

Reformation Series 2009
(Lecture One: Richard Sibbes)

I. Introduction:

A. Why we need the Puritans:

1. "The answer, in one word, is maturity."
 - a. "Maturity is a compound of wisdom, goodwill, resilience, and creativity. The Puritans exemplified maturity; we don't. We are spiritual dwarfs. A much-travelled leader, a native American (be it said), has declared that he finds North American Protestantism, man-centered, manipulative, success-oriented, self-indulgent and sentimental, as it blatantly is, to be 3,000 miles wide and half an inch deep."
 - b. "The Puritans, by contrast, as a body were giants. They were great souls serving a great God. In them clear-headed passion and warm-hearted compassion combined. Visionary and practical, idealistic and realistic too, goal-oriented and methodical, they were great believers, great hoppers, great doers, and great sufferers. But their sufferings, both sides of the ocean (in old England from the authorities and in New England from the elements), seasoned and ripened them till they gained a stature that was nothing short of heroic. Ease and luxury, such as our affluence brings us today, do not make for maturity; hardship and struggle however do, and the Puritans' battles against the spiritual and climatic wildernesses in which God set them produced a virility of character, undaunted and unsinkable, rising above discouragement and fears, for which the true precedents and models are men like Moses, and Nehemiah, and Peter after Pentecost, and the apostle Paul."
 - c. "Spiritual warfare made the Puritans what they were. They accepted conflict as their calling, seeing themselves as their Lord's soldier-pilgrims, just as in Bunyan's allegory, and not expecting to be able to advance a single step without opposition of one sort or another. Wrote John Geree, in his tract *The Character of an Old English Puritane or Nonconformist* (1646): "His whole life he accounted a warfare, wherein Christ was his captain, his arms, prayers and tears. The Crosse his Banner and his word [motto] *Vincit qui patitur* [he who suffers conquers]."
2. How can the Puritans help us?
 - a. "First, there are lessons for us in the integration of their daily lives. As their Christianity was all-embracing, so their living was all of a piece. Nowadays we would call their lifestyle holistic: all awareness, activity, and enjoyment, all 'use of the creatures' and development of personal powers and creativity, was integrated in the single purpose of honouring God by appreciating all his gifts and making everything 'holiness to the Lord'. There was for them no disjunction between sacred and secular; all creation, so far as they were concerned, was sacred, and all activities, of whatever kind, must be sanctified, that is, done to the glory of God."
 - b. "Second, there are lessons for us in the quality of their spiritual experience. In the Puritans' communion with God, as Jesus Christ was central, so Holy Scripture was supreme. By Scripture, as God's word of instruction about divine-human relationships, they sought to live, and here, too, they were conscientiously methodical.

Knowing themselves to be creatures of thought, affection, and will, and knowing that God's way to the human heart (the will) is via the human head (the mind), the Puritans practised meditation, discursive and systematic, on the whole range of biblical truth as they saw it applying to themselves. Puritan meditation on Scripture was modelled on the Puritan sermon; in meditation the Puritan would seek to search and challenge his heart, stir his affections to hate sin and love righteousness, and encourage himself with God's promises, just as Puritan preachers would do from the pulpit."

