised Reed*, which the fifteen-year-old Baxter read. It "opened more the love of God to me," he wrote, "and gave me a livelier apprehension of the mystery of redemption, and how much I was beholden to Jesus Christ."²

2. Cited by Alexander B. Grosart, "Memoir of Richard Sibbes, DD," in *Works of Richard Sibbes*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), xxi.

It is based on Matthew 12:20 (itself a quote from Isa. 42:3): “*A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory.*” This verse provides the structure of the book. Sibbes considers first the condition of those with whom Christ deals: they are *bruised reeds* and *smoking flax*. Then he considers how Christ deals with them: not breaking them, but cherishing them. Finally he considers the resolution of Christ: for despite his tenderness, he is determined to nurture believers until “judgment come to victory,” that is, “until the sanctified frame of grace begun in their hearts be brought to that perfection, that it shall prevail over all opposite corruption.” (11)

THE BRUISING OF CHRIST

Sibbes uses the metaphor of *bruising* to describes the process by which God enlightens sinners. The bruised reed is a man who feels the misery of his sin and can find no relief in himself. It is being humbled in this way that drives people to Christ. “This bruising is required before conversion, that so the Spirit may make way for itself into the heart by levelling all proud high thoughts, and that we may understand ourselves to be what indeed we are by nature” (13). God must reveal to our proud hearts not only the way of salvation, but also our desperate need. God must wound before he can heal. We need this bruising both before conversion and after conversion. “After conversion we need bruising, that reeds may know themselves to be reeds and not oaks; even we need bruising by reason of the remainder of pride in our nature, and to let us see that we live by mercy” (14).

The point of this bruising (whether before or after conversion) is always to lead us to Christ. It is our union with Christ that brings relief and comfort, for through Christ we experience the love and life of the Trinity.

What a support to our faith is this: that God the Father, the party offended by our sins, is so well pleased with the work of redemption! And what a comfort is this: that seeing God's love rests on Christ, as well pleased in him, we may gather that he is as well pleased with us, if we be in Christ! For his love rests in a whole Christ, in Christ mystical, as well as Christ natural, because he loves him and us with one love. Let us therefore embrace Christ, and in him God's love, and build our faith safely on such a Savior, that 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 to it, and Christ himself executeth the office of a Mediator. Our redemption is founded upon the joint agreement of all three Persons of the Trinity. (10-11)

Sibbes wants us to hear the words the Father spoke about Christ at his baptism – “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matt. 3:17) – as words the Father now speaks to us if we are in Christ by faith: “You are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased.”

There was a polemic edge to Sibbes's writing. He was challenging the tendency among some Puritans towards 'preparationism', the idea that people could prepare for divine grace through their religious diligence. It is true that God uses the circumstances of our life to prepare us for conversion. But we cannot prepare ourselves, nor should we exhort others to do so. Elsewhere Sibbes says, “All preparations are from God, We cannot prepare ourselves, or deserve future things by our preparations; for the preparations themselves are of God.... We grant no force of a meritorious cause in preparations

to produce such an effect as conversion is.”³ Instead of exhorting religious diligence, we should point people to Christ and urge them to embrace him through faith. Sibbes was wary of creating a destructive self-absorption that came from seeking assurance by examining your behaviour for signs of your election. So, while Sibbes believed the law may be used to confront sin, our central message must be God’s love in Christ. It is this love that draws us to embrace God and a life of holiness, rather than any threat.

THE HEALING OF CHRIST

So the second point that Sibbes draws out is that Christ will not “break the bruised reed.” Christ is a gentle king: “a king of poor and afflicted persons. As he has beams of majesty, so he has bowels of mercies and compassion” (18). Therefore sinners have every encouragement to draw near to Christ’s throne of grace. “Never fear to go to God since we have such a mediator with him that is not only our friend but our brother and husband” (19). Christians can often look at the corruption that remains in their lives and be filled with despair. But we need not worry that evidences of grace are small in their lives, argues Sibbes. Rather every evidence of grace is a cause for reassurance because Christ will not snuff out the smouldering wick. The idea that Christ is displeased with us is exposed by Sibbes as a lie of Satan:

Since Christ is thus comfortably set before us, let us not believe Satan’s representations of him. When we are troubled in conscience for our sins, his [Satan’s] manner is then to present him [Christ] to the afflicted soul as a most severe judge armed with justice against us. But then let us present him [Christ] to our

3. Richard Sibbes, “Lydia’s Conversion,” in *Works of Richard Sibbes*, Vol. 6 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 522.

souls as thus offered to our view by God himself, as holding out a scepter of mercy, and spreading his arms to receive us. (97)

Sibbes reminds us that doing our duty may well mean discouragement and suffering. There may even be moments in which we feel we cannot continue. But if Christ leads us to bear the cross, he says, we can be sure he will be with us as we do so since he has already borne the cross and will eventually bring us out of suffering in better shape.

In this context Sibbes writes of the tenderness required by ministers towards young believers, urging ministers to adapt their preaching to the capacities of their hearers and warning them not to crush people with unrealistic expectations. As we've seen, Sibbes recognises the role of "bruising" or conviction of sin. But he was wary of focusing too much on presenting the moral demands of the law. What people needed to hear was the gracious love of God to them in Christ. This is what would win their hearts and transform their lives. We must not find fault in other people's good works – "taking up Satan's office" of accusing the saints. Nor should we "be too curious in prying into the weaknesses of others." Instead we should work hard "to see what they have that is for eternity" and "incline our heart to love them" (59). "The church of Christ is a common hospital, wherein all are in some measure sick of some spiritual disease or other" (60). So we all have good reason to exercise meekness towards others.

THE GOVERNMENT OF CHRIST

The final section of *The Bruised Reed* discusses how Christ reestablishes his government in our souls. Sibbes rejected the idea that we could grow in holiness by mere determination of will. We need more than a spiritually-informed will because ultimately the will chooses what the heart desires. Elsewhere Sibbes says, "Religion is mainly in

the affections.”⁴ The Christian life is driven by holy loves and desires. “Love is the weight and wing of the soul, which carries it where it goes.”⁵ So our desires must be captivated by Christ. And this is precisely what takes place through the preaching of the gospel. In the gospel the Spirit so reveals God’s love in Christ that our wills are moved to embrace Christ. “The same Spirit that enlightens the mind inspires gracious inclinations in the will and affections, and infuses strength into the whole man” (128). If the believer’s “affections and duty” decline, the solution is “to warm ourselves at this fire of his love and mercy in giving himself for us.” But even this apparent initiative of the believer is actually the Spirit’s work by which “he draws us strongly” and must “subdue our hearts, and sanctify them to love him, without which all motives would be ineffectual” (119).

The Christ of *The Bruised Reed* is not a light-weight Christ. He is determined to establish his government in the hearts of his people. But neither does he batter us into submission. Instead, through the operation of his Spirit, his love wins our loves. He captures our will by captivating our hearts. Sibbes’s concern is not to explicate a dry theory of affections, but warmly to commend Christ to wounded souls and thereby win our love afresh. This is what makes him such a delight to read nearly 400 years on.

TIM CHESTER

4. Richard Sibbes, “The Returning Backslider,” in *Works of Richard Sibbes*, Vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 368.

5. Richard Sibbes, “Bowels Opened,” in *Works of Richard Sibbes*, Vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 129.

TO THE CHRISTIAN READER

God has laid up all grace and comfort in Christ for us, and planted a wonderful sweetness of pity and love in his heart toward us. As God his Father has fitted him with a body, so with a heart to be a merciful Redeemer. What do the Scriptures speak but Christ's love and tender care over those that are humbled? And besides the mercy that rests in his own breast, he works the like impression in his ministers and others, to comfort the feeble-minded, and to bear with the weak. Ministers by their calling are friends of the bride, to bring Christ and his spouse together, and therefore ought, upon all good occasions, to lay open all the excellencies of Christ, and among others, not only that he is highly born, mighty, one in whom all the treasures of wisdom are hid, &c., but likewise gentle, and of a good nature, and of a gracious disposition. It cannot but cheer the heart of the spouse, to consider in all the infirmities and miseries she is subject to, that she has a husband of a kind

disposition, that knows how to give the honor of mild usage to the weaker vessel, that will be so far from rejecting her, because she is weak, that he will pity her the more. And as he is kind at all times, so especially when it is most seasonable, he will speak to her heart, especially in the wilderness.

The more glory to God, and the more comfort to a Christian soul, arising from the belief and application of these things, the more the enemy of God's glory and man's comfort labors to breed misconceptions of them, that if he cannot keep men from heaven, and bring them into that cursed condition he is in himself, yet he may trouble them in their passage. Some, and none of the worst, Satan prevails with so far as to neglect the means, upon fear they should, being so sinful, dishonor God and increase their sins; and so they lie smothering under this temptation, as it were bound hand and foot by Satan, not daring to go to Christ, and yet are secretly upheld by a spirit of faith, showing itself in hidden sighs and groans unto God. These are abused by false representations of Christ; all whose ways to such are ways of mercy, and all his thoughts, thoughts of love. The more Satan is malicious in keeping the soul in darkness, the more care is to be had of establishing the soul upon that which will stay it (Rev. 22:17). Among other grounds to build our faith on, such as the free offer of grace to all that will receive it; the gracious invitation of all that are weary and heavy-laden, those that have nothing to buy with, the command binding to believe; the danger of not believing, being shut up prisoners thereby under the guilt of all other sins; the sweet entreaty to believe, and ordaining ambassadors to desire peace; putting tender affections into them, answerable to their calling; ordaining sacraments for the sealing of the covenant; besides these, I say, and such moving inducements, this is one infusing vigor and strength into all the rest: that they proceed from Christ, a person authorized, and from the compassion that moved

him, not only to become a man, but a curse for us; hence it is that he will not quench the smoking wick or flax.

It adds strength to faith to consider that all expressions of love issue from nature in Christ, which is constant. God knows that as we are prone to sin, so when conscience is thoroughly awakened, we are as prone to despair for sin; and therefore he would have us know that he sets himself in the covenant of grace to triumph in Christ over the greatest evils and enemies we fear, and that his thoughts are not as our thoughts are (Isa. 55:8); that he is God, and not man (Hos. 11:9); that there are heights, and depths, and breadths of mercy in him above all the depths of our sin and misery (Eph. 3:18); that we should never be in such a forlorn condition, wherein there should be ground of despair, considering our sins be the sins of men, his mercy the mercy of an infinite God. But though it be a truth clearer than the sunbeam that a broken-hearted sinner ought to embrace mercy so strongly enforced, yet there is no truth that the heart shuts itself more against than this, especially under a sense of misery, when the soul is fittest for mercy, until the Holy Spirit sprinkles the conscience with the blood of Christ and sheds his love into the heart, that so the blood of Christ in the conscience may cry louder than the guilt of sin; for only God's Spirit can raise the conscience with comfort above guilt, because he is alone greater than the conscience.

Men may speak comfort, but it is Christ's Spirit that can alone comfort. Peace is the fruit of the lips, but yet created to be so. No creature can take off wrath from the conscience, but he that set it on, though all the prevailing arguments be used that can be brought forth, till the Holy Ghost effectually persuades, by a divine kind of rhetoric, which ought to raise up our hearts to him who is the comforter of his people, that he would seal them to our souls. Now God dealing with men as understanding creatures, the manner which