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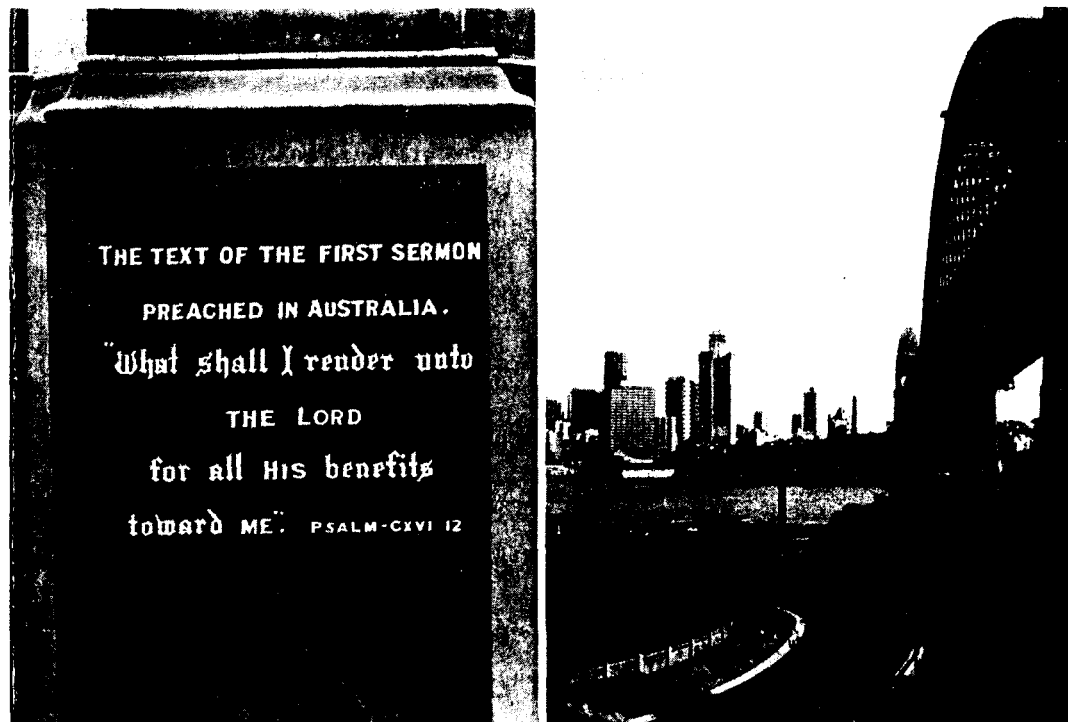
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JOHN OWEN ON CHRISTIAN PIETY

Sinclair B. Ferguson¹

We saw in the previous article that the foundation of Christian piety lies for Owen in his teaching on the Covenant of Grace. The heart of that Covenant is that men are taken into union with Christ, and from that union flow all the blessings and obligations of the Christian life. It is the Covenant of Grace, effected in union with Jesus that transforms all obedience from legal to evangelical. It is the method of the gospel to graft duties onto faith. Or, to put it in more modern terms, it is invariably the case that the great indicative statements of the gospel, which affirm what God has done for men in Christ, that are the foundation for gospel imperatives – what men are to do in and for Christ.

In particular, we noticed that the Christian has a duty to honour, worship and obey his Lord Jesus; he also has a duty to deal with the remnants of corruption in his own heart. Opposition to that is found in the work of satan, the circumstances of his life, and most especially, for Owen, in the power of indwelling sin. Owen calls on his readers always to be killing sin, or it will be killing them. And this led us to consider briefly the goal of the Christian life, in this world, in the development of Christian character.

So the pattern Owen develops is this:

There is opposition to sin, on the believer's part. True piety for Owen is found in this, and not in the strength of sin's opposition to us (a point about which he believed many Christians were deceived).

There is also growth in universal holiness of life; and this takes both negative and positive directions.

In what we have already considered, our attention has moved from the negative aspects of sanctification to the positive. Now we must take up and develop the more positive framework which Owen gives to reformed piety. We have seen that it is based on union with Christ, but there is more to it than that, and there is more in it than that. We must turn therefore to consider the *Nature, Progress, and Consummation* of positive Christian piety.