- c. "Third, there are lessons for us in their passion for effective action. Though the Puritans, like the rest of the human race, had their dreams of what could and should be, they were decidedly not the kind of people that we would call 'dreamy'! They had no time for the idleness of the lazy or passive person who leaves it to others to change the world. They were men of action in the pure Reformed mould – crusading activists without a jot of self-reliance; workers for God who depended utterly on God to work in and through them, and who always gave God the praise for anything they did that in retrospect seemed to them to have been right; gifted men who prayed earnestly that God would enable them to use their powers, not for self-display, but for his praise. None of them wanted to be revolutionaries in church or state, though some of them reluctantly became such; all of them, however, longed to be effective change agents for God wherever shifts from sin to sanctity were called for. So Cromwell and his army made long, strong prayers before each battle, and preachers made long, strong prayers privately before ever venturing into the pulpit, and laymen made long, strong prayers before tackling any matter of importance (marriage, business deals, major purchases, or whatever)."
- d. "Fourth, there are lessons for us in their program for family stability. It is hardly too much to say that the Puritans created the Christian family in the English-speaking world. The Puritan ethic of marriage was to look not for a partner whom you do love passionately at this moment, but rather for one whom you can love steadily as your best friend for life, and then to proceed with God's help to do just that. The Puritan ethic of nurture was to train up children in the way they should go, to care for their bodies and souls together, and to educate them for sober, godly, socially useful adult living. The Puritan ethic of home life was based on maintaining order, courtesy, and family worship. Goodwill, patience, consistency, and an encouraging attitude were seen as the essential domestic virtues. In an age of routine discomforts, rudimentary medicine without pain-killers, frequent bereavements (most families lost at least as many children as they reared), an average life expectancy of just under thirty years, and economic hardship for almost all save merchant princes and landed gentry, family life was a school for character in every sense, and the fortitude with which Puritans resisted the all-too-familiar temptation to relieve pressure from the world by brutality at home, and laboured to honour God in their families despite all, merits supreme praise. At home the Puritans showed themselves (to use my overworked term) mature, accepting hardships and disappointments realistically as from God and refusing to be daunted or soured by any of them. Also, it was at home in the first instance that the Puritan layman practised evangelism and ministry. 'His family he endeavoured to make a Church,' wrote Geree, '...labouring that those that were born in it, might be born again to God.' In an era in which family life has become brittle even among Christians, with chicken-hearted spouses taking the easy course of separation rather

than working at their relationship, and narcissistic parents spoiling their children materially while neglecting them spiritually, there is once more much to be learned from the Puritans' very different ways."

- e. "Fifth, there are lessons to be learned from their sense of human worth. Through believing in a great God (the God of Scripture, undiminished and undomesticated), they gained a vivid awareness of the greatness of moral issues, of eternity, and of the human soul."
- f. "Sixth, there are lessons to be learned from the Puritans' ideal of church renewal. . . . In line with this, the ideal for the church was that through 'reformed' clergy all the members of each congregation should be 'reformed' – brought, that is, by God's grace without disorder into a state of what we would call revival, so as to be truly and thoroughly converted, theologically orthodox and sound, spiritually alert and expectant, in character terms wise and steady, ethically enterprising and obedient, and humbly but joyously sure of their salvation." (Packer, *Quest*).

B. Though they left this world long ago, the Puritans may still speak to us with the same spirit and wisdom as during their lives.

1. Thomas Adams wrote in the introduction to a collection of his sermons:

- a. "I hear of some idle drones humming out their dry derisions, that we . . . affect to be men in print, as if that were the only end of these publications; but let the communication of goodness stop their mouths. Speech is only for presence, writings have their use in absence . . . our books may come to be seen where ourselves shall never be heard. These may preach when the author cannot, and (which is more) when he is not. The glory be only to God, the comfort to your souls and mine; with which prayer, I leave you to Him that never leaveth His" (Works of Thomas Adams).
- b. We can't travel back in time to sit under these great men and learn from their wisdom. Thankfully, we don't need to: God moved on their hearts to commit this godly wisdom to print. To benefit from their knowledge, all we need do is pick up their books and read.
- c. Many have and received blessing.

2. Endorsements.

a. George Whitefield once wrote in a preface to the *Works of John Bunyan*:

- (i) "Ministers never write or preach so well as when under the cross: the Spirit of Christ and of glory then rests upon them. It was this, no doubt, that made the Puritans of the last century such burning and shining lights. When cast out by the black Bartholomew-act [act of uniformity requiring Episcopal ordination and services from *The Book of Common Prayer*], and driven from their respective charges to preach in barns and fields, in the highways and hedges, they in an especial manner wrote and preached as men having authority. Though dead, by their writings they yet speak: a peculiar unction attends them to this very hour; and for these thirty years past I have remarked, that the more true and vital religion hath revived either at home or abroad, the more the good old puritanical writings, or the authors of a like stamp who lived and died in communion of the church of England, have been called for.

