

**Devotional Thoughts :: Help for the Weak****Help for the Weak - posted by savannah, on: 2010/11/10 23:57**

Help for the Weak

By meditation on these rules and signs, much comfort may be brought to the souls of the weakest. That it may be in greater abundance, let me add something to help them over some few ordinary objections and secret thoughts against themselves which, getting within the heart, oftentimes keep them low.

TEMPTATIONS WHICH HINDER COMFORT

1. Some think they have no faith at all because they have no full assurance, whereas the fairest fire that can be will have some smoke. The best actions will smell of the smoke. The mortar wherein garlic has been stamped will always smell of it; so all our actions will savor something of the old man.
2. In weakness of body some think grace dies, because their performances are feeble, their spirits, which are the instruments of their souls' actions, being weakened. But they do not consider that God regards the hidden sighs of those that lack abilities to express them outwardly. He that pronounces those blessed that consider the poor will have a merciful consideration of such himself.
3. Some again are haunted with hideous representations to their imaginations, and with vile and unworthy thoughts of God, of Christ, of the Word, which, as busy flies, disquiet and molest their peace. These are cast in like wildfire by Satan, as may be discerned by the strangeness, the strength and violence, and the horribleness of them even to corrupt nature. A pious soul is no more guilty of them than Benjamin was when Joseph's cup was put into his sack. Among other helps recommended by godly writers, such as detestation of them and diversion from them to other things, let this be one, to complain to Christ against them, and to fly under the wings of his protection, and to desire him to take our part against his and our enemy. Shall every sin and blasphemy of man be forgiven, and not these blasphemous thoughts, which have the devil for their father, when Christ himself was molested in this way so that he might succor all poor souls in this condition?

But there is a difference between Christ and us in this case. Because Satan had nothing of his own in Christ his suggestions left no impression at all in his holy nature, but, as sparks falling into the sea, were presently quenched. Satan's temptations of Christ were only suggestions on Satan's part, and apprehensions of the vileness of them on Christ's part. To apprehend ill suggested by another is not ill. It was Christ's grievance, but Satan's sin. But thus he yielded himself to be tempted, that he might both pity us in our conflicts, and train us up to manage our spiritual weapons as he did. Christ could have overcome him by power, but he did it by argument. But when Satan comes to us, he finds something of his own in us, which holds correspondence and has intelligence with him. There is the same enmity in our nature to God and goodness, in some degree, that is in Satan himself. Therefore his temptations fasten, for the most part, some taint upon us. And if there were no devil to suggest, yet sinful thoughts would arise from within us, though none were cast in from without. We have a mint of them within. These thoughts, if the soul dwell on them so long as to suck or draw from and by them any sinful delight, then they leave a more heavy guilt upon the soul, hinder our sweet communion with God, interrupt our peace, and put a contrary relish into the soul, disposing it to greater sins. All scandalous actions are only thoughts at the first. Ill thoughts are as little thieves, which, creeping in at the window, open the door to greater. Thoughts are seeds of actions. These, especially when they are helped forward by Satan, make the life of many good Christians almost a martyrdom. In this case it is an unsound comfort that some minister, that ill thoughts arise from nature, and what is natural is excusable. We must know that nature, as it came out of God's hands in the beginning, had no such risings out of it. The soul, as inspired of God, had no such unsavory breathings. But since it betrayed itself by sin it is, in some sort, natural to it to forge sinful imaginations, and to be a furnace of such sparks. And this is an aggravation of the sinfulness of natural corruption, that it is so deeply rooted and so generally spread in our nature.