1. THE NATURE OF POSITIVE CHRISTIAN PIETY

Because it is founded on union with Christ, reformed piety is characterized by communion with God, which, according to Owen,

¹The substance of the second of two addresses on this theme given at this year's Leicester Ministers Conference.

consisteth in his communication of himself unto us, with our returnal unto him of that which he requireth and accepteth, flowing from that union which in Jesus Christ we have with him.²

This communion is essentially Trinitarian. We will find ourselves taken up with it Christologically, and there is no doubt that Owen's teaching here is profoundly, and basically, Christological and Christocentric. But he is also at pains to emphasise that communion with God is Trinitarian, and part of what he means by that is that the believer enjoys a quite distinctive communion with each person of the Trinity. That is a position that has not received a great deal of attention in our reformed theology, but it is axiomatic with Owen. He bases it partly on 1 John 5.7, and holds that, just as each person of the Trinity is said in that text to bear witness, similarly, in that witness, the believer holds communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit distinctly. That text, as Owen would have known, is suspect, but he also adduces other texts. In 1 Corinthians 12.4-6 emphasis is placed on communion with each Person of the Trinity in the special communication of each. Owen holds that Ephesians 2.8 also supports his case, as do other passages in the New Testament.

The question therefore arises: What is distinctive about each of these? Owen answers: The Father communicates by original authority. The Son communicates from his purchased treasury. The Spirit communicates in immediate efficacy.

(a) *Communion with the Father*, is pre-eminently in love, and if that is to be received, it must first of all be *contemplated*. It is very striking to notice what Owen says in this context:

How few of the saints are experimentally acquainted with this privilege of holding immediate communion with the Father in love! With what anxious, doubtful thoughts do they look upon him! What fears, what questionings are there, of his good-will and kindness! At the best, many think there is no sweetness at all in him towards us, but what is purchased at the high price of the blood of Jesus. It is true, that alone is the way of communication; but the free fountain and spring of all is in the bosom of the Father.³

Now, that is a point of immense theological and practical importance. *Theologically* at a stroke it clears Owen's evangelicalism of the accusation that he makes a loving Son placate a reluctant Father, and persuade him to have mercy. No! says Owen, the source, the fountain of all our salvation is found in the loving heart of the Father.

²II:8.
³II:32.

Practically, what he says here has far-reaching implications for the doctrine of assurance. There is nothing more inimical to Christian assurance than the thought that Christ is only a 'front' to the Father, and that behind Christ, and sending him, is a God who, in his heart of hearts, would rather destroy us. Of course there is a paradox here, and it has always been recognised in truly reformed theology: He loved us, even when he hated us, says Augustine – and Calvin quotes him with total approval. This is Owen's position too – and, moreover, he sees that so much of our lack of assurance springs from our basic insecurity about the love of God for us. And lack of assurance always breeds a narrowness of spirit, and a spirit of censoriousness more akin to Pharisaism than the grace of God. That is why Owen stresses the need to recognize the freeness, the fullness, the universality of the Love of God the Father. He too quotes Augustine with approval:⁴

Omnia diligit Deus, quae fecit
 et inter ea magis diligit creaturas racionales,
 et de illis eas amplius quae sunt membra unigeniti sui.
 Et multo magis ipsum unigenitum.
 God loves everything he has made
 And therein, he loves more his rational creatures
 And among them those who are members of his only begotten.
 And most of all, he loves his only begotten Son.

You see what he is doing: he is not denying the distinguishing character of God's love. It would be impossible for him to be doing that in view of his demolition job on Arminianism and universal redemption.⁵ But he is emphasising what he believes to be the Biblical logic. Distinguishing love is not the opposite of free and universal love, but a category within it.

Now, we may say, how does Owen put this together, in practical terms? How does he remove the fears of men who eye God's distinguishing love and cannot see the full freeness of God's love? Here is his answer:

Never any one from the foundation of the world, who believed such love in the Father, and made returns of love to him again, was deceived; neither shall ever any to the world's end be so, in so doing. Thou art, then, in this, upon a most sure bottom. If thou believest and receivest the Father as love, he will infallibly be so to thee, though others may fall under his severity.⁶

Ah, someone may say, imagines Owen: 'If only I could find some

⁴II:33.

