

## INTRODUCTION

# The Challenge to Myself

*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*

—Matthew 11:28-30

### Meeting me

Where is your happy place? The space that stills your heart, brings simple joy, allows you to breathe a sigh of contentment.

Is it a precious location grounding your sense of home? Being with friends or family, or time alone enjoying those blissful moments free from responsibility and pressure?

In 2017, fresh into a move from the South Coast to Oxford, feeling overwhelmed with adulting and parenting preschoolers, I found quiet refuge in a Waterstones café on Broad Street: coffee, pastry and a book for a whole hour's breathing space during the children's first day in nursery. My adrenaline was still sky high, but I was daunted and exhausted by the expectations of 'ministry life' that lay beyond my husband's three years of training.

Most of the time I thrive on pressure, but only when I've set the terms. This was a whole new level of stress. I felt this time—pressure to emerge as some ideal, all-hosting, super-spiritual,

answer-to-everything, all-tray-baking ‘vicar’s wife’. But I felt broken before I’d even begun. Even if I could work out how to lower my cortisol levels, no chamomile tea or sleep routine would solve this kind of soul-fatigue.

So I returned to familiar old coping mechanisms as ways to release the valve and found myself at thirty once again fighting – and losing – my battle with bulimia. On top of exhaustion, I could now add the weight of shame and self-frustration. But one thing I could always rely on was my ability to cover up, to put on a public front. My high-alert, adrenaline-fuelled state of anxiety has always served me well. It has driven my constantly restless but incredibly productive and ‘capable’ life of extrovert energy, enthusiasm and seeming effortless ease.

On the surface, I was my usual self, a confident social butterfly flitting in and around conversation and people. To all appearances, as a family, we were thriving in our new lives. In reality, I was barely surviving – self-medicating with distraction, seizing control over the minutiae – from regimented sleep times for my daughters to food portions and meal choices for everyone. Disciplined exercise regimes had suffocated any ability to rest in mind or body; day-and-night meditation had become a cyclone of worry, obsessive thoughts, endless counting of calories. I was highly regimented in Scripture-reading and memorisation as my devotional diet, never missed a quiet time, Bible study or church meeting, but spiritually, I was starved.

All theology, all Bible knowledge felt like dry, stagnant, notional understanding – abstract ideas. I assented to truths, was lively company in Christian fellowship, but far too distracted with myself and earthly goals to dive deep into union with Jesus or church. My journey from knowing God’s truths in my head to knowing them in my heart had barely begun, and the road ahead was to prove humbling and hard.

Looking back, I was completely unaware of the state of my soul. I'd compartmentalised Christ, going through the motions of reading God's Word without listening to the hope and challenge of living in its power. I was barely surviving in a state of superficiality instead of fully living in dependence and devotion to God.

The more I fine-tuned my self-survival system, all I achieved was my own inevitable self-implosion. It was in this barely self-aware, self-destructive state that I found myself sitting (a miracle in itself) in an Oxford bookshop café, and opening my book to read these precious words of grace:

Christ is a garment, faith puts him on; Christ is a foundation, faith builds upon him; Christ is a root, faith plants us in him ... Faith makes generals, personal. Faith makes generals particulars.<sup>1</sup>

These are the words of Puritan and Anglican minister, Richard Sibbes. In them I heard God's promises for me. *Really heard them.*

I heard the freedom of the challenge that my faith was not part of any productivity programme or self-improvement regime (not that those had worked anyway). Faith was purely a sweet gift to clothe me – that God wraps around me.

*Me.*

Generalities of the gospel and the consequence of Christ's death and resurrection started to become personal, particular promises to me.

Promises God had made to me, gifted to me, with specific implications for me.

I pictured Jesus clothing me with Himself, His purity, His righteousness.

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1. Richard Sibbes, *The Works of Richard Sibbes*, 7 vols., The Banner of Truth Trust, 5:387

I heard His promise to continue robing me ever more in His ways and holiness, beautifying me in His likeness.

I sensed His all-enfolding arms of love wrapped tightly and securely around me.