It promotes humiliation to know the whole breadth and depth of sin. But the fact that our nature now, so far as it is unrenewed, is so unhappily fruitful in ill thoughts, ministers this comfort, that it is not our case alone, as if our condition in this were different from others, as some have been tempted to think, even almost to despair. None, say they, have such

a loathsome nature as I have. This springs from ignorance of the spreading of original sin, for what can come from an unclean thing but that which is unclean? 'As in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man' (Prov. 27:19), where grace has not made some difference. As in annoyances from Satan, so here, the best way is to lay open our complaints to Christ, and cry with Paul, 'O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' (Rom. 7:24). On giving vent to his distress, he presently found comfort, for he breaks into thanksgiving, 'I thank God.' And it is good to profit from this, to hate this offensive body of death more, and to draw nearer to God, as that holy man did after his 'foolish' and 'beastly' thoughts (Psa. 73:22 and 28), and so to keep our hearts closer to God, seasoning them with heavenly meditations in the morning, storing up good matter, so that our heart may be a good treasury, while we beg of Christ his Holy Spirit to stop that cursed issue and to be a living spring of better thoughts in us. Nothing more abases the spirits of holy men that desire to delight in God after they have escaped the common defilements of the world than these unclean issues of spirit, as being most contrary to God, who is a pure Spirit. But the very irksomeness of them yields matter of comfort against them. They force the soul to all spiritual exercises, to watchfulness and a more near walking with God, and to raise itself to thoughts of a higher nature, such as those which the truth of God, the works of God, the communion of saints, the mystery of godliness, the terror of the Lord, and the excellency of the state of a Christian and a conversation suitable to it, do abundantly minister. They discover to us a necessity of daily purging and pardoning grace, and of seeking to be found in Christ, and so bring the best often upon their knees.

Our chief comfort is that our blessed Saviour, as he bade Satan depart from him, after he had given way awhile to his insolence (Matt. 4:10), so he will command him to be gone from us, when it shall be good for us. He must be gone at a word. And Christ can and will likewise, in his own time, rebuke the rebellious and extravagant stirrings of our hearts and bring all the thoughts of the inner man into subjection to himself.

4. Some think, when they become more troubled with the smoke of corruption than they were before, therefore they are worse than they were. It is true that corruptions appear now more than before, but they are less.

For, first, the more sin is seen, the more it is hated, and therefore it is less. Dust particles are in a room before the sun shines, but they only appear then.

Secondly, the nearer contraries are one to another, the sharper is the conflict between them. Now, of all enemies the spirit and the flesh are nearest one to another, being both in the soul of a regenerate man, in the faculties of the soul, and in every action that springs from those faculties, and therefore it is no marvel that the soul, the seat of this battle, thus divided within itself, is as smoking flax.

Thirdly, the more grace, the more spiritual life, and the more spiritual life, the more antipathy to the contrary. Therefore none are so aware of corruption as those whose souls are most alive.

Fourthly, when men give themselves up to self-indulgence, their corruptions do not trouble them, as not being bound and tied up; but when once grace suppresses their extravagant and licentious excesses, then the flesh boils, as disdainful to be confined. Yet they are better now than they were before. That matter which yields smoke was in the torch before it was lighted, but it is not offensive till the torch begins to burn. Let such know that if the smoke be once offensive to them, it is a sign that there is light. It is better to enjoy the benefit of light, though with smoke, than to be altogether in the dark.

Nor is smoke so offensive to us as light is pleasant to us, since it yields an evidence of the truth of grace in the heart. Therefore, though it is cumbersome in the conflict, yet it is comfortable as evidence. It is better that corruption should offend us now than, by giving way to it to gain a little peace, to lose comfort afterwards. Let such therefore as are at variance and odds with their corruptions look on this text as their portion of comfort.

WEAKNESS SHOULD NOT KEEP US FROM DUTY

It should encourage us to duty that Christ will not quench the smoking flax, but blow on it till it flames. Some are loath to do good because they feel their hearts rebelling, and duties turn out badly. We should not avoid good actions because of the infirmities attending them. Christ looks more at the good in them which he means to cherish than the ill in them which he means to abolish. Though eating increases a disease, a sick man will still eat, so that nature may gain strength against the disease. So, though sin cleaves to what we do, yet let us do it, since we have to deal with so good a Lord, and the more strife we meet with, the more acceptance we shall have. Christ loves to taste of the good fruits that come from us, even though they will always savor of our old nature.

A Christian complains he cannot pray. 'Oh, I am troubled with so many distracting thoughts, and never more than now!'

