

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY Part 1: The Christian's Beginning Chapter 2 THE POWER OF GOD

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Transcript

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

Part 1: The Christian's Beginning

Chapter 2

THE POWER OF GOD

"Twice have I heard this; that power belongeth unto God" (Ps. 62:11). In When first writing upon this subject, we practically confined our attention to the omnipotence of God as it is seen in and through the old creation. Here we propose to contemplate the exercise of His might in and on the new creation. That God's people are much slower to perceive the latter than the former is plain from Ephesians 1:19, where the apostle prayed that the saints might know "what is the exceeding greatness of His power to usward who believe, according to the working of His mighty power." Very striking indeed is this. When Paul speaks of the Divine power in creation he mentions "His power and Godhead" (Romans 1:20); but when he treats of the work of grace and salvation, he calls it "the exceeding greatness of His power." God proportions His power to the nature of His work. The casting out of demons is ascribed to His "finger" (Luke 11:20); His delivering of Israel from Egypt to His "hand" (Ex. 13:9); but when the Lord saves a sinner it is His "holy arm" which gets Him the victory (Ps. 98:1). It is to be duly noted that the language of Ephesians 1:19, is so couched as to take in the whole work of Divine grace in and upon the elect. It is not restrained to the past—"who have believed according to"; nor to the time to come—"the power that shall work in you"; but, instead, it is "the exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward who believe." It is the "effectual working" of God's might from the first moment of illumination and conviction till their sanctification and glorification. So dense is the darkness which has now fallen upon the people (Isa. 60:2), that the vast majority of those even in the "churches" deem it by no means a hard thing to become a Christian. They seem to think it is almost as easy to purify a man's heart (James 4:8) as it is to wash his hands; that it is as simple a matter to admit the light of Divine Truth into the soul as it is the morning sun into our chambers by opening the shutters; that it is no more difficult to turn the heart from evil to good, from the world to God, from sin to Christ, than to turn a ship round by the help of the helm. And this in the face of Christ's emphatic statement, "With men this is impossible" (Matt. 19:26). To mortify the lusts of the

flesh (Col. 3:5), to be crucified daily to sin (Luke 9:23), to be meek and gentle, patient and kind—in a word, to be Christ-like—is a task altogether beyond our powers; it is one on which we would never venture, or, having ventured on, would soon abandon, but that God is pleased to perfect His strength in our weakness, and is "mighty to save" (Isa. 63:1). That this may be the more clearly evident to us, we shall now consider some of the features of God's powerful operations in the saving of His people. 1. In Regeneration Little as real Christians may realize it, a far greater power is put forth by God in the new creation than in the old, in refashioning the soul and conforming it to the image of Christ than in the original making it. There is a greater distance between sin and righteousness, corruption and grace, depravity and holiness, than there is between nothing and something, or nonentity and being; and the greater the distance there is, the greater the power in producing something. The miracle is greater according as the change is greater. As it is a more signal display of power to change a dead man to life than a sick man to health, so it is a far more wonderful performance to change unbelief to faith and enmity to love than simply to create out of nothing. There we are told, "the gospel of Christ . . . is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth" (Romans 1:16). The Gospel is the instrument which the Almighty uses when accomplishing the most wondrous and blessed of all His works, i.e. the picking up of wretched worms of the earth and making them "meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light" (Col. 1:12). When God formed man Out of the dust of the ground, though the dust contributed nothing to the act whereby God made him, it had in it no principle contrary to His design. But in turning the heart of a sinner toward Himself, there is not only the lack of any principle of assistance from him in this work, but the whole strength of his nature unites to combat the power of Divine grace. When the Gospel is presented to the sinner, not only is his understanding completely ignorant of its glorious contents, but the will is utterly perverse against it. Not only is there no desire for Christ, but there is inveterate hostility against Him. Nothing but the almighty power of God can overcome the enmity of the carnal mind. To turn back the ocean from its course would not be such an act of power as to change the turbulent bent of man s wicked heart. 2. In convicting us of sin The "light of reason" of which men boast so much, and the "light of conscience" which others value so highly, were utterly worthless as far as giving any intelligence in the things of God was concerned. It was to this awful fact that Christ referred when He said, "If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!" (Matt. 6:23). Yes, so "great" is that darkness that men "call evil good, and good evil; . . . put darkness for light, and light for darkness; . . . put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!" (Isa. 5:20). So "great" is that darkness that spiritual things are "foolishness" unto them (1 Cor. 2:14). So "great" is that darkness that they are completely ignorant of it (Eph. 4:18), and utterly blind to their actual state. Not only is the natural man unable to deliver himself from this darkness, but he has no desire whatever for such deliverance, for being spiritually dead he has no consciousness of any need for deliverance. It is because of their fearful state that, until the Holy Spirit actually regenerates, all who hear the Gospel are totally incapacitated for any spiritual understanding of it. The majority who hear it imagine that they are already saved, that they are real Christians, and no arguments from the preacher, no power on earth, can ever convince them to the contrary. Tell them, "There is a generation that are pure in their own eyes, and yet is not washed from their filthiness" (Prov. 30:12), and it makes no more impression than does water on a duck's back. Warn them that, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3), and they are no more moved than are the rocks by the oceans spray. No, they suppose that they have nothing to repent of, and know not that their repentance needs "to be repented of" (2 Cor. 7:10). They have far too high an opinion of their religious profession to allow that they are in any danger of hell. Thus, unless a mighty miracle of grace is wrought within them, unless Divine power shatters their complacency, there is no hope at all for them. For, a soul to be savingly convicted of sin is a greater wonder than for a putrid fountain to send forth sweet waters. For a soul to be brought to realize that "every imagination of the thoughts of his

heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5) requires the power of omnipotence to produce. By nature man is independent, self-sufficient, self-confident: what a miracle of grace has been wrought when he now feels and owns his helplessness! By nature a man thinks well of himself; what a miracle of grace has been wrought when he acknowledges, "in me... dwelleth no good thing" (Rom. 7:18)! By nature men are "lovers of themselves" (2 Tim. 3:2); what a miracle of grace has been wrought when men abhor themselves (Job 42:6)! By nature man thinks he is doing Christ a favour to espouse His Gospel and patronize His cause; what a miracle of grace has been wrought when he discovers that he is utterly unfit for His holy presence, and cries, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8). By nature man is proud of his own abilities, accomplishments, attainments; what a miracle of grace has been wrought when he can truthfully declare, "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus. . . and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ" (Phil. 3:8).

3. In casting out the Devil "The whole world lieth in wickedness" (1 John 5:19), bewitched, fettered, helpless. As we go over the Gospel narratives and read of different ones who were possessed of demons, thoughts of pity for the unhappy victims stir our minds, and when we behold the Saviour delivering these wretched creatures we are full of wonderment and gladness. But does the Christian reader realize that we too were once in that same awful plight? Before conversion we were the slaves of Satan, the Devil wrought in us his will (Eph. 2:2), and so we walked according to the prince of the power of the air." What ability had we to deliver ourselves? Less than we have to stop the rain from falling or the wind from blowing. A picture of man's helplessness to deliver himself from Satan's power is drawn by Christ in Luke 11:21: "When a strong man armed keepeth his palace, his goods are in peace." The "strong man" is Satan; his "goods" are the helpless captives. But blessed be His name, "the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). This too was pictured by Christ in the same parable: "But when a stronger than he shall come upon him, and overcome him, he taketh from him all his armour wherein he trusted, and divideth the spoils" (Luke 11:22). Christ is mightier than Satan, He overcomes him in the day of His power (Ps. 110:3), and emancipates "His own" who are bound (Isa. 61:1). He still comes by His Spirit to "set at liberty them that are bruised" (Luke 4:18), therefore is it said of God, "who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and bath translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son" plucking or snatching out of a power that otherwise would not yield its prey.

4. In producing repentance Man without Christ cannot repent: "Him hath God exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance" (Acts 5:31). Christ gave it as a "prince," and therefore to none but His subjects, those who are in His kingdom, in whom He rules. Nothing can draw men to repentance but the regenerating power of Christ, which He exercises at God's right hand; for the acts of repentance are hatred of sin, sorrow for it, determination to forsake it, and earnest and constant endeavour after its deaths But sin is so transcendently dear and delightful to a man out of Christ that nothing but an infinite power can draw him to these acts mentioned. Sin is more precious to an unregenerate soul than anything else in heaven or earth. It is dearer to him than liberty, for he gives himself up to it entirely, and becomes its servant and slave. It is dearer to him than health, strength, time, or riches, for he spends all these upon sin. It is dearer to him than his own soul. Shall a man lose his sins or his soul? Ninety-nine out of a hundred vote for the latter, and lose their souls on that account. Sin is a man's self. Just as "I" is the central letter of "sin," so sin is the center, the moving-power, the very life of self. Therefore did Christ say, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself" (Matt. 16:24). Men are "lovers of their own selves" (2 Tim. 3:2), which is the same as saying that their hearts are wedded to sin. Man "drinketh iniquity like water" (Job 15:16); he cannot exist without it, he is ever thirsting for it, he must have his fill of it. Now since man so dotes on sin, what is going to turn his delight into sorrow, his love for it into loathing of it? Nothing but almighty power. Here, then, we may mark the folly of those who cherish the delusion that they can repent whenever they get ready to do so. But evangelical repentance is not at the

beck and call of the creature. It is the gift of God: "If God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth" (2 Tim. 2:25). Then what insanity is it that persuades multitudes to defer the effort to repent till their death-beds? Do they imagine that when they are so weak that they can no longer turn their bodies they will have strength to turn their souls from sin? Far sooner could they turn themselves back to perfect physical health. What praise, then, is due to God if He has wrought a saving repentance in us.