I felt safe. I felt hopeful. I felt challenged. God's gift of life, of freedom, of love with Him in Christ, for me. I felt the Father's love and I felt at home – rested, known and named as His child. So He set me on the journey from head to heart, and opened my eyes to His gracious, good and pleasing work of renewing and transforming me soul-deep deep.

This is the promise God has made for each of His children – for you. The gospel is not a collection of general ideas. It is the particular love of God revealed to you in Christ.

Through Sibbes' preaching, I heard the gospel call to surrender my survival plans to a life of fullness and enduring hope in Christ.

But I felt daunted by the dangerous vulnerability this would mean. I could sense already the discomfort of being exposed before God, in the light of Jesus. My antennae were up and alert to the risk of allowing Jesus to truly challenge my soul.

I was aware of the fear and caution of giving my will, desires, affections, habits, even my disordered mind patterns to Him to be changed by faith and grown into something beautiful.

But I also heard hope. I felt the need to do this, to let go, to confess my control over 'my' faith, that was never mine in the first place. I heard His promise of something deeper, better, and authentic. As I read more of Sibbes, my fearful heart heard the tender heart of God as I received the enduring hope and glorious grace of the gospel through this faithful old preacher and his compassionate, gentle tone that matched that of my heavenly Father's for me. He preached to me that:

The manner of [God's] working ... is to work freely by a sweet inclination, not by violence.<sup>2</sup>

I saw afresh God's fatherly heart towards me, knowing my temptations, my sin and my struggles, and compassionately, tenderly drawing me to Himself 'by sweet inclination'. I repented of my view of God as a begrudging, absent Father, forced to love me, but frustrated and disgusted with my failure as a daughter. Sibbes preached to my starved and forgetful soul of who God rightly is as a faithful, willing, loving Lord who chooses and delights to 'work freely' and intimately in and through me, and each of His particular children. I wasn't a lost cause. God's love for me wasn't abstract theology but life-giving, life-transforming reality.

My Father was willing and able to tenderly bring me into His powerful presence. He was willing and able to continue His freeing and transforming work in me, to the depths of my self-reliant soul. There is a reason Sibbes kept coming back to the book of 2 Corinthians, filling whole volumes of his works.<sup>3</sup> It is 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 that especially flowed throughout all his writing though:<sup>4</sup>

[For] where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. (2 Cor. 3:17-18)

This was God's goal for me – my sanctification and growth in the likeness of the glory of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

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2. Richard Sibbes, *Works of Richard Sibbes*, 6:521.

3. For example, vol. 3 of *Works of Richard Sibbes* is an entire volume dedicated to Chapter 1 alone; volume 6 is devoted to Chapters 3 and 4.

4. Indeed, it was the sole focus of his sermon, 'The excellency of the Gospel above the law,' *Works of Richard Sibbes*, 4:202-305.

In His saving and transforming presence, by His Spirit, I could unravel, completely trusting that He would reveal and re-make my true self.

Meeting the writings of Richard Sibbes and other Puritans was like meeting Jesus afresh. Their writings continue to raise my often downturned, self-focused gaze up and out of myself and onto the beauty and glory of my Saviour. Their commitment to preaching the gospel of salvation through faith alone, by grace alone, in Christ alone, for the glory of God alone keeps me returning to the accomplished and continuing work of God alone for my salvation and my sanctification. His delight and willingness to keep growing me, challenging and changing me more into Christ's likeness lead me time and again to confess and surrender the ways I strive out of self, for myself. For, as Sibbes preached:

All springs of love, all spiritual strivings of the soul flow back to the fountainhead who is God himself, who is himself love. God, who by his 'secret', sovereign will has drawn his children to particular salvation.<sup>5</sup>

God's work is the true striving my soul longs for – striving not of self, but of the Spirit. This is the path, progress, productivity and end-goal my restless heart pursues.

This gospel truth. This fountainhead. This God.

He is my goal, my source of all strength and longing. He is my sustainer and the One my soul was seeking – God Himself, who first sought me.

As the gospel-preaching of the Puritans continues to anchor my wandering heart, and as their words of grace and truth calm my chaotic inclination to spiral into self, the 400-year gap between their time in the 1600s and my own life now in the twenty-first century feels fleeting and remarkably small.

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5. Richard Sibbes, *Works of Richard Sibbes*, 6:387.