

GRACE SHALL REIGN

by Richard Sibbes

Sibbes' exposition on the certainty of grace's victory over all opposition, explaining why Christ's kingdom must prevail through the power of the Spirit and faith, and why victory comes through suffering with deep spiritual roots conquering corruption.

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Grace Shall Reign by Richard Sibbes WHY CHRIST'S KINGDOM MUST PREVAIL

1. Christ has conquered all in his own person first, and he is 'over all, God blessed for ever' (Romans 9:5), and therefore 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 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 be 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 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 assaults fetched from the justice of God, now satisfied by Christ, 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 fall. If they rise up again, it is to have the greater fall.

3. The Spirit of truth, to whose tuition 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 (1 Peter 1:23), and this truth, must not only live for ever, but also prevail over all that oppose it, for both the Word and the Spirit are mighty in operation (Hebrews 4:12). And, if the wicked spirit is never idle in those whom God has delivered up to him, we cannot think that the Holy Spirit will be idle in those whose leading and government is committed to him. No, as he dwells in them, so he will drive out all that rise up against him, until he is all in all. What is spiritual is eternal. Truth is a beam of Christ's Spirit, both in itself and as it is engrafted into the soul. Therefore it, and the grace wrought 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. 'Unto everyone that hath shall be given' (Matthew 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' (Joshua 10:25). Heaven is ours already, only we strive till we have full possession.

5. Christ as king brings in 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, '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, as well as sealing to us the assurance of his victory, so also (1) to quicken our souls from death in sin; (2) to free our souls from such snares and sorrows of spiritual death as accompany the guilt of sin; (3) to raise them up more comfortable, as 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, now appeased by that sacrifice, the Spirit will show in the church, which is his body, and in every particular member thereof. And this power is conveyed by faith, by which, after union with Christ in his estates both of humiliation and of exaltation, we see ourselves, not only dead with Christ, but risen and sitting together with him in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6). Now we, apprehending ourselves to be dead and risen, and therefore victorious over all our enemies in our Head, and apprehending that his scope in all this is to conform us to himself, we are by this faith changed into his likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18), and so become conquerors over all our spiritual enemies, 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 fulfil 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, as to the church in general, by Christ it will have its victory. Christ is that little 'stone cut out without hands' which broke in pieces the goodly image (Daniel 2:34), that is, all opposite government, until it became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth' (Daniel 2:35). So that the stone that was cut out of the mountain becomes a mountain itself at length. Who art thou, then, oh, mountain, that thinks to stand up against this mountain? All shall lie flat and level before it. He will bring down all mountainous, high, exalted thoughts, and lay the pride of all flesh low. When chaff strives against the wind, or stubble against the fire, when the heel kicks against the pricks, when the potsherd strives with the potter, when man strives against God, it is easy to know on which side the victory will be. The winds may toss the ship wherein Christ is, but not overturn it. The waves may dash against the rock, but they only break themselves against it.

WHY THE ENEMY SEEMS VICTORIOUS

Objection: If this is so, why is it thus with the church of God, and with many a gracious Christian? The victory seems to be with the enemy. To understand this, we should remember, firstly, that God's children usually, in their troubles, overcome by suffering. Here lambs overcome lions, and doves, eagles, by suffering, that herein they may be conformable 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, and therefore they are too hasty-spirited that would conquer as soon as they strike the first stroke, and be at the end of their race at the first setting forth. The Israelites were sure of their victory in their journey to Canaan, yet they must fight it out. God would not have us quickly forget what cruel enemies Christ has overcome for us. 'Slay them not, lest my people forget,' says the Psalmist (Psalms 59:11), so that, by the experience of that annoyance we have by them, we might be kept in fear to come under their power.

Thirdly, God often works by contraries: when he means to give victory, he will allow us to be foiled at first; when he means to comfort, he will terrify first; when he means to justify, 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 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. As seed rots in the ground in the winter time, but after comes up better, and the harder the winter the more flourishing the spring, so we learn to stand by falls, and get strength by weakness discovered—*virtutis custos infirmitas* (weakness is the keeper of virtue). We take deeper root by shaking. And, as torches flame brighter by moving, thus it pleases Christ, out of his freedom, in this manner to maintain his government in us. Let us herein labor to exercise our faith, so that it may answer 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, yet would not give over wrestling (Genesis 32:25) till he had obtained the blessing. So let us never give up, but, in our though knit the beginning, progress and end together, and then we shall 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, as he is the author, so will he be the finisher, of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). We are under a more gracious covenant.

