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Richard Sibbes and *The Bruised Reed*

by J. William Black

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Richard Sibbes, like so many of his peers, was a man of humble origins. He was born in 1577 in Tostock, Suffolk, the first-born son of a wheelwright. In 1595, against his father's wishes that he carry on the family trade, Sibbes joined St John's College, Cambridge. Though of his own spiritual progress we know little, we do know that he undoubtedly heard the preaching of William Perkins in Cambridge, and that he was ultimately converted under the ministry of Perkins' successor, Paul Baynes. After earning his B.D. in 1610, he was appointed as a lecturer at Holy Trinity in Cambridge, a position from which he was relieved five years later because of his Puritan tendencies. Sibbes, however, had by then become widely known for his preaching, and through the influence of some powerful friends, in 1617 he was chosen to be the preacher at Gray's Inn, one of the most influential pulpits in London. At Gray's Inn, Sibbes' eminence and influence as a preacher continued to grow, to the extent that his foes did not dare move against him. In 1626, he came back to Cambridge as Master of St Catherine's Hall, while retaining his position at Gray's Inn. And in 1633, he returned to Holy Trinity, this time by crown appointment 'to its perpetual curacy'. Sibbes continued his preaching ministry both there and at Gray's Inn, as well as maintaining his duties at St Catherine's. until his death on 5th July 1635, at the age of 58.

During his lifetime, Sibbes authorised the publishing of only three volumes of his work. One is a treatise entitled *The Soul's Conflict with Itself and Victory over itself by Faith*, and the other two are collections of sermons under the titles *The Saint's Safety in Evil Times* and *The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax*. Both *The Soul's Conflict* and *The Saint's Safety* are able works, exposing their author as a master at the practical application of Scripture and theology. But it is in *The Bruised Reed* that we find crystallised the foundation and essence of Sibbes' own ministry and preaching.

Though well written and reasoned, *The Bruised Reed* is far from a scholarly treatise. It was originally published as 'Some Sermons contracted out of the 12. of Matth. 20.' It was not written in the heat of academic debate, but in the heat of pastoral concern, as the title page continues: 'At the desire, and for the good of weaker Christians.' But Sibbes writes armed with more than just a pastor's concern. He writes with a physician's skill, for he knows the true cause of his readers' woes and symptoms, and wastes no time in directing them to the cure:

having had occasion lately of some fresh thoughts concerning this argument, by dealing with some, the chief ground of whose trouble was the want of considering the gracious nature and office of Christ; the right conceit of which is the spring of all service to Christ, and comfort from him. [This and all subsequent quotations from Sibbes are drawn from *The Bruised Reed*.]

Our purpose is to understand from *The Bruised Reed* this experiential process by which Christ is apprehended and applied by the believer, and thereby to understand why Christ is so magnified by Sibbes. To accomplish this we shall first consider how Sibbes undertakes to convince his readers that their wrong conceit of themselves is the true source of their misery, for such a wrong conceit will never allow Christ to be rightly understood or appreciated. Once the wound is lanced and the true position uncovered, we shall then observe Sibbes' description of the way Christ heals and saves us by exercising the offices of prophet, priest and king on our behalf. Finally, we shall consider the particularly powerful way in which Sibbes applies these truths concerning Christ to his readers to their great benefit.

Why Christ Bruises Us

To describe the process by which God convinces and enlightens sinners to have a right conceit of themselves, Sibbes uses the metaphor of bruising. For if his readers are rightly to apprehend and appreciate Christ, they must first see themselves as God sees them and judge themselves as they, in effect, truly are before a holy and righteous God. This is the bruising. And the end result is that we are reduced from the mighty oaks of our pride's imagination to the frailty of bruised reeds, which is our true standing before our Creator:

This bruised reed is a man that for the most part is in some misery ... and ... by misery is brought to see sin the cause of it; for whatsoever pretences sin maketh, yet bruising or breaking is the end of it; ... sensible of sin and misery... [he sees] no help in himself