- (ii) “Their works still praise them in the gates; and without pretending to a spirit of prophecy, we may venture to affirm, that they will live and flourish, when more modern performances, of a contrary cast, notwithstanding their gaudy and tinsel trappings, will languish and die in the esteem of those, whose understandings are opened to discern what comes nearest to the scripture standard . . .” (Dust jacket).
- b. Their books have not only been sought during revivals, as Whitefield told us, they have been the cause of personal conversion and national revival.
 - (i) An ungodly Welsh clergyman, shopping at a fair in the 18th Century, bought an item that the seller wrapped in a page torn from a Puritan book. The reading of that one page led him to a sound conversion (Bruised Reed, preface).
 - (ii) Puritan books, translated into Dutch and circulated in the Netherlands, were also largely responsible for the Dutch Second Reformation, influencing such men as Wilhelmus a Brakel, who left us his own work, written very much in the Puritan vein, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* (Interview with Bartel Elshout).
- 3. Luther once wrote, “Satan hates the use of pens.”
 - a. When we read the Puritans, we can understand why.
 - b. The cause of Christ and His kingdom were never more powerfully promoted than through the writings of the Puritans.
- 4. In this series, we’ll look at five of the more prominent Puritans and be exposed to samples of their writings. I think by the time we’re done, you’ll begin to see something of what Whitefield and A’ Brakel saw, and why Satan hates the godly use of pens.

II. The first Puritan we’ll consider is Richard Sibbes.

A. Biography.

1. His life.

- a. Like many of the Puritans, Richard Sibbes came from a humble beginning. He was born in 1577 in Tostock, Suffolk, the first-born of a wheelwright (one who makes and repairs wooden wheels).
- b. In 1595, contrary to his father’s wishes that he carry on the family trade, Sibbes enrolled at St. John’s College, Cambridge when he was eighteen.
- c. We don’t know much about his own spiritual pilgrimage, but we do know that while there he heard the preaching of William Perkins (also known as the father of Puritanism), and that he was subsequently converted under the ministry of Perkins’ successor, Paul Baynes.
- d. He earned his B.D. in 1610, after which he was appointed a lecturer at Holy Trinity in Cambridge. Five years later, he was relieved of that position because of his Puritan leanings.
- e. By then he had become widely known for his preaching, and through the help of influential friends, he was chosen to be the preacher at Gray’s Inn in 1617, one of the most influential pulpits in London. (Grays’s Inn was one of four Inns of Court to which one must belong if he was seeking a career in law. The Inn has had a chaplain since 1400, and during the sixteenth century began hiring full time preachers.”

- f. Here, his influence continued to grow to the point that his enemies were afraid to move against him.
- g. In 1626, he returned to Cambridge as Master of St. Catherine's Hall, while continuing in his position at Gray's Inn (Black).
- h. In 1627, he was granted a Doctorate in Divinity and afterwards was referred to as 'the heavenly Doctor Sibbes,' because of the content and way in which he preached (Bruised, Preface).
- i. In 1633, he returned to Holy Trinity, this time appointed by the crown to be its perpetual curate (parish priest, one entrusted with the care of parish souls).
- j. Sibbes continued to preach both at Holy Trinity and Gray's Inn, as well maintaining his duties at St. Catherine's until his death on July 5, 1635, at the age of 58 (Black).