5. In working faith in His people Saving faith in Christ is not the simple matter that so many vainly imagine. Countless thousands suppose it is as easy to believe in the Lord Jesus as in Caesar or Napoleon, and the tragic thing is that hundreds of preachers are helping forward this lie. It is as easy to believe on Him as on them in a natural, historical, intellectual way; but not so in a spiritual and saving way. I may believe in all the heroes of the past, but such belief effects no change in my life! I may have unshaken confidence in the historicity of George Washington, but does my belief in him abate my love for the world and cause me to hate even the garment spotted by the flesh? A supernatural and saving faith in Christ purifies the life. Is such a faith easily attained? No, indeed! Listen to Christ Himself: "How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?" (John 5:44). And again, we read, "They could not believe" (John 12:39). Faith in Christ is receiving Him as He is offered or presented to us by God (John 1:12). Now God presents Christ to us not only as Priest, but as King; not only as Saviour, but as "Prince" (Acts 5:21)—note that "Prince" precedes "Saviour," as taking His "yoke" upon us goes before finding "rest" to our souls (Matt. 11:29)! Are men as willing for Christ to rule as to save them? Do they pray as earnestly for purity as for pardon? Are they as anxious to be delivered from the power of sin as they are from the fires of hell? Do they desire holiness as much as they do heaven? Is the dominion of sin as dreadful to them as its wages? Does the filthiness of sin grieve them as much as the guilt and damnation of it? The man who divides what God has joined together when He offers Christ to us has not "received" Him at all. Faith is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8, 9). It is wrought in the elect by "the operation of God" (Col. 2:12). To bring a sinner from unbelief to saving faith in Christ is a miracle as great and as wondrous as was God's raising Christ from the dead (Eph. 1:19, 20). Unbelief is far, far more than entertaining an erroneous conception of God's way of salvation: it is a species of hatred against Him. So faith in Christ is far more than the mind assenting to all that is said of Him in the Scriptures. The demons do that (James 2:19), but it does not save them. Saving faith is not only the heart being weaned from every other object of confidence as the ground of my acceptance before God, but it is also the heart being weaned from every other object that competes with Him for my affections. Saving faith is that "which worketh by love" (Gal. 5:6), a love which is evidenced by keeping His commandments (John 14:23); but by their very nature all men hate his commandments. Therefore where there is a believing heart which is devoted to Christ, esteeming Him above self and the world, a mighty miracle of grace has been wrought in the soul.

6. In communicating a sense of pardon When a soul has been sorely wounded by the "arrows of the Almighty" (Job 6:4), when the ineffable light of the thrice holy God has shone into our dark hearts, revealing their unspeakable filthiness and corruption; when our innumerable iniquities have been made to stare us in the face, until the convicted sinner has been made to realize he is fit only for hell, and sees himself even now on the very brink of it; when he is brought to feel that he has provoked God so sorely that he greatly fears he has sinned beyond all possibility of forgiveness (and unless your soul has passed through such experiences, my readers, you have never been born again), then nothing but Divine power can raise that soul out of abject despair and create in it a hope of mercy. To lift the stricken sinner above those dark waters that have so terrified him, to bestow the light of comfort as well as the light of conviction into a heart filled with worse than Egyptian darkness, is an act of Omnipotence. God only can heal the heart which He has wounded and speak peace to the raging tempest within. Men may count up the promises of God and the arguments of peace till they are as old as Methuselah, but it will avail them