But has he put into your heart a desire to pray? Then he will hear the desires of his own Spirit in you. 'We know not what we should pray for as we ought' (nor how to do anything else as we ought), but the Spirit helps our infirmities with 'groanings which cannot be uttered' (Rom. 8:26), which are not hid from God. 'My groaning is not hid from thee' (Psa. 38:9). God can pick sense out of a confused prayer. These desires cry louder in his ears than your sins. Sometimes a Christian has such confused thoughts that he can say nothing but, as a child, cries, 'O Father', not able to express what he needs, like Moses at the Red Sea. These stirrings of spirit touch the heart of God and melt him into compassion towards us, when they come from the Spirit of adoption, and from a striving to be better.

'Oh, but is it possible', thinks the misgiving heart, 'that so holy a God should accept such a prayer?' Yes, he will accept that which is his own, and pardon that which is ours. Jonah prayed in the fish's belly (Jon. 2:1), being burdened with the guilt of sin, yet God heard him. Let not, therefore, infirmities discourage us. James takes away this objection (James 5:17). 'Some might object, 'If I were as holy as Elijah, then my prayers might be regarded.' 'But,' says he, 'Elijah was a man's subject to like passions as we are.' He had his passions as well as we, or do we think that God heard him because he was without fault? Surely not. But look at the promises: 'Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee' (Psa. 50:15). 'Ask, and it shall be given you' (Matt. 7:7) and others like these. God accepts our prayers, though weak, because we are his own children, and they come from his own Spirit; because they are according to his own will; and because they are offered in Christ's mediation, and he takes them, and mingles them with his own incense (Rev. 8:3).

There is never a holy sigh, never a tear we shed, which is lost. And as every grace increases by exercise of itself, so does the grace of prayer. By prayer we learn to pray. So, likewise, we should take heed of a spirit of discouragement in all other holy duties, since we have so gracious a Saviour. Pray as we are able, hear as we are able, strive as we are able, do as we are able, according to the measure of grace received. God in Christ will cast a gracious eye upon that which is his own.

Would Paul do nothing because he could not do the good that he would? No, he 'pressed toward the mark'.

Let us not be cruel to ourselves when Christ is thus gracious. There is a certain meekness of spirit whereby we yield thanks to God for any ability at all, and rest quiet with the measure of grace received, seeing it is God's good pleasure it should be so, who gives the will and the deed, yet not so as to rest from further endeavors. But when, with faithful endeavor, we come short of what we would be, and short of what others are, then know for our comfort, Christ will not quench the smoking flax, and that sincerity and truth, as we said before, with endeavor of growth, is our perfection.

What God says of Jeroboam's son is comforting, 'He only shall come to the grave, because in him there is found some good thing toward the LORD God of Israel' (1 Kings 14:13), though only 'some good thing'. 'Lord, I believe' (Mark 9:24), with a weak faith, yet with faith; love thee with a faint love, yet with love; endeavor in a feeble manner, yet endeavor. A little fire is fire, though it smokes. Since thou hast taken me into thy covenant to be thine from being an enemy, wilt thou cast me off for these infirmities, which, as they displease thee, so are they the grief of my own heart?

by Richard Sibbes

OVERCOMING DISCOURAGEMENTS - posted by savannah, on: 2010/11/11 22:55

OVERCOMING DISCOURAGEMENTS

Suffering brings discouragements, because of our impatience. 'Alas!', we lament, 'I shall never get through such a trial.' But if God brings us into the trial he will be with us in the trial, and at length bring us out, more refined. We shall lose nothing but dross (Zech. 13:9). From our own strength we cannot bear the least trouble, but by the Spirit's assistance we can bear the greatest. The Spirit will add his shoulders to help us to bear our infirmities. The Lord will give his hand to help us up (Psa. 37:24). 'Ye have heard of the patience of job,' says James (James 5:11). We have heard of his impatience too, but it pleased God mercifully to overlook that. It yields us comfort also in desolate conditions, such as contagious sicknesses and the like, in which we are more immediately under God's hand, than then Christ has a throne of mercy at our bedside and numbers our tears and our groans. And, to come to the matter we are now about, the Sacrament', it was ordained not for angels, but for men; and not for perfect men, but for weak men; and not for Christ, who is truth itself, to bind him, but because we are ready, by reason of our guilty and unbelieving hearts, to call truth itself into question.