2. His usefulness:

- a. "Sibbes never wastes the student's time," Spurgeon wrote, "he scatters pearls and diamonds with both hands" (Bruised, Preface).
- b. Izaak Walton (an English author) later wrote regarding Sibbes: 'Of this blest man, let this just praise be given: heaven was in him, before he was in heaven' (Bruised, Preface).
- c. "The Lord took him away," wrote one of his contemporaries, "that his eyes might not see the great evils which were about to break out upon the land."
- d. These evils came to a head in the English Civil War in the 1640s.
 - (i) William Laud, the Archbishop of Canterbury, backed by the king, was leading a movement away from the doctrines and practices of the Reformation.
 - (ii) The Puritans stood together against this attack on God's kingdom. Sibbes considered the moderation Laud was promoting to be sinful lukewarmness. "A curse lies upon those," wrote Sibbes, "that, when the truth suffers, have not a word to defend it."
- e. Sibbes was reprimanded for his boldness in 1627, and in 1632, along with eleven other Puritan ministers, was sentenced to banishment. This sentence was never carried out against him, but he did see many of his dear friends imprisoned or forced into exile to Holland or New England, such as Samuel Ward, Thomas Goodwin, John Cotton, Thomas Hooker and others.
- f. Notwithstanding these events, Sibbes had no doubt that the kingdom of God would eventually triumph. "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'" (Bruised, Preface).
- g. Sibbes wrote, "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 ruleth over all things and hath 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 laugheth them to scorn. And as Luther said, 'Shall we weep and cry when God laugheth?'" (Bruised, Preface).

- h. Sibbes authorized the publishing of only three volumes of his works during his lifetime. One of these volumes was a work entitled *The Soul's Conflict with Itself and Victory over Itself by Faith*, while the other two were collections of sermons entitled *The Saint's Safety in Evil Times* and *The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax*. The first two volumes show that Sibbes was a master of the practical application of Scripture and theology, while the Bruised Reed reveals something of his ministry and preaching.

B. *The Bruised Reed*.

1. Introduction.

- a. *The Bruised Reed* is not an academic treatise, but sermons extracted from a larger volume of sermons on Matthew 12. It wasn't written in the middle of controversy, but out of a heart of pastoral concern, as he indicates in the title, "At the desire, and for the good of weaker Christians." He writes with the skill of a physician, knowing the true cause of his readers' maladies and directing them to the cure (Black). It's main purpose is to point bruised sinners and saints to Christ for their spiritual healing.
- b. Since it was first published, Sibbes' *The Bruised Reed* was used by the Lord to bring sinners to Christ and comfort to the saints. Richard Baxter tells of his own conversion at fifteen after reading this book, "And about that time it pleased God that a poor pedlar came to the door that had ballads and some good books; and my father bought of him Dr. Sibb's *Bruised Reed*. This also I read, and found that it suited to my state (*Reliquiae Baxterianae*) . . . and gave me a livelier apprehension of the mystery of redemption and how much I was beholden to Jesus Christ . . . Without any means but books was God pleased to resolve me to himself" (*Bruised*, Preface).
- c. Martyn Lloyd Jones writes, in his book *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."
- d. In his book, Sibbes was merely following the advice he once gave 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."
- e. Let's turn now to *The Bruised Reed* and allow Sibbes to teach us in his own words how we ought to look to Christ for our spiritual comfort and healing during times when we're wounded.
- f. We won't have time to cover the whole book, but the excerpts we'll look at will enrich your spiritual life and hopefully will give you the desire to read the rest.

2. *The Bruised Reed*.

- a. The reed and the bruising.
 - (i) Introduction.