⁵Cf. *A Display of Arminianism*, written when Owen was aged about 26!

⁶II:36-7.

rising within my own soul to the love of God, then I could believe he loves me'. This is Owen's reply:

This is the most *preposterous* course that possibly thy thoughts can pitch upon, a most ready way to rob God of his glory. 'Herein is love,' saith the Holy Ghost, 'not that we loved God, but that he loved us' first . . . Now, thou wouldst invert this order, and say, 'Herein is love, not that God loved me, but that I love him first'. This is to take the glory of God from him . . . Lay down, then, *thy reasonings*; take up the love of the Father upon a *pure act of believing*, and that will open thy soul to let it out unto the Lord in the communion of love.⁷

(b) *Communion with Christ the Son* is in grace – in what Owen calls purchased grace and personal grace; purchased grace is what he has done for us by his active and passive obedience, personal grace is what he is in himself as our Saviour. To this we must turn in a moment.

(c) *Communion with the Spirit* is in all the ministries which he exercises towards us, in us, and for us. Here Owen thinks of his anointing, his presence in the believer as an earnest of our inheritance, his work as Advocate and Comforter, and also particularly his sealing ministry. If we had time, it would be immensely valuable to consider what Owen has to say in Volumes II and IV of the *Works* in this connection. But we must move on now from the Nature of Christian piety, with its roots in this three-fold communion, to our second and main section, which is –

2. THE PROGRESS OF CHRISTIAN PIETY

The essence of progress, positive advance, in the Christian life, is determined by the believer's fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ. This fellowship, as we have already seen, is in *grace*. Owen recognized that the word 'grace' was used in three different connections in the Scriptures – it is used of free favour, the quality of graciousness, and of the fruit of the Spirit. Now, Owen has a very marked tendency to use 'grace' of the graciousness of Christ and the fruit of Spirit, whereas Scripture, by contrast, tends to use grace in connection with free favour. But, despite that, we need have no hesitation in finding much that is helpful in Owen's teaching on the benefits of fellowship with the graciousness of Christ. This is what he calls his '*personal grace*'. Personal grace is just another way of speaking of the glorious perfections of the humanity of the Lord Jesus, and, according to Owen, the progress of true religion in the soul depends upon how we respond to him. It is 'The liking of Christ, for his *excellency*,

⁷II:37.

grace, and suitableness,' and 'The *accepting* of Christ by the *will*, as its only husband, Lord, and Saviour'.⁸

Owen has vast tracts of material on this, and it is a recurring theme in his writings on the Christian life. One way in which the essence of it all could be encapsulated in a coherent way is by demonstrating how Owen saw the whole process of developing true fellowship with Christ in terms of the teaching of the Song of Solomon. It may be Owen's teaching will encourage not only the reading of his own exposition, but preaching on the Song of Solomon as well!

What did Owen think he was doing in his exposition of the Song of Solomon? He did not think he was creating his doctrine of Christ from its pages. But he did think it was an illustration of the fellowship which the believer enjoys with his Lord, and of the vicissitudes of his relationship with Christ. It is, in other words, a transcript of the affections of the child of God. Not only piety in the outward behaviour, in moral rectitude, which he emphasises elsewhere, but piety in the cleansing and substantial healing of the very emotions of the child of God.

The theme of Canticles is this, essentially:

This sense of the love of Christ, and the effect of it in communion with him, by prayer and praises, is divinely set forth in the Book of Canticles. The church therein is represented as the spouse of Christ; and, as a faithful spouse she is always either solicitous about his love, or rejoicing in it.⁹

In brief, this whole book is taken up in the description of the communion that is between the Lord Christ and his saints;¹⁰

Now, Owen was really a Welshman who happened to be born in England! And there is, no doubt, a 'Celtic' flavour to his emphasis here on the importance of the affections and senses. But I wonder if there is not more to it than that. For here is this man, with his massive intellectual equipment, his great grasp of theology – and what is he looking for most of all? It is the sense of the love of Christ for him. That is what he sees he needs if he is to progress in Christian piety. Surely there is something for us to learn here. We eschew the false dichotomy between the Person of Christ and the Bible which reveals him. We know of no other Christ than the one we meet in the pages of Scripture. But it is all too possible to search the Scriptures which testify of Christ, and never actually to discover the power of their truth in coming to Christ, and drinking in his love for us.¹¹ It was not a theological axiom that God sent to die for us. It was the

⁸II:58. ⁹I:116. ¹⁰II:46.