Therefore it was not enough for his goodness to leave us many precious promises, but he gives us confirming tokens to

strengthen us. And even if we are not so prepared as we should be, yet let us pray as Hezekiah did: 'The good LORD pardon every one that prepareth his heart to seek God, the LORD God of his fathers, though he be not cleansed according to the purification of the sanctuary' (2 Chron. 30:18,19). Then we come comfortably to this holy sacrament, and with much fruit. This should carry us through all duties with much cheerfulness, that, if we hate our corruptions and strive against them, they shall not be counted ours. 'It is no more I that do it,' says Paul, 'but sin that dwelleth in me' (Rom. 7:17). For what displeases us shall never hurt us, and we shall be esteemed by God to be what we love and desire and labour to be. What we desire to be we shall be, and what we desire truly to conquer we shall conquer, for God will fulfill the desire of them that fear him (Psa. 145:19). The desire is an earnest of the thing desired. How little encouragement will carry us to the affairs of this life! And yet all the helps God offers will hardly prevail with our backward natures.

SOME SCRUPLES REMOVED

Among other causes of discouragement, some are much vexed with scruples, even against the best duties; partly by disease of body, helped by Satan's malice in casting dust in their eyes in their way to heaven; and partly from some remainder of ignorance, which, like darkness, breeds fears- ignorance especially of this merciful disposition in Christ, the persuasion of which would easily banish false fears. They conceive of him as one on watch for all advantages against them, in which they may see how they wrong not only themselves but his goodness. This scrupulosity, for the most part, is a sign of a godly soul, as some weeds are of a good soil. Therefore they are the more to be pitied, for it is a heavy affliction, and the ground of it in most is not so much from trouble of conscience as from a disordered imagination. The end of Christ's coming was to free us from all such groundless fears. There is still in some such ignorance of that comfortable condition we are in under the covenant of grace as to discourage them greatly. Therefore we must understand that:

1. Weaknesses do not break covenant with God. They do not break the covenant between husband and wife, and shall we make ourselves more pitiful than Christ who makes himself a pattern of love to all other husbands?
2. Weaknesses do not debar us from mercy; rather they incline God to us the more (Psa. 78:39). Mercy is a part of the church's marriage inheritance. Christ betroths her to him 'in mercy' (Hos. 2:19). The husband is bound to bear with the wife, as being the 'weaker vessel' (1 Pet. 3:7), and shall we think Christ will exempt himself from his own rule, and not bear with his weak spouse?
3. If Christ should not be merciful to our weaknesses, he should not have a people to serve him. Suppose therefore we are very weak, yet so long as we are not found amongst malicious opposers and underminers of God's truth, let us not give way to despairing thoughts; we have a merciful Saviour.

But lest we flatter ourselves without good grounds, we must know that weaknesses are to be reckoned either imperfections cleaving to our best actions, or actions proceeding from immaturity in Christ, whilst we are babes, or the effects of want of strength, where ability is small, or sudden unintended breakings out, contrary to our general bent and purpose, whilst our judgment is overcast with the cloud of a sudden temptation, after which we feel our infirmity, grieve for it and from grief, complain, and, with complaining, strive and labour to reform; finally, in laboring, we make some progress against our corruption.

Weaknesses so considered, although a matter of humiliation and the object of our daily mortification, yet may be consistent with boldness with God, nor is a good work either extinguished by them or tainted so far as to lose all acceptance with God. But to plead for an infirmity is more than an infirmity; to allow ourselves in weaknesses is more than a weakness. The justification of evil shuts our mouths, so that the soul cannot call God Father with childlike liberty, or enjoy sweet communion with him, until peace be made by shaming ourselves, and renewing our faith. Those that have ever been bruised for sin, if they fall, are soon recovered. Peter was recovered with a gracious look of Christ, David by Abigail's words. If you tell a thief or a vagrant that he is out of the way, he pays no heed, because his aim is not to walk in any particular way, except as it suits his purpose. (Richard Sibbes)

Re: OVERCOMING DISCOURAGEMENTS - posted by buttermilk80 (), on: 2010/11/12 8:40

We pronounce the Greatness of Christ with Paul:

"Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong".