

# THROUGH CONFLICT TO VICTORY

by Richard Sibbes

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*Sibbes' encouraging work on spiritual struggles showing how believers, through faith in Christ, move from conflict with sin and Satan toward ultimate victory, with Christ as both guide and guarantee of triumph.*

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1. Through Conflict to Victory

## Through Conflict to Victory

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

It takes much trouble to bring Christ into the heart, and to set up a tribunal for him to judge there. There is an army of lusts in mutiny against him. The utmost strength of most men's endeavors and abilities is directed to keeping Christ from ruling in the soul. The flesh still labors to maintain its own government, and therefore it cries down the credit of whatever crosses it, such as God's blessed ordinances, and highly prizes anything, though never so dead and empty, if it allows the liberty of the flesh.

**WHY CHRIST'S GOVERNMENT IS OPPOSED** And no marvel if the spiritual government of Christ is so opposed:

First, because it is government, and that limits the course of the, will and casts a bridle on its wanderings. Everything natural resists what opposes it; so the corrupt will labor to bear down all laws, and counts it a noble thing not to be awed, and an argument of a low spirit to fear any, even God himself, until unavoidable danger seizes on men. Then those that feared least when out of danger fear most in danger, as we see in the case of Belshazzar (Daniel 5:6).

Secondly, it is spiritual government, and therefore the flesh will endure it even less. Christ's government brings the very thoughts and desires, which are the most immediate and free issue of the soul, into obedience. Though a man were of such controlled behavior that his whole life were free from outward offences, yet in Christ's eyes to be carnally or worldly-minded is death (Romans 8:6). He looks on a worldly mind with a greater detestation than any one particular offence.

One may say, 'But Christ's Spirit is in those who are in some degree earthly-minded.' True, but not as an allower and maintainer, but as an opposer, subduer, and in the end as a conqueror. Carnal men would like to bring Christ and the flesh together, and could be content, with some reservation, to submit to Christ. But Christ will be no underling to any base affection, and therefore, where there is allowance of ourselves in any sinful lust, it is a sign the keys were never given up to Christ to rule us.

Thirdly, this judgment is opposed, because it is judgment, and men do not like to be judged and censured. Now Christ, in his truth, arraigns them, gives sentence against them, and binds them over to the latter judgment of the great day, and therefore they take upon them to judge that truth which must judge them. But truth will be too strong for them. Man has a day now, which Paul calls 'man's day' (1 Corinthians 4:3 [margin]), in which he gets on his bench and usurps a judgment over Christ and his ways; but God has a day in which he will set everything straight, and his judgment shall stand. And the saints shall have their time, when they shall sit in judgment on those that judge them now (1 Corinthians 6:2). In the meantime, Christ will rule in the midst of his enemies (Psalms 110:2), even in the midst of our hearts.

#### WE MUST EXPECT OPPOSITION

It is therefore no sign of a good condition to find all quiet, with no opposition; for can we think that corruption, which is the older element in us, and Satan, the strong man who has many holds over us, will yield possession quietly? No, there is not so much as a thought of goodness discovered by him, but he joins with corruption to kill it in the birth. And as Pharaoh's cruelty was especially against the male children, so Satan's malice is especially against the most religious and manly resolutions.

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

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

Thus, the desperate madness of men is laid open, that they would rather be under the guidance of their own lusts, and in consequence of Satan himself, to their endless destruction, than put their feet into Christ's fetters and their necks under his yoke; though, indeed, Christ's service is the only true liberty. His yoke is an easy yoke, his burden but as the burden of wings to a bird which make her fly the higher. Satan's government is rather a bondage than a government, to which Christ gives up those that shake off his own, for then he gives Satan and his agents power over them. Since they will not 'receive the love of the truth' (2 Thessalonians 2:10), take him, Jesuit, take him, Satan, blind him and bind him and lead him to perdition. Those that take the most liberty to sin are the greatest slaves., because the most voluntary slaves. The will is either the best or the worst part in anything. The further men go on in a willful course, the deeper they sink in rebellion; and the more they oppose Christ, doing what they will, the more they shall one day suffer what they would not. In the meantime, they are prisoners in their own souls, bound over in their consciences to the judgment after death of him whose judgment they would not accept in their lives. And is it not just that they should find him a severe judge to condemn them when they would not have him as a mild judge to rule them? **OUR VICTORY IN CHRIST IS CERTAIN** In conclusion and as a general application to ourselves of all that has been said, we see the conflicting, 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' (Ephesians 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.

Discouragement rising from unbelief and the ill report brought upon the good land by the spies moved God to swear in his wrath that they should not enter into his rest. Let us take heed that a spirit of faintheartedness, rising from the seeming difficulty and disgrace involved in God's good ways, does not provoke God to keep us out of heaven. We see here what we may look for from heaven. Oh beloved, it is a comfortable thing to conceive of Christ aright, to know what love, mercy and strength we have laid up for us in the breast of Christ. A good opinion of the physician, we say, is half the cure. Let us make use of this mercy and power of his every day in our daily combats: 'Lord Jesus, 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).