¹¹No distinction is more Owenian than the distinction between the truth and the experience of the power of the truth!

Son of his love. And it is communion with him which leads to progress in piety. This, after all is the teaching of Paul – knowledge without this, he says, puffs up: it is love which build up. Owen seems to have been conscious of the danger of the massive intellectual satisfaction to be gained from the gospel – that in it all, instead of finding 'Jesus lover of my soul', a man might find himself crying out in spiritual sterility: 'Where is the blessedness I knew, when first I saw the Lord? Where is the soul refreshing view of Jesus . . . ?'

The theme of Canticles is worked out in this way:

Christ and the Christian are the two main characters. The *daughters of Jerusalem* represent 'all sorts of professors'.¹² The *watchmen* represent office-bearers in the church, and *the city* represents the visible church itself. And while, occasionally, the corporate aspect of the Christian life appears in his exposition, the major concentration is on the individual's experience and the communion he enjoys with his Lord Jesus.

Owen develops this theme in several central passages:

2.1-7: Here Christ is seen, describing his own character and significance to the Christian. He is the Rose of Sharon, the Lily of the Valley. That is, he is pre-eminent in all his personal graces, just as the Rose abounds in perfume, and the Lily in beauty. Indeed, the Rose is from the fertile plain of Sharon, in which the choicest herds are reared.

What does all this mean? Christ 'allures'¹³ the Christian, says Owen – there is an irresistible attraction to him; the believer enjoys the scent of him as the Rose.

But there is more, for Christ goes on in the passage to describe what the church means to him – she is a Lily among thorns, (2: v.2) – and here Owen draws this exquisite lesson. The believer is one with Christ – he is the lily; but the believer, through faith in Christ, is the lily to Christ. He is the lily of the valleys. But we are the lily among thorns! Christ looks upon you, in all your trials, in all the opposition there is to you – but do you not see what he thinks about you? He sees you as his lily!

This conversation and communion between the lover and the beloved continues. He is compared to the apple tree, (2: v.3) – it provides fruit for food, and shade for protection. So with Christ; all others are fruitless to the hungry soul, but he provides shelter, 'from wrath without, and . . . because of weariness from within . . . From the power of *corruptions*, trouble of temptations, distress of persecutions, there is in him quiet, rest, and repose'.¹⁴

¹²II:55.

¹³II:42.

¹⁴II:43-4.

And so in the verses that follow, our communion with the Lord Jesus is delineated for us: It is marked by 4 things:

(i) *Sweetness of fellowship*. 'He brought me to the banqueting-house', v. 4, where he reveals all the treasures of his grace in the Gospel. Indeed, says Owen, we find in this book (1.2) – that his love is better than wine – since it is righteousness, peace, joy in the Holy Spirit. What does wine do? It cheers the heart, it makes us forget our misery; it gives us a glad countenance! And so it is with the wine which flows from the grace of our Lord Jesus, and our fellowship with him.

(ii) *Delight in fellowship*. The maiden is overcome with all this, and she wants to know more of the love of her beloved. She is 'sick of love' – v.5; 'not (as some suppose) fainting for want of a sense of love,' but, 'made sick and faint, even overcome, with the mighty actings of that divine affection, after she had once tasted of the sweetness of Christ in the banqueting-house'.¹⁵

(iii) *Safety*. v.4 – his banner over her was love – a symbol of protection, and a token of success and victory. And here is Owen's application: Christ's banner stands over the believer – anything that comes upon the believer must first press through the love of Christ. Only what Christ gives to us in his love for us will ever come to us. It is the great argument of Romans 8.32 – he that spared not his own Son, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? This is our resting place and safety!

(iv) *Support and Consolation*. v.6. His left hand is under her head, and his right hand embraces her. What is this? asks Owen. It is the picture of Christ supporting the church, and at the same time cherishing it and nourishing it! And so, v.7 – their fellowship together is continued and sustained.

He that has much, to him will more be given. There is an increase in capacity, and in desire for Christ: This is how Owen puts it, in another comment on 2.7:

A believer that hath gotten Christ in his arms, is like one that hath found great spoils, or a pearl of price. He looks about him every way, and fears everything that may deprive him of it.¹⁶

In Canticles 2.9 Christ reappears. In the Song, the lover shows himself through the lattice, and this is interpreted as follows: 'our sight of him here is as it were by glances – liable to be clouded by many interpositions.' There is 'instability and imperfection in our apprehension of him', that is our present mortal state; 'In the meantime he looketh through the windows of the ordinances of the Gospel.'¹⁷ When the Christian has turned away in heart, Christ comes, searching and longing for the

¹⁵II:44. ¹⁶II:126. ¹⁷I:377.

loving service of the Church. If he does not receive it, he will withdraw. It would be impossible within the general framework of Owen's theology to suppose that this involves severed relationships; but it does imply disjointed experience and broken fellowship. Christ is still the Christian's possession and vice-versa, but the *sense* of this has gone.

In chapter 3 the spouse discovers that her lover has withdrawn. She is perplexed. Owen is not clear whether this is the cause or the effect of the 'night' in which she discovers herself, but points to application: 'in the greatest peace and opportunity of ease and rest, a believer finds none in the absence of Christ: though he be on his bed, having nothing to disquiet him, he rests not, if Christ, his rest, be not there.'¹⁸ So the soul searches for Christ, first of all in the ordinary duties of faith,¹⁹ but 'This is not a way to recover a sense of lost love,'²⁰ rather there must be 'Resolutions for new, extraordinary, vigorous, constant applications unto God,' – 'the first general step and degree of a sin-entangled soul acting towards a recovery'.²¹ It is evident that here the soul has lost its sense of forgiveness, and that the search for its restoration involves two things: first, a search of one's own *soul* to discover the cause of Christ's absence, and, second, a search of the *promises* of God to discover the means of his return. Self-examination must be followed by a reapplication to the Covenant of Grace. If this yields no success, the solution is to be found in extraordinary duties, as Owen has already hinted. So the spouse goes about the city (the visible church) looking for her lover. If Christ is not found in private, it is the Christian's duty to make a special search for him in public, through worship, the preaching of the word, and the sacraments. In her search the maiden is found by the watchmen, (office bearers in the church visible) – 'it is of sad consideration, that the Holy Ghost doth sometimes in this book take notice of them to no good account. Plainly, chap. 5.7 they turn persecutors'. Owen finds support for this view in Luther's sentiment "Nunquam periclitatur religio nisi inter reverendissimos", a reason he gives for his dislike for the title 'reverend'! But in fact in this instance the watchmen take notice of the plight of the spouse. This is the duty of faithful office-bearers. Exactly how Christ is discovered is not indicated in the passage, but Owen detects some significance in this too. When Christ comes, it is in his own mysterious way by the Spirit.

By chapter 5 the spouse has sunk again into sloth and indolence. The shepherd-lover comes to meet with her, but she excuses herself by the unsuitableness of the time and her lack of preparation for her duties.²² Christ, thus rebuffed, leaves the believer and 'long it is before she obtains any recovery'.²⁴ He returns later in the chapter and the description given

¹⁸II:128. ¹⁹VI:613. ²⁰VI:353. ²¹*Ibid.*
²²II:130-1. ²³VI:520. ²⁴VI:346.

in 5, v.10-16 provides Owen with a further opportunity to describe what the Christian finds in his Saviour.

Christ is described as being 'white and ruddy'. 'He is *white* in the glory of his *Deity*, and *ruddy* in the preciousness of his *humanity*.²⁵ White is the colour of glory; red is the colour of man made from the dust of the earth, yet in the image of God, man being originally called Adam because of the redness of the earth from which he was made. So the expression here 'points him [Christ] out as the second Adam, partaker of flesh and blood, because the children partook of the same, Hebrews 2.14.'²⁶ He is also white in his innocence, and ruddy 'in the blood of his oblation' – 'by his whiteness he fulfilled the law; by his redness he satisfied justice.'²⁷ Further, the excellence of his administration of the Kingdom of God is expressed: he is white with love and mercy to his own people, and red with justice and revenge upon his enemies. It is this excellence, through the union of the 'white and ruddy', that fits him to be the Saviour, and brings salvation through union and communion with him. This is exegesis in the allegorical tradition, and we may note that Owen has gathered the doctrines of the two natures of Christ, his one person, his work as second Adam, in his active and passive obedience, as the source of man's salvation, out of this one phrase! But perhaps his stress on Christ's humanity is most worthy of note.