What some say of rooted faith, *fides radicata*, that it continues, while weak faith may come to nothing, seems to be contradicted by this Scripture; for, as the strongest faith may be shaken, so the weakest, where truth is, is so far rooted that it will prevail. Weakness with watchfulness will stand, when strength with too much confidence fails. Weakness, with acknowledgement of it, is the fittest seat and subject for God to perfect his strength in; for consciousness of our infirmities drives us out of ourselves to him in whom our strength lies. From this it follows that weakness may be consistent with the assurance of salvation. The disciples, notwithstanding all their weaknesses, are bidden to rejoice that their names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20). Failings, with conflict, in sanctification should not weaken the peace of our justification and assurance of salvation. It matters not so much what ill is in us, as what good; not what corruptions, but how we regard them; not what our particular failings are so much as what the thread and tenor of our lives are, for Christ's dislike of that which is amiss in us turns not to the hatred of our persons but to the victorious subduing of all our infirmities.

Some have, after conflict, wondered at the goodness of God that so little and such trembling faith should have upheld them in so great combats, when Satan had almost caught them. And, indeed, it is to be wondered at, how much a little grace will prevail with God for acceptance, and over our enemies for victory, if the heart is upright. Such is the goodness of our sweet Savior that he delights to show his strength in our weakness.

CONSOLATION FOR WEAK CHRISTIANS The first use of this is for the great consolation of poor and weak Christians. Let them know that a spark from heaven, though kindled under green wood that sobs and smokes, yet it will consume all at last. Love once kindled is strong as death. Many waters cannot quench it, and therefore it is called a vehement flame, or flame of God (Song of Solomon 8:6), kindled in the heart by the Holy Ghost. That little that is in us is fed with an everlasting spring. As the fire that came down from heaven in Elijah's time (1 Kings 18:38) licked up all the water, to show that it came from God, so will this fire consume all our corruption. No affliction without or corruption within shall quench it. In the morning, we often see clouds gather about 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 hinder the breaking out of this fire, until at length it gets above them all, and Christ prevails. And then he upholds his own graces in us. Grace conquers us

first, and we, by it, conquer all else; whether corruptions within us, or temptations from outside us. The church of Christ, begotten by the Word of truth, has the doctrine of the apostles for her crown, and tramples the moon, that is, the world and all worldly things, 'under her feet' (Revelation 12:1). Every one that is 'born of God overcometh the world' (1 John 5:4). Faith, whereby especially Christ rules, sets the soul so high that it looks down on all other things as far below, as having represented to it, by the Spirit of Christ, riches, honor, beauty and pleasures of a higher nature.

EVIDENCES OF CHRIST'S RULE IN US

Now, that we may not come short of the comfort intended, there are two things especially to be taken notice of by us: firstly, 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. The evidences whereby we may come to know that Christ's judgment in us is such as will be victorious, are:

1. Being able from experience to justify all Christ's ways, let flesh and blood say what they can to the contrary, and willingly subscribing 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 the strongest reasons with us, prevailing more than reasons fetched from worldly policy.
3. Being so true to our ends and steadfast to our rule that no hopes or fears can sway us another way, but still we are inquiring what agrees with or differs from our rule.
4. Being able to 'do nothing against the truth, but for the truth' (2 Corinthians 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 under whose government we would live, out of a delight in the inner man to Christ's government, making choice of him only to rule us before any other. This argues that we are like-minded to Christ, a free and a willing people, and not compelled to Christ's service otherwise 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 up ourselves to him in all things, then his kingdom is come to us, and our wills are brought to his will. It is the bent of our wills that makes us good or ill.
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 comes into competition with any earthly loss or gain, yet then, in that particular case, having the heart willing to stoop to Christ is a true sign; for the truest trial of the power of grace is in particular cases which touch us most closely, for there our corruption makes the greatest head. When Christ came nearest to home with the young man in the gospel, he lost a disciple of him (Matthew 19:22).
8. Being able to practice duties pleasing to Christ, though contrary to flesh and the course of the world, and being able to overcome ourselves in that evil to which our nature is prone and stands so much inclined, and which agrees to the ruling passion of the times, which others lie enthralled

under, such as desire of revenge, hatred of enemies, private ends, etc., this shows that grace in us is above nature, heaven above earth, and 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 though we are foiled; second, when grace gets the better, though with 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); because 'Greater is he that is in you', who takes the part of his own grace, 'than he that is in the world' (1 John 4:4). And if we may hope for victory from bare resistance, what may we not hope for when the Spirit has gained the upper hand?

Taken from The Bruised Reed. Updated.

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