- (a) He takes his text from Matthew 12:18-21, which is quoted and applied by Matthew to Christ and His ministry. He is the Servant of the Lord for our salvation.
 - (b) “Behold, My Servant whom I have chosen; My Beloved in whom My soul is well-pleased; I will put My Spirit upon Him, and He shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel, nor cry out; nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets. A battered reed He will not break off, and a smouldering wick He will not put out, until He leads justice to victory. And in His name the Gentiles will hope” (Matt. 12:18-21).
- (ii) What is Christ’s calling?
- (a) “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 to 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.”
 - (b) “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!”
- (iii) How does Christ pursue this calling?
- (a) “This is here said to be done modestly, without making a noise, or raising dust by any pompous coming, as princes are accustomed to do.”
 - (b) “And as his coming was modest, so it was mild, which is set down in these words: ‘A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench.’”
 - (c) “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 amongst the fowls; to a vine amongst the plants; to sheep amongst the beasts; to a woman, which is the weaker vessel.”
 - (d) “God’s children are bruised reeds before their conversion and oftentimes after. Before conversion all (except such as, 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 such of themselves, and makes them nothing, before he will use them in any great services.”
- (iv) What does it mean to be bruised? “The bruised reed is a man that for the most part is in some misery, as those were that came to Christ for help, and by misery he is brought to see sin as the cause of it, for, whatever pretences sin makes, they come to an end when we are bruised and broken. He is sensible of sin and misery, even unto bruising; and, seeing no help in himself, is carried with restless desire to have supply from another, with some hope, which a little raises him out of himself

to Christ, though he dare not claim any present interest of mercy. This spark of hope being opposed by doubtings and fears rising from corruption makes him as 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 an one as our Saviour 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 mourns, and, upon some hope of mercy from the promise and examples of those that have obtained mercy, is stirred up to hunger and thirst after it."

(v) What good results does this bruising produce?

(a) "This bruising is required before conversion that so the Spirit may make way for himself into the heart by levelling all proud, high thoughts, and that we may understand ourselves to be what indeed we are by nature. . . . Again, this bruising makes us set a high price upon Christ. . . . Likewise this dealing of God establishes us the more in his ways, having had knocks and bruising in our own ways. This is often the cause of relapses and apostasy, because men never smarted for sin at the first; they were not long enough under the lash of the law."

(b) "After conversion we need bruising so that reeds may know themselves to be reeds, and not oaks. Even reeds need bruising, by reason 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 much 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 thee, 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."

(c) "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) that we may know how much we are bound unto him."

(d) "Ungodly spirits, ignorant of God's ways in bringing his children to heaven, censure broken hearted Christians as miserable persons, whereas God is 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, so unyielding and intractable are our hearts."

b. Christ will not break the bruised reed.

(i) "In pursuing his calling, Christ will not break the bruised reed, nor quench the smoking flax, in which more is meant than spoken, for he will not only not break nor quench, but he will cherish those with whom he so deals."

(a) "Physicians, though they put their patients to much pain, will not destroy 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 cast it away. And shall there be more mercy in the stream than in the spring? Shall we think there is more mercy in ourselves than in God, who plants the affection of mercy in us?"

(b) "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. . . . 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 Saviour, given him by God himself. Consider his office answerable to his name, which is that he should 'bind up the broken hearted' (Isa. 61:1). . . . 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 suggested most exceptions against themselves, 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden' (Matt. 11:28). How did his heart yearn when he saw the people 'as sheep having no shepherd' (Matt. 9:36)!"

(ii) What should this teach us?

- (a) "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. Conceal not your wounds, open all before him and take not Satan's counsel. Go to Christ, although trembling, as the poor woman who said, 'If I may but touch his garment' (Matt. 9:21). We shall be healed and have a gracious answer."
- (b) "Let this support us when we feel ourselves bruised. Christ's way is first to wound, then to heal. No sound, whole soul shall ever enter into heaven. Think when in temptation, Christ was tempted for me; according to my trials will be my graces and comforts. If Christ be so merciful as not to break me, I will not break myself by despair, nor yield myself over to the roaring lion, Satan, to break me in pieces."
- (c) "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 upon the Shechemites, 'when they were sore' (Gen. 34:25), but Christ will make up in us all the breaches which sin and Satan have made. He 'binds up the broken hearted' (Isa. 61:1).

(iii) Who exactly are the bruised reeds?

- (a) How may we know that we are those who can expect mercy?
 - (1) "By the bruised here is not meant those that are brought low only by crosses, but such as, by them, are brought to see their sin, which bruises most of all."
 - (2) "Again, a man truly bruised judges sin 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) "Towards others he is not censorious, as being taken up 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 honours the very feet of those blessed instruments that bring peace unto him (Rom. 10:15)."

- (b) How do we become bruised reeds?
 - (i) “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 here meant. 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.”
 - (ii) “A set measure of bruising of ourselves cannot be prescribed, but it must be so far as (1) that we may prize Christ above all, and see that a Saviour must be had; and (2) that we reform that which is amiss, though it be to the cutting off of our right hand, or pulling out of our right eye.”
 - (iii) “For the concluding 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.”

c. Who is the smoking flax?

- (i) Those who have little grace and much corruption.
 - (a) “In pursuing his calling, Christ will not quench the smoking flax, or wick, but will blow it up till it flames. . . . The observations from this are that, in God’s children, especially in their first conversion, there is but a little measure of grace, and that little mixed with much corruption, which, as smoke, is offensive; but that Christ will not quench this smoking flax.”
 - (b) “There are several ages in Christians, some babes, some young men. Faith may be as ‘a grain of mustard seed’ (Matt. 17:20). Nothing so little as grace at first, and nothing more glorious afterward. Things of greatest perfection are longest in coming to their growth. . . . 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. . . . Let us not therefore be discouraged at the small beginnings of grace, but look on ourselves as elected to be ‘holy and without blame’ (Eph. 1:4).”
- (ii) Grace is mixed with corruption: smoking flax.
 - (a) “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.”
 - (b) “‘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).”
 - (c) “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 to force us to pitch our rest on justification, not sanctification, which, besides imperfection, has some stains.”
 - (d) “From this mixture arises the fact that the people of God have so different judgments of themselves, looking sometimes at the work of grace, sometimes at

the remainder of corruption, and when they look upon that, then they think they have no grace.”

- d. Christ will not quench the smoking flax.
- (i) “First, because this spark is from heaven: it is his own, it is kindled by his own Spirit.”
 - (ii) “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.”
 - (iii) “We see how our Saviour 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 quenched not that little light in Peter, which was smothered: Peter denied him, but he denied not Peter (Luke 22:61).”
 - (iv) “If Christ should not be merciful, he would miss of his own ends: ‘There is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared’ (Psa. 130:4).”
 - (v) “Here 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, ever cherishes even the least beginnings. How he bore with the many imperfections of his poor disciples! . . . It is not the best way, to assail young beginners with minor matters, but to show them a more excellent way and train them in fundamental points. Then other things will not gain credence with them. It is not amiss to conceal their defects, to excuse some failings, to commend their performances, to encourage their progress, to remove all difficulties out of their way, to help them in every way to bear the yoke of religion with greater ease, to bring them to love God and his service, lest they acquire a distaste for it before they know it.”
 - (vi) “It would be a good contest amongst Christians, one to labour to give no offence, and the other to labour to take none. The best men are severe to themselves, tender over others.”
 - (vii) “Weak Christians are like glasses which are hurt with the least violent usage, but if gently handled will continue a long time. This honor of gentle use we are to give to the weaker vessels (1 Pet. 3:7), by which we shall both preserve them and likewise make them useful to the church and ourselves.”
- e. We should exercise a spirit of mercy.
- (i) “Let us be watchful in the use of our liberty, and labour to be inoffensive in our behavior, that our example compel them not. 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 that which is apt of itself to destroy the souls of others their ruin is imputable to us.”
 - (ii) “Let men take heed of taking up Satan’s office, in misrepresenting the good actions of others, as he did Job’s case, ‘Doth Job fear God for naught?’ (Job 1:9), or slandering their persons, judging of them according to the wickedness that is in their own hearts.”

- (iii) “Where most holiness is, there is most moderation, where it may be without prejudice of piety to God and the good of others. We see in Christ a marvelous temper of absolute holiness, with great moderation. What would have become of our salvation, if he had stood upon terms, and not stooped thus low unto us? We need not affect to be more holy than Christ.”
 - (iv) “The Holy Ghost is content to dwell in smoky, offensive souls. Oh, that that Spirit would breathe into our spirits the same merciful disposition!”
 - (v) “We must supply out of our love and mercy that which we see wanting in them. The church of Christ is a common hospital, wherein all are in some measure sick of some spiritual disease or other, so all have occasion to exercise the spirit of wisdom and meekness.”
 - (vi) “So that we may do this the better, let us put upon ourselves the Spirit of Christ. There is a majesty in the Spirit of God. Corruption will hardly yield to corruption in another. Pride is intolerable to pride. The weapons of this warfare must not be carnal (2 Cor. 10:4). . . . The Spirit will only work with his own tools. And we should think what affection Christ would carry to the party in this case. That great physician, as he had a quick eye and a healing tongue, so had he a gentle hand, and a tender heart.”
 - (vii) “And, further, let us take to ourselves the condition of him with whom we deal. We are, or have been, or may be in that condition ourselves. Let us make the case our own, and also consider in what near relation a Christian stands to us, even as a brother, a fellow member, heir of the same salvation. And therefore let us take upon ourselves a tender care of them in every way; and especially in cherishing the peace of their consciences. Conscience is a tender and delicate thing, and must be so treated.”
- f. How may we know that we are the smoking flax Christ will not quench?
- (i) “We must have two eyes, one to see imperfections in ourselves and others, the other to see what is good. . . . Those who are given to quarrelling with themselves always lack comfort, and through their infirmities they are prone to feed on such bitter things as will most nourish that disease which troubles them. These delight to be looking on the dark side of the cloud only.”
 - (ii) “We must not judge of ourselves always according to present feeling, for in temptations we shall see nothing but smoke of distrustful thoughts. Fire may be raked up in the ashes, though not seen.”
 - (iii) “We must beware of false reasoning, such as: because our fire does not blaze out as others, therefore we have no fire at all. By false conclusions we may come to sin against the commandment in bearing false witness against ourselves. The prodigal would not say he was no son, but that he was not worthy to be called a son (Luke 15:19). We must neither trust to false evidence, nor deny true; for so we should dishonor the work of God’s Spirit in us, and lose the help of that evidence which would cherish our love to Christ, and arm 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.”

- (iv) “We must acknowledge that in the covenant of grace God requires the truth of grace, not any certain measure; and a spark of fire is fire, as well as the whole element. Therefore we must look to grace in the spark as well as in the flame.”
- (v) “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 know not 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 an enemy. A troubled soul is like troubled water: we can see nothing in it, and, so far as it is not cleansed, it will cast up mire and dirt. It is full of objections against itself, yet for the most part we may discern something of the hidden life, and of these smothered sparks. In a gloomy day there is so much light that we may know it to be day and not night; so there is something in a Christian under a cloud whereby he may be discerned to be a true believer and not a hypocrite. There is no mere darkness in the state of grace, but some beam of light whereby the kingdom of darkness does not wholly prevail.”
- g. 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, but yet sure and hopeful, state of God’s people. The victory lies not with us, but with Christ, who has taken on him 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 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 here overcome but he that will not fight. Therefore, when any base fainting seizes on us, let us lay the blame where it ought to be laid. . . . Let us make use of this mercy and power of his every day in our daily combats: ‘Lord Jesus, thou hast promised not to quench the smoking flax, nor to break the bruised reed. Cherish thy grace in me; leave me not to myself; the glory shall be thine.’ Let us not allow Satan to transform Christ to us, to make him other than he is to those that are his. Christ will not leave us till he has made us like himself, all glorious within and without, and presented us blameless before his Father (Jude 24).”