In the following verses the maiden goes on to describe Christ more fully. His *head* is as fine gold – conveying the splendour and durability of Christ as the head of the government of the kingdom of God.²⁸ His *locks* are said to be 'bushy' or curled, 'black as a raven'. To first appearance the hair is tangled, but in fact it is well and precisely ordered, thus representing the wisdom of Christ in his mediatorial administration. The *hair* is black to indicate that his ways are past finding out,²⁹ and, in a natural sense, emphasising his comeliness and vigour.³⁰ His *eyes* are like those of the dove – not a bird of prey – indicating the wealth of his knowledge and discernment. They are tender and pure as he discerns the thoughts and intentions of men.³¹ His *cheeks* are like beds of spices, sweet of savour, beautiful in their orderliness;³² so the graces of Christ, in his human nature, are gathered by Christians in prayer, from the Covenant promises of God which are well ordered. (2 Samuel 23.5) These graces are eminent indeed, like 'towers of perfumes' (marginal reading adopted by Owen).³³ His *lips* are like lilies, dropping myrrh – a description of the riches of Christ's word.³⁴

His hands (v.14), refers to the work he has accomplished, as the fruit of his love. His belly (in the sense of bowels) reminds us of his tender mercy

²⁵II:49. ²⁶II:50. ²⁷*Ibid.* ²⁸II:71. ²⁹II:72.
³⁰II:73. ³¹*Ibid.* ³²II:75. ³³II:76. ³⁴*Ibid.*

and loving affection. His legs, countenance and mouth (v.15) remind us of the stability of his kingdom, the grace and faithfulness of his promises. He is completely worthy of the desires and affections of his followers (v.16) in his birth, life, and death, in the glory of his ascension and coronation, in the supply of the Spirit of God, in the ordinances of worship, in the tenderness of his care, in the justice of his vengeance on his enemies, as well as in the pardon he dispenses to all his own people. And this Christ, says Owen, often comes by surprise to the Christian: when he is engaged in ordinary occupations, he finds his mind drawn out in love for Jesus. Weigh these experiences against those times when Satan invades the mind with worldly thoughts, says Owen – lest you be led to despair.

And so the believer is led to the prayer of 8.6 'Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm; for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave'. The worst thought believers have of hell, then, says Owen 'is that they shall not enjoy Jesus Christ'. Here, as elsewhere, he distinguishes between unbelief, and what he calls spiritual jealousy, in which it is the individual's own sense of unworthiness, breeding insecurity, which gives rise to jealousy. Do not only come to love and trust Christ, he says, but see that *you are his beloved*; he loves *you*, he adores *you* as the apple of his eye. He has married himself to *you*!

Now, what is the point of this? It gives a better perspective on Owen. Most of us will never read him until we see he has something to say to us. Owen was a pastor, and a preacher. Do not think he was interested in academic theology, but was not interested in Jesus!

And that is really the point, is it not? Owen did not for a moment build his Christology on the Song of Solomon. And in a sense it is of secondary importance how far we follow his exegesis of these passages. What is significant is this: at the heart of his teaching on progress in Christian piety lay loving fellowship and company with Jesus. It was *Jesus* he loved – not in some maudlin denigratory sense, but in the sense of our Lord's full deity and glory! And that was the great and necessary balance to his mighty intellectual theology. He loved his Lord, and companied with him. One need hardly point up the application. Is this what we are? Is this what we are known for? Is this why people sit under our ministry? Is this what we teach in all the Scriptures? Faith in Christ that works by love for Christ, and in him, for others? This is piety!

3. THE CONSUMMATION OF CHRISTIAN PIETY

This leads us, once again, to the same future perspective with which we concluded the previous study. But now that we have developed the positive aspects of reformed piety in fellowship with Christ, it should be

clear that the logical development and consummation of this is not merely the production of Christian character in this world – but the fullness of fellowship with Christ in the world to come. And this is such a consummation that it inevitably must be read back into the whole character of the Christian life, for that prospect makes an impact on how we live *now*. This was Paul's teaching: being justified by faith, he says, we rejoice now in our afflictions, because they produce glory; and we are able to rejoice now in our afflictions because we also rejoice in the hope of sharing the glory of God!