What a comfort this is in our conflicts with our unruly hearts, that it shall not always be thus! Let us strive a little while, and we shall be happy for ever. Let us think when we are troubled with our sins that Christ has this in charge from his Father, that he shall not 'quench the smoking flax' until he has subdued all. This puts a shield into our hands to beat back 'all the fiery darts of the wicked' (Ephesians 6:16). Satan will object, 'You are a great sinner. We may answer, 'Christ is a strong Savior.' But he will object, 'You have no faith, no love.' 'Yes, a spark of faith and love.' 'But Christ will not regard that.' 'Yes, he will not quench the smoking flax.' 'But this is so little and weak that it will vanish and come to naught.' 'Nay, but Christ will cherish it, until he has brought judgment to victory.' And this much we have already for our comfort, that, even when we first believed, we overcame God himself, as it were, by believing the pardon of all our sins, notwithstanding the guilt of our own consciences and his absolute justice. Now, having been prevailers with God, what shall stand against us if we can learn to make use of our faith?

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

#### TREASURE THE LEAST DEGREE OF GRACE

Since there is such comfort where there is a little truth of grace, that it will be so victorious, let us often try what God has wrought in us, search our good as well as our ill, and be thankful to God for the least measure of grace, more than for any outward thing. It will be of more use and comfort than all this world which passes away and comes to nothing. Yea, let us be thankful for that

promised and assured victory which we may rely on without presumption, as Paul does: 'But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Corinthians 15:57). See a flame in a spark, a tree in a seed. See great things in little beginnings. Look not so much to the beginning as to the perfection, and so we shall be, in some degree, joyful in ourselves, and thankful to Christ.

Neither must we reason from a denial of a great measure of grace to a denial of any at all in us, for faith and grace do not consist in an indivisible amount, so that he who has not such and such a measure has none at all. But, as there is a great difference between a spark and a flame, so there is a great difference between the least measure of grace and the greatest; and he who has the least measure is within the compass of God's eternal favor. Though he is not a shining light, yet he is a smoking wick, which Christ's tender care will not allow him to quench.

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

#### **CHRIST IS THE HOPE OF THE CHURCH**

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

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

why should we not rejoice to think of the calling of the Jews? The gospel's course has hitherto been as that of the sun, from east to west, and so in God's time it may proceed yet further west. No creature can hinder the course of the sun, nor stop the influence of heaven, nor hinder the blowing of the wind, much less hinder the prevailing power of divine truth, until Christ has brought all under one head, and then he will present all to his Father: 'These are those thou hast given to me; these are those that have taken me for their Lord and King, that have suffered with me. My will is that they may be where I am and reign with me. And then he will deliver up the kingdom, even to his Father, and put down all other rule, and authority, and power (1 Corinthians 15:24).

#### FAITH WILL PREVAIL

Let us then bring our hearts to holy resolutions, and set ourselves upon that which is good, and against that which is ill, in ourselves or others, according to our callings, with this encouragement, that Christ's grace and power will go along with us. What would have become of that great work of reformation of religion in the latter-spring of the gospel if men had not been armed with invincible courage to overcome all hindrances, with this faith, that the cause was Christ's, and that he would not fail to help his own cause? Luther ingenuously confessed that he often acted inconsiderately and moved by, various passions. But when he acknowledged this: God did not condemn him for his errors, but, the cause being God's, and his aims being holy, to promote the truth, and being a mighty man in prayer, and strong in faith, God by him kindled that fire which all the world shall never be able to quench. According to our faith, so is our encouragement to all duties, therefore let us strengthen faith, so that it may strengthen all other graces. The very belief that faith shall be victorious is a means to make it so indeed. Believe it, therefore, that, though it is often as smoking flax, yet it shall prevail. If it prevails with God himself in trials, shall it not prevail over all other opposition? Let us wait a while, 'stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD' (Exodus 14:13). The Lord reveal himself more and more to us in the face of his Son Jesus Christ and magnify the power of his grace in cherishing those beginnings of grace in the midst of our corruptions, and sanctify the consideration of our own infirmities to humble us, and of his tender mercy to encourage us. And may he persuade us that, since he has taken us into the covenant of grace, he will not cast us off for those corruptions which, as they grieve his Spirit, so they make us vile in our own eyes. And because Satan labors to obscure the glory of his mercy and hinder our comfort by discouragements, the Lord add this to the rest of his mercies, that, since he is so gracious to those that yield to his government, we may make the right use of this grace, and not lose any portion of comfort that is laid up for us in Christ. And, may he grant that the prevailing power of his Spirit in us should be an evidence of the truth of grace begun, and a pledge of final victory, at that time when he will be all in all, in all his, for all eternity. Amen.

Taken from The Bruised Reed. Updated.

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