

# Help for the Weak

By Todd Pruitt

I love reading the Puritans. Often misunderstood in our own day, the Puritans have in recent years been rediscovered by historians who have found that their grim caricature bears little resemblance to the real men and women who made up this 17<sup>th</sup> century movement within Protestantism. In their day, the Puritans faced alternating periods of tolerance and persecution depending on whomever was ruling in England at the time. The Puritans were characterized by a zeal to see Scripture as the sole authority for the doctrine and practice of the church, which put them squarely at odds with the church of Rome. This was a dangerous position. The persecutions heaped upon them drove thousands from their pulpits forbidding them to preach under pain of imprisonment and even death. John Bunyan is one well known example of a Baptist Puritan who spent twelve years in Bedford jail for preaching the free grace of God in Jesus Christ. Eventually, Puritans would pursue religious freedom in places like the Netherlands and even the New World.

We are fortunate that a vast wealth of Puritan writings is available in our own day. Their books are Bible saturated. The Puritans had a knack for writing book-length treatments of single verses of Scripture. Also, more than any of their contemporaries the Puritans knew how to wed proper doctrine with proper practice. They knew that an insistence on theological precision was never at odds with a fervor for Christian charity and all its fruits. This is why reading the Puritans will enlighten the mind, challenge the will, and thrill the heart. Most helpfully, the Puritans never intended their sermons and books to be ends in themselves but rather to drive the reader back to the Scriptures.

One of the most beloved books of the Puritan era is The Bruised Reed by Richard Sibbes (pronounced "Sibs"). It is an extended commentary and meditation on Isaiah's messianic prophecy: "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice" (42:1-3). Matthew's gospel confirms that Jesus was the fulfillment of those words (12:18-20). What a tender image this is of Jesus and His ministry. Can you think of anything weaker than a bruised reed or faintly burning wick? While Jesus was known for dealing harshly with the self-righteous and those more offended by other people's sins than their own, He was extraordinarily tender with those who were well aware of their sins and sickness. He made a place at the table for swindlers, lepers, and various people of ill repute. It is not that Jesus turned a blind eye to sin. But He did come to save sinners. This is good news for all of us who have at one time or

another come to terms with our own desperately lost condition. Jesus is Lord and Savior of the bruised reeds. It is of this truth that Sibbes writes so beautifully.

Of The Bruised Reed, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the 20<sup>th</sup> century's greatest Bible expositor, wrote, "I shall never cease to be grateful to...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...*The Bruised Reed*...quieted, soothed, comforted, encouraged and healed me." Since its first publication in 1630 a long line of men and women have given similar testimony to Sibbes' masterwork of pastoral exposition.

Sounding much like the apostle Paul in his second letter to the church at Corinth, Sibbes helps us understand that it pleases God to "bruise" His people that we might be humble. He writes:

*This bruising makes us set a high price upon Christ. Then the gospel becomes the gospel indeed; then the fig-leaves of morality will do us no good. And it makes us more thankful, and, from thankfulness, more fruitful in our lives; for what makes many so cold and barren, but that bruising for sin never endeared God's grace to them? Likewise this dealing of God establishes us the more in His ways, having had knocks and bruising in our own ways...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.*

Beyond his keen insights into God's ways of keeping us humble and tender, Sibbes also offers challenging instruction on how to care for the bruised reeds within the body of Christ. He does this first by reminding us of how Christ has treated us: "There is more mercy in Christ than sin in us...Christ refuses none for weakness of parts, that none should be discouraged." With the tender example of Jesus firmly established the author turns his attention to how we treat one another. He writes:

*It would be a good contest amongst Christians, one to labor to give no offence, and the other to labor to take none. The best men are severe to themselves, tender over others...Men must not be too curious in prying into the weaknesses of others. We should labor rather to see what they have that is for eternity, to incline our hearts to love them, than into that weakness which the Spirit of God will in time consume, to estrange us. Some think it strength of grace to endure nothing in the weaker, whereas the strongest are readiest to bear with the infirmities of the weak.*

The church today could learn a great deal from this man and his wonderful book. Sibbes does not uncover new truth. He simply shines a light upon the truth of God's sweet mercy in Christ. It is a mercy that is often conspicuously absent in so many of our dealings with one another. How the world needs to see

a church that is full of love for the weakest. Charles Spurgeon once wrote, "Sibbes never wastes a student's time, he scatters pearls and diamonds with both hands." This has certainly been my experience in reading The Bruised Reed. I trust you will find the time to take it up and read.

### Report from the Strategic Ministry Planning Team

Beginning Sunday February 4<sup>th</sup> we will be distributing spiritual life inventories to those members and regular attenders of Metro East eighteen years old and above. The purpose is to help the SMPT draft an action plan concerning our ministries and priorities for the future. By carefully completing the survey you will help us understand the strengths and weaknesses of our ministries and where the greatest spiritual needs exist. You will find surveys throughout the building. You can also download a copy from our web page ([www.metroeastbaptist.com](http://www.metroeastbaptist.com)). Be sure and check our website regularly for updates and other helpful information.