Owen's emphasis is no different: the vision of, and the longing for the future life stamp the present life with a new dimension altogether.

Of course, this was not Owen's only perspective on the future. He held to the view that the glory of God would fill the earth as the waters cover the sea. But he also knew there was something 'far better' in being with Christ. And that is the essence of his view of the consummation of the Christian life. Here, as we have seen, Christ is seen only through the lattice. He comes to us in the ordinances of the gospel – in preaching and praying, in worship and sacraments. But for all the sense of his glory we may have in these, it is but the dim outline of what he really is, and what he will be to the spirits of just men made perfect. For, in the glory, says Owen, all the barriers of sin, and the finitude of human experience will be broken down, and believers will be transformed into the likeness of Christ. And this, the final crisis of the Christian life, bringing the Christian from sanctification to glorification, involves a number of factors which Owen expounds warmly:

(1) The mind will be set free from its natural darkness, through sin; and its incapacity through creatureliness and fleshly existence.

(2) A new light – the light of glory, will be implanted within him. We will be changed, says Paul, from one degree of glory to another, and this has a special significance: 'as the *light of grace* doth not destroy or abolish the *light of nature*, but rectify and improve it, so the *light of glory* shall not abolish the *light of faith and grace*, but by incorporating with it, render it absolutely perfect.'³⁵ But just as we cannot appreciate the light of grace by the light of nature, so we do not fully appreciate the light of glory by the light of grace; we can only here believe that it will form the soul into the image of Christ, so that, as Owen says, 'Grace renews nature; glory perfects grace.'³⁶

(3) The body of the believer will also be glorified through union with Christ in the body of his humiliation and glory. Heaven will more exceed the state of the gospel, than the gospel state exceeds the state of the law!

³⁵I:382.
³⁶I:383.

In the gospel we see the perfect image of Christ, in the glorified body we will see the perfect substance of Christ. It follows then, that whatever we see here of Christ will make us long to see him more fully in the future. The Christian life then is the planting of a seed, and the growth of the stock. The coming of the flower waits a future revelation.

Now, it is characteristic of Puritan teaching, as it is of New Testament teaching, that this most heavenly doctrine is one with great practical implications, and Owen held that the contemplation of the glorified Christ, through the image of his Word, brings a lively experience of grace to the believer. But the experience of the future is yet distinct: His faculties will then be set free from the 'clogs of the flesh',³⁷ and all its restraints upon his spiritual powers. Christ will be seen, not by faith, but by sight, never to become invisible again, never more to withdraw from sensed fellowship. The vision with which we shall see him will no longer be liable to the defects of our own weakness and the external assaults of the world and the devil. And then, again, here the believer can only gather what Owen calls 'parcels of Christ'; there we will see him, all at once, and for evermore! The transformation will be immediate, total, irreversible, eternal – and yet there will be a continual operation on, and communication to the saints, from the love of Christ. Everything will still depend on his mediation: 'We shall no more be self-subsistent in glory than we are in nature or grace.'³⁸

Nothing is more thrilling about Owen's view of Christian piety than that he turned to this theme, as many before and since have done, in the last days of his life. In fact his *Meditations on the Glory of Christ*³⁹ really represent the substance of his dying ministry to his congregation in London. It is natural that they carry teaching on reformed piety at its most testing and glorious time, in the valley of deep darkness. Here especially the contemplation of Christ lies at the heart of all true grace. Contemplation of that glory, says Owen, 'will carry us cheerfully, comfortably, and victoriously through life and death, and all that we have to conflict withal in either of them.'⁴⁰

At such a time, God acts in special wisdom to his children, to bring them an entrance of triumph into his heavenly kingdom, but certain duties are still called for, if a man is to die confidently in the profession of Christ:

(1) Special faith must be exercised, to commit the soul to God. We cannot go into the world beyond without trusting in the glory that is to be revealed. So it was with Christ – who commended his spirit to God

³⁷I:405.

³⁸I:414.

³⁹I:273ff.

⁴⁰I:277.

in faith. So it was with Stephen, who saw by faith his conquest in Christ's conquest. There is no greater encouragement to the believer than the knowledge that it is *Jesus* who receives him.

(2) The Christian must be willing to part with the flesh, and this, especially for the biblically-instructed believer, takes special understanding. For the body-soul union is peculiar and precious to man; neither angels nor beasts know it. Only man can experience this cataclismic convulsion of his being. And he, by nature has 'a fixed aversation from a dissolution'. Only through the knowledge of something that is better yet, can the Christian repose in God:

He, therefore, that would die comfortably, must be able to say within himself and to himself, 'Die, then, thou frail and sinful flesh: "dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return". I yield thee up unto the righteous doom of the Holy One. Yet therein also I give thee into the hand of the great Refiner, who will hide thee in thy grave, and by thy consumption purify thee from all thy corruption and disposition to evil.'⁴¹

(3) The believer must learn to comply with the times and seasons that God has ordained for his departure.

(4) Since the ways and means by which death approaches bring special trials – long illnesses, severe medical treatment, perhaps persecution – the child of God must learn to resign himself to the gracious will of God and the infinite perfections of his decree, in the sure knowledge that his life is patterned on the image of him who is the firstborn of many brethren predestined to eternal glory. And thus, says Owen:

If our future blessedness shall consist in being where he is, and beholding of his glory, what better preparation can there be for it than in a constant previous contemplation of that glory in the revelation that is made in the Gospel, unto this very end, that by a view of it we may be gradually transformed into the same glory?⁴²

John Owen himself knew something of this in his own experience. It was during his last days that his great work *The Glory of Christ* was being prepared for the press. On 24 August, 1683, William Payne, a Puritan minister at Saffron Waldon, who was seeing the work through the various stages of publication, called to tell him that the work was already being printed. Into its composition he had poured the finest of his spiritual thoughts. But Owen's biographers record his eloquent reply:

⁴¹I:283.

⁴²I:275.

I am glad to hear it; but O brother Payne! the long wished for day is come at last, in which I shall see that glory in another manner than I have ever done, or was capable of doing, in this world.

That is perhaps the most eloquent argument of all for believing that John Owen knew what he was speaking of in all his teaching on reformed piety. Just as his teaching on salvation and assurance by grace sprang from his own search for a settled peace with God; so his teaching on the goal of Christian piety sprang from his love for the Lord Jesus Christ, and his anticipation of the presence of his glory, where he trusted he would be received with great joy.

There is therefore a continuing appropriateness in these words spoken during Owen's funeral sermon preached by David Clarkson, one of his assistants, and himself a great theologian and preacher:

I need not tell you of this who knew him, that it was his great Design to promote Holiness in the Life and Exercise of it among you: But it was his great Complaint that its Power declined among Professors. It was his Care and Endeavour to prevent or cure spiritual Decays in his own Flock: He was a burning and a shining Light. Alas! it was but for a while; and we may Rejoice in it still.

HEAVEN AND ASSURANCE

John Bunyan was once asked a question about heaven which he could not answer, because the matter was not revealed in the Scriptures; and he thereupon advised the inquirer to live a holy life and go and see.

Where the unveiled glories of the Deity shall beat full upon us, and we for ever sun ourselves in the smiles of God.

EZEKIEL HOPKINS

Heaven begins where sin ends.

THOMAS ADAMS

The sea enters into the rivers before the rivers can run into the sea. In like manner, God comes to us before we go to Him; and heaven enters into our souls before we can enter into heaven.

PETER DRELINCOURT

Assurance is the fruit that grows out of the root of faith.

STEPHEN CHARNOCK

Assurance is glory in the bud, it is the suburbs of paradise.

THOMAS BROOKS

Faith is our seal; assurance of faith is God's seal.

CHRISTOPHER NESSE

I am wholly His; I am peculiarly His; I am universally His; I am eternally His.

THOMAS BROOKS

A child of God may have the Kingdom of grace in his heart, yet not know it. The cup was in Benjamin's sack, though he did not know it was there.

THOMAS WATSON

As an infant hath life before he knoweth it; and as he hath misapprehensions of himself, and most other things for certain years together; yet it will not follow that, therefore, he hath no life or reason.

RICHARD BAXTER