By this bruising, God is being neither malicious nor capricious. In Sibbes' view, this work of bruising is both necessary and crucial. For humanity labours under a

double curse. Not only have men and women wilfully and repeatedly transgressed the laws of God, declaring themselves his enemies by arrogantly rebelling against his good and rightful authority over them, but they are, for the most part, either altogether deceived and ignorant of the true nature of their crime and guilt (and of the terrible penalty such offence must incur if God be just), or they are rendered senseless to it, intoxicated as it were, by their pride. For Sibbes, God's holy wrath against those who persist in their sin and rebellion is an awful and terrifying reality:

Can we think that he that threw the angels out of heaven will suffer dust and worms' meat to run a contrary course, and to carry it away always so? No; as verily as Christ is 'King of kings and Lord of lords', Rev. 19:16, so will he dash all those pieces of earth 'which rise up against him, as a potter's vessel; Psa. 2:9.

Condemned by sin, lost by delusion, a more wretched state could not be conceived. Bound by this double curse, men and women are truly without hope. Therefore, to bring us to salvation, God must first even bring to light the *need* for salvation. To heal truly, the Physician must in effect first wound, and wound deeply. God in grace opens our eyes, but what he bids us gaze at first is not Christ, but our sin. Of ourselves, we would in no way be attracted to Christ at all, for as the prophet Isaiah says, 'He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him' [Isa. 53:2]. However, when we are thus bruised by having this true and right conceit of ourselves as sinners before God, it is then that we begin to look at Christ differently. In fact no one can truly come to Christ who has not first experienced this 'bruising':

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.

Sibbes makes the further distinction that bruising is not to be identified with or contingent upon the negative situations or circumstances which one must endure (circumstances interpreted by many in his day as 'crosses'). Rather true bruising results from understanding one's own heart, for by such an understanding we are 'brought to see [our] sin, which bruiseeth most of all.'

This bruising is not just a recognition of the sin within us, but is also the wrenching realisation of our impotence ever to resist its influence and our resulting total inability ever to please God. Sibbes preaches this with force, undoubtedly from the wellspring of his own experience:

[W]hereas Christ saith, 'Without me you,' apostles that are in a state of grace, 'can do nothing; John 15:5, he doth not say you can do a little, but nothing. Of

ourselves, how easily we are overcome! how weak to resist! we are reeds shaken with every wind; we shake at the very noise and thought of poverty, disgrace, losses, &c., we give in presently, we have no power over our eyes, tongues, thoughts, affections, but let sin pass in and out. How soon we are overcome of evil! ... How many good purposes stick in the birth and have no strength to come forth! all which shews how nothing we are without the Spirit of Christ.

Moreover, such is the deceitfulness of our hearts that even this bruising, this fathoming of our own true condition is beyond our ability. For ultimately this bruising, as it is God's way of driving us to Christ, is a work that only God himself can effect. For 'all directions will not prevail, unless God, by his Spirit, convinceth us deeply, setting our sins before us and, driving us to a stand. Then we will make out for mercy.' 'Therefore,' continues Sibbes, 'desire God that he 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.'

For Sibbes, God's purpose and interest are clear. Such bruising intends to drive us 'to a stand; to cause us to 'make out for mercy,' to drive us to Christ. It is because men and women are 'for the most part, not lost enough in their own feeling for a Saviour' that this bruising is applied. Only then will we finally despair of ourselves. Only then, when pride is thus slain and God's judgment upon our sin thereby accepted, will Christ begin to make sense to our fallen minds. For 'a man truly bruised judgeth sin the greatest evil, and the favour of God the greatest good. . . . He had rather hear of mercy than of a kingdom.'

But yet this bruising is costly for those who lie under it. For some, a right conceit of themselves is a terrible burden, so tender are their consciences. And Sibbes gives stern warnings to ministers and others in positions of spiritual authority not to overwhelm or overrun those entrusted into their care, but instead with tenderness and compassion to encourage and bear with those who are troubled in spirit. For 'those are failing that, by overmuch austerity, drive back troubled souls from having comfort by them; for by this carriage many smother their temptations, and burn inwardly, because they have none into whose bosom they may vent their grief and ease their souls.'

And ultimately for everyone with whom God deals, this bruising is indeed most costly, for it wars with our natural inclinations and seeks to subdue and put to death that arch-enemy of God within us, our pride. But when God by his grace so wounds and bruises us, he does not leave us to die in the misery of our sins. When he bids us open our eyes and gaze at the reality of our sin, he does not leave us in despair. Rather, he widens our field of vision till we see that our sin is in fact fastened to the cross in Christ and dealt with there. Such a vision is at once both

most wonderful and most terrible to behold. And it is beholding this supreme manifestation of God's love—Christ Jesus crucified for us—that finally undoes us. For in Christ, the love of God embraces our sin with deadly effect. And we are left to lament with Sibbes, 'Lord, what an heart have I that needs all this, that none of this could be spared!'

With our sin so exposed and Christ so presented, God is free to begin his work of salvation within us, to save us from our sin through Christ and receive us to himself. This is the end and the glory of God's work of bruising within us. But it is a work which must be repeated often. So restless and fallen are our hearts, that even after we have been converted, our eyes find ways to stray from Christ and look back upon ourselves. But while we would try to put our rest and hope and comfort of security in our sanctification, God, in his persevering mercy, drives us again back to Christ, forcing us 'to pitch our rest on *justification*, *not sanctification*' (emphasis mine). By forsaking our vision of Christ and training our eyes upon ourselves and our own spiritual progress, or lack thereof, were thereby place ourselves back under the ministry of the law, under which we can stand only condemned. But God intervenes again and again, exercising this ministry of bruising so that by it we might know experientially both the heinousness of our sin and the transforming love of God, till our hearts be so refined that they know and desire nothing but Christ. Therefore can Sibbes conclude:

[T]here can be no danger in thorough healing. It is better to go bruised to heaven than sound to hell. Therefore, let us not take off ourselves too soon, nor pull off the plaster before the cure be wrought, but keep ourselves under this work till sin be the sourest, and Christ the sweetest, of all things.

How Christ Heals

Important and crucial though this bruising is, it is but the prelude and the preparation for the true and effectual apprehension of Christ. No one is saved or rendered acceptable to God by this bruising (for indeed, it is only a revelation of the reality of one's true standing), but no one can be saved without it. Only when the disease is properly diagnosed can the right cure be applied. And having thus expounded man's desperate state and need before God, Sibbes proceeds to describe and apply God's cure. To this end, Sibbes focuses our attention on Jesus. And as a jeweller examines his diamond facet by facet, in a light which makes his stone dazzle, so Sibbes bids us look on Christ in the light of God's word, where we see refracted through the facets of his character and offices a rainbow of comfort and hope and mercy.

For Sibbes, Christ's work in us and for us is threefold, defined by the 'offices' he fulfils on our behalf. In his sermon, 'Description of Christ,' a work which, after his death, was published with *The Bruised Reed* as an introduction, Sibbes writes:

He is a prophet wise enough, and a priest full enough to make us acceptable of God. If we want any grace, he is a king able enough, rich enough, and strong enough to subdue all our rebellions in us, and he will in time by his Spirit overcome all.

To know Christ in this way is for Sibbes the heart of the Christian gospel, the very marrow of divinity. Thus if we are to understand the reason behind Sibbes' Christocentricity, then we must see and understand Christ as he and his Puritan brothers did, as prophet, priest and king.

The Office Of Prophet

Christ is first described as a prophet. Indeed, he is in reality what earthly prophets are merely a type and shadow of, for in Christ is God, his character, his word and his will, most perfectly mediated to us. Perhaps the best way of understanding the difference is to compare the effects of their ministries. The prophets of the Old Testament undoubtedly mediated the counsel of God to Israel. But their mediation, their prophesying, had no power of its own to effect anything. In fact most of it was ignored, to the great ruin of Israel. But when Christ mediates the word and counsel of God, great change is wrought; because, as Sibbes observes, 'Where Christ by his Spirit as a prophet teaches, he likewise as a king by his Spirit subdueth the heart to obedience of what is taught.' Sibbes expounds his meaning by stating:

This is that teaching which is promised of 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 the very doing of it; they are not only taught that they should love, fear, and obey, but they are taught love itself, and fear and obedience itself.

Moreover, Christ does not just speak and prophesy generally, as if to a multitude, but he sets up his school in each one's heart. And by his very presence he is able to alter its frame, and thus '*makes* his subjects good,, together with teaching of them to be good' (emphasis mine).

But not only is Christ *effective* when he takes on the office of prophet and teacher, he is also good and merciful. Christ is indeed the perfect prophet, the perfect teacher, and to sit at *his* feet is to be desired above all. For, as Sibbes observes, 'It is no great matter how dull the scholar be, when Christ taketh upon him to be the teacher: who as he prescribeth what to understand, so he giveth understanding, even to the simplest.'

The Office Of Priest

Christ is not only a prophet, mediating God and his counsel to us; he is also our priest, mediating us and our plight to God. But Christ's mediation on our behalf is not that of the hired but ultimately disinterested attorney and advocate, pleading the case of an obviously guilty defendant. If Christ were such a mediator, there would be no hope for us. We might consider him a friend because of his interest in our case and his sympathy for us, but his pleading would be to no effect, for the nature of our crime against God and our guilt beyond doubt would demand that justice be done and God's sentence carried out against us.

But Christ does not mediate in such a way. Instead, because of his relationship to the Father, his petition is heard because the Father loves him. And because of the perfect obedience of his earthly life, he is able to take on the office of priest before God, and thereby stand between God and man. But in light of his own holiness and righteousness and our own sin and corruption, he has the right and is in fact given the authority to be our judge. But the mystery of grace is that the very one who by right and authority should pass judgment and be done with us becomes instead the very sin against which that judgment is pronounced. Christ, in the mystery and wonder of his love and humility, wraps himself not only in our nature, but in our very sin as well, and takes upon himself the anger and the wrath of God against our sin and corruption: 'Christ drank the dregs of the cup [of judgment] for us.... He became not only a man, but a curse, a man of sorrows for us. He was broken that we should not be broken; he was troubled that we should not be desperately troubled; he became a curse, that we should not be accursed.' Even more wondrous, if possible, 'He came to die as a priest for his enemies ... standing between God's anger and them; and shed tears for those that shed his blood.'

Christ's mediation on our behalf is effective, for not only does he plead our case before God, but he takes the cause of our offence to God, our sin, to himself and destroys it on the cross. Thus when God considers us now, he does so through the lens of his Son, with whom he is well pleased.

Therefore, by fulfilling the office of priest on our behalf, Christ is able to answer perfectly the terrors awakened in those who have experienced the work of bruising in them. For it was to this very end that we were bruised to begin with, that we might fly to Christ. Sibbes again confirms that it was for reasons of mercy that we were bruised: for 'God seeth it fit we should taste of that cup of which his Son drank so deep, that we might feel a little what sin is, and what his Son's love was.'

In the light of such a mediator, Sibbes draws these applications for those who lie bruised under the knowledge of their sin:

What should we learn from hence, 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? Art thou bruised? Be of good comfort, he calleth thee; conceal not thy wounds, open all before him.. . Go to Christ though trembling.. . 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.

The Office Of King

Christ's work as mediator and priest on behalf of his people may be a profound work of inexpressible grace and love, but for Sibbes, that work is only the beginning of Christ's gracious dealing with them. Christ means to do an even deeper work than that. For even though their heavenly status has been altered by his grace and effective mediation, his people are still, in reality, nothing more than 'bruised reeds' or 'smoking flax' before him. But Christ continues in mercy. As such, they are not scorned or despised by him. Instead, marvels Sibbes, '[H]e will not only not break the bruised reed, nor quench [the smoking flax], but he will cherish them.' Indeed, his purpose is to see the work of grace begun in them to completion, to ensure that what is ratified in heaven concerning them is ultimately confirmed in their present reality. Christ, in Sibbes' words, thereby commits himself to continue with his people 'until the sanctified frame of grace begun in their hearts be brought to that perfection, that it prevaieth over all opposite corruption. Christ accomplishes this by the initiation and advance of his 'judgment, or government and rule in the lives of those whom he saves. So Christ is not only prophet and priest, he becomes king of his people by conquest as well.

Such conquest, however, is perhaps the most difficult work of all. Christ, by his work of grace, may overthrow the sinful self and set up his own throne in one's heart, but sin refuses to surrender. Therefore, in one sense, the government which Christ sets up in the heart is a martial government, whose purpose is to subdue sin and promote righteousness: 'By this judgment set up in us, good is discerned, allowed and performed; sin is judged, condemned, and executed.' And again, 'The spirit of judgment will be a spirit of burning, Isa. 6:4, to consume whatever opposed corruption like rust eats into the soul'

Again, Sibbes is careful to direct our focus to Christ. The work is in the hands of a sure and able sovereign, even when it seems obscured to our eyes by our failing. But because of the limitations of our perspective, we are in constant danger. Our state is ironic and seemingly contrary, for as Sibbes notes, 'If our faith were but as

firm as our state in Christ is secure and glorious, what manner of men should we be?' But we still see with the weak eyes of this life. Even so, once Christ has set up his government in our hearts, the only true misery which the enemy can still cause is somehow to distract us from Christ. But what sharp misery such distractions result in, and the enemy exploits our weakness to his greatest advantage. For though he has been frustrated in his efforts to carry us off to hell, our weaknesses encourage him to bring as much of hell as he can to us in our present situations. But, as Sibbes warns, it is oftentimes when we feel most strong and secure that we are in fact most weak and vulnerable. Feeling our need drives us to Christ, wherein is our true security:

Weakness and watchfulness will stand out, when strength with too much confidence faileth. Weakness, with the acknowledging of it, is the fittest seat and subject for God to perfect his strength in; for consciousness of our infirmities driveth us out of ourselves to him in whom our strength lieth.

But even here there is much tension and even danger, for those with tender consciences are liable first to be overwhelmed by their weaknesses and failings and insecurities, and the condemnation which they hear from Satan, before they remember their Saviour and his promises. To such, Sibbes speaks powerful encouragement:

It mattereth not so much what ill is in us, as what good; not what corruptions, but how we stand affected to them; not what our particular failings be, so much as what is the thread and tenor of our lives; for Christ's mislike of that which is amiss in us, redounds not to the hatred of our persons, but to the victorious subduing of all our infirmities.

Christ's government within us is not just a martial or a conquering government, it is a transforming government as well. 'Other princes; writes Sibbes, 'can make good laws, but they "cannot write them in their people's hearts" Jer. 32:40. This is Christ's prerogative, he infuseth into his subjects his own Spirit.' For Christ is not just concerned with outward conformity. But as he subdues our old nature, so he creates a new one, of which he is both the pattern and the architect, as well as the means and the motivation. And he accomplishes this not only by infusing us with his own Spirit, but by revealing himself more and more to us: 'The very beholding of Christ is a transforming sight.'

Finally, Christ's government within us is an eternal government. He is not easily daunted by the task. In fact, he is not daunted at all. He seems to delight in turning mourning into joy and dancing, in bringing those lost in darkness into the light of his love, in bringing even the most irascible and hell-bent sinner to sing of his glorious grace. For as we have already seen, what Christ begins, he will bring to

completion, and what he intends he will bring to pass. In spite of our failings or our feelings, Christ will indeed save the ones who trust in him. God's purpose will not be thwarted. God's love will not be frustrated. Sibbes himself says it best:

The victory lieth not upon us, but upon Christ, who hath taken upon him, as to conquer for us, so to conquer in us. The victory lieth neither in our own strength to get, nor in our enemies to defeat it. If it lay upon 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.

For '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 for ever, "his kingdom hath no end", Luke 1:33'

Our Need Today

Richard Sibbes writes and preaches as a man constrained and compelled by the love of Christ. He cannot know enough about Christ. For more than anything else, Christ defines his existence. And he has found Christ to be the source of everything good and needful. *The Bruised Reed* represents a distillation of this Christocentric world view, and in it Sibbes writes persuasively, with both tenderness and compelling urgency, betraying by his words an intimacy with the ways of God. He counsels as one who knows what it means to be broken and bruised and poor in spirit before God. His words carry with them the wisdom of one who has spent many hours at the feet of his master. He preaches as one whose sins have been forgiven, whose heart has been filled with Good News. And he speaks with the peace of one who knows what the final outcome of the battle will be. Thus, in *The Bruised Reed*, Sibbes reveals the fountain of his life, the very core of motivation in his heart. But not of Sibbes only. He simply expresses most clearly the experience of many in his day. A recovery of this experimental and marrowy Calvinistic teaching is one of the church's greatest needs in our day.

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