nothing until a Divine hand shall pour in "the balm of Gilead." The sinner is no more able to apply to himself the Word of Divine comfort when he is under the terrors of God's law, and writhing beneath the strokes of God's convicting Spirit, than he is able to resurrect the moldering bodies in our cemeteries. To "restore the joy of salvation" was in David's judgment an act of sovereign power equal to that of creating a clean heart (Ps. 51:10). All the Doctors of Divinity put together are as incapable of healing a wounded spirit as are the physicians of medicine of animating a corpse. To silence a tempestuous conscience is a mightier performance than the Saviour's stilling the stormy winds and raging waves, though it is not to be expected that any will grant the truth of this who are in themselves strangers to such an experience. As nothing but infinite power can remove the guilt of sin, so nothing but infinite power can remove the despairing sense of it. 7. In actually converting a soul "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?" (Jer. 13:23). No, indeed; though he may paint or cover them over. So one out of Christ may restrain the outward acts of sin, but he cannot mortify the inward principle of it. To turn water into wine was indeed a miracle, but to turn fire into water would be a greater one. To create a man out of the dust of the ground was a work of Divine power, but to re-create a man so that a sinner becomes a saint, a lion is changed into a lamb, an enemy transformed into a friend, hatred is melted into love, is a far greater wonder of Omnipotence. The miracle of conversion, which is effected by the Spirit through the Gospel, is described thus: "For the weapons of our warfare [i.e. the preachers] are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds; casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:4, 5). Well has it been said, "To dispossess a man, then, of his self-esteem and self-sufficiency, to make room for God in the heart where there was none but for sin, as dear to him as himself, to hurl down pride of nature, to make stout imaginations stoop to the cross, to make designs of self-advancement sink under a zeal for the glory of God and an overruling design for His honour, is not to be ascribed to any but to an outstretched arm wielding the sword of the Spirit. To have a heart full of the fear of God that was just before filled with contempt of Him, to have a sense of His power, an eye to His glory, admiring thoughts of His wisdom; to have a hatred of his habitual lustings that had brought him in much sensitive pleasure; to loathe them; to live by faith in and obedience to the Redeemer, who before was so heartily under the dominion of Satan and self, is a triumphant act of infinite power that can 'subdue all things' to itself" (S. Charnock). 8. In preserving His people "Who are kept by the power of God through faith.. . ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet. 1:5). "Kept from what? Ah, what mortal is capable of returning a full answer? A whole section might profitably be devoted to this one aspect of our subject. Kept from the dominion of sin which still dwells within us. Kept from being drawn Out of the narrow way by the enticements of the world. Kept from the horrible heresies which ensnare thousands on every side. Kept from being overcome by Satan, who ever seeks our destruction. Kept from departing from the living God so that we do not make shipwreck of the faith. Kept from turning His grace into lasciviousness. Weak as water in ourselves, yet enabled to endure as seeing Him who is invisible. This "is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes." Sin is a mighty monarch which none of his subjects can withstand. There was more in Adam while innocent to resist sin than in any other since, for sin has an ally within the fallen creature that is ever ready to betray him into temptation from without. But sin had no such advantage over Adam, nevertheless it overwhelmed him. The non-elect angels were yet better able to withstand sin than Adam was, having a more excellent nature and being nearer to God, yet sin prevailed against them, and threw them out of heaven into hell. Then what a mighty power is required to subdue it! Only He who "led captivity captive" can make His people more than conquerors. "As the providence of God is a manifestation of His power in a continued creation, so the preservation of grace is a manifestation of His power in a continued regeneration. God's strength abates and modifies the violence of temptations, His

staff supports His people under them, His might defeats the power of Satan. The counterworkings of indwelling corruptions, the reluctancies of the flesh against the breathings of the spirit, the fallacies of the senses and the roving of the mind would quickly stifle and quench grace if it were not maintained by the same all-powerful blast that first inbreathed it. No less power is seen in perfecting it, than implanting it (2 Peter 1:3); no less in fulfilling the work of faith, than in engrafting the word of faith (2 Thess. 1:11)."—S. Charnock. The preservation of God's people in this world greatly glorifies the power of God. To preserve those with so many corruptions within and so many temptations without magnifies His ineffable might more than if He were to translate them to heaven the moment they believed. In a world of suffering and sorrow, to preserve the faith of His people amid so many and sore testings, trials, buffetings, disappointments, betrayals by friends and professed brethren in Christ, is infinitely more wonderful than if a man should succeed in carrying an unsheltered candle alight across an open moor when a hurricane was blowing. To the glory of God the writer bears witness that but for omnipotent grace he had become an infidel years ago as the result of the treatment he had received from those who posed as preachers of the Gospel. Yes, for God to supply strength to His fainting people, and enable them to "hold the beginning of their confidence stedfast unto the end" (Heb. 3:14), is more marvelous than though He were to keep a fire burning in the midst of the ocean. How the contemplation of the power of God should deepen our confidence and trust in Him: "Trust ye in the Lord for ever: for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength" (Isa. 26:4). The power of God was the ground of Abraham's assurance (Heb. 11:19), of the three Hebrews' in Babylon (Dan. 3:17), of Christ's (Heb. 5:7). Oh, to bear constantly in mind that "God is able to make all grace abound toward us" (2 Cor. 19:8). Nothing is so calculated to calm the mind, still our fears, and fill us with peace as faith's appropriation of God's sufficiency. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31). His infallible promise is, "Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of My righteousness" (Isa. 41:10). He who brought a nation through the Red Sea without any ships, and led them across the desert for forty years where was neither bread nor water, still lives and reigns!

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