

A Body Of Practical Divinity by Dr. John Gill

Book 1

Chapter 18

OF CHRISTIAN FORTITUDE

Though saints are to be humble, self-denying, submissive to the will of God, and patient towards all men, and in all things; yet they are not to indulge to pusillanimity and to a meanness of spirit; but to show firmness of mind, resolution, an undaunted courage, and fortitude of soul, a manly spirit, which is not at all unbecoming the Christian; “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, of love, and of a sound mind” (2 Tim. 1:7), they should play the man, act the manly part, show themselves to be men, as of wisdom, so of courage; “Quit you like men, and be strong;” which respects not strength of body, but fortitude of mind (1 Cor. 16:13), and is the subject to be treated of. Concerning which may be observed,

1. The nature and necessity of it. It is not a natural fortitude which is meant, and which may be in brutes as well as in men; as in the lion, “which is the strongest among beasts, and turneth not away from any” (Prov. 30:30), its courage is equal to its strength; but such natural animosity, or greatness of mind, found among men, is not properly virtue, much less grace, as Christian fortitude is; and which also does not lie in bold and daring enterprises, as when a man attempts things arduous and difficult, and encounters dangers; either of which he has no call unto, but rushes into them unnecessarily and unwarily, without any consultation and deliberation, and without having any good end in view to be answered. This is no other than audaciousness, or rather “temerity,” [52] or rashness; and not true fortitude. Also true Christian fortitude is to be distinguished from civil fortitude, or what is exercised in war, in a military way; though the one may bear some resemblance to the other: and even civil fortitude is often but a false appearance; men will make a show of courage, through fear of disgrace, rebukes of their superiors, and military discipline, or of being taken prisoners, and becoming captives; or it may arise from their confidence in their bodily strength, and in the strength and safety of their armour, and in their military skill, and through ignorance of the strength of the enemy; and it is usually through hope of honour and the applause of men, and sometimes of the spoil; [53] and at most and best, it is exercised for their own good, and the good of their country, which is commendable: but Christian fortitude is concerned about things which are apparently the will of God, and is exercised in obedience to it; for the sake of a man’s doing his duty, and with a pure view to the hon-

our and glory of God; trusting in and depending upon his power, strength, and grace, to carry him through whatever he is called to do or suffer in the performance of it; and from which he is not to be deterred by any difficulties that occur, or dangers he may be exposed unto therein: this is fortitude becoming Christians.

Now of such fortitude there is a necessity in the Christian life. When we consider the many duties of religion to be performed by us, and that with constancy and perseverance, both public and private, relative, social, and personal, in which we are to be steadfast and immovable; and when our own weakness is considered, that without Christ we can do nothing, but all things, through Christ strengthening us, it requires great boldness of faith, and confidence in Christ for grace and strength: and since the Christian has so many difficulties and dangers to encounter with; so many discouragements in the way; so many trials, temptations, tribulations, and afflictions, from various quarters, he must be a man of fortitude not to be moved with these things; bearing all with an invincible courage and constancy. To which may be added, the numerous enemies he has to grapple with; enemies mightier than he, who are lively and strong; some not flesh and blood, as he is, but above his match; even principalities and powers, and spiritual wickednesses in high places. Good men dwell in a sinful world, called, "This present evil world;" and to live soberly, righteously, and godly in it; to bear the vexation arising from the filthy conversation of the wicked, as was the case of Lot; and to bear a testimony against them, and to suffer their mockings, insults, and injuries, who are for war when they are for peace, requires great fortitude of mind; their souls are sometimes among lions, men comparable to them, as David's soul was; and they had need to be as "bold as lions," as the righteous man is. Now this being the case, and these the circumstances of the Christian, he has need of great fortitude of mind and of strength, and grace from above to support under them; he has need to be "strong in the Lord, and in the grace that is in Christ" Jesus; to be fortified with the love of God, with the promises of the gospel, and with fresh supplies of grace and strength from Christ. But these things will more largely appear in what will be farther suggested by considering,

II. Wherein this fortitude of mind consists, and whereby it shows itself. And,

First, it appears in the performance of religious exercises, and especially in some. As,

1. In family worship; which undoubtedly is incumbent on the people of God: but now for a man to distinguish himself in a neighborhood from

all about him, and to say in his practice, with Joshua, “As for me, and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15), let others do what they will; this shows religious fortitude of mind: and in particular when a man first sets up family prayer in his house; suppose the master of a family is the only one in it called by grace, and at a time when he has an irreligious yoke fellow, irreligious children and servants, he sees it his duty, at least once a day, to call them together, and to pray with them; now for this man to fall down on his knees, and pray to his God, and his wife, children, and servants sneering at him and laughing, at least secretly, to one another, requires a fortitude of mind: and if this is not the case, yet it may be he lives alone among wicked neighbours, and so contiguous to them that he cannot pray, nor read the scriptures, nor sing the praises of God, which is the usage of some Christians in their families, without being overheard by them, and exposed to their ridicule and contempt; to bear which constantly is an instance and evidence of fortitude.

2. In a man’s giving up himself to a church of Christ, to walk with it in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord. For a man to attend public worship on Lord’s days is no great trial of his fortitude, because it is what his neighbours in common do; but let him separate himself from the world, and stand out from among them, and give himself up to the Lord in a public manner, and to his people in a church state; and this will try it and show it; for this is practically saying, he is not of the world, and belongs to another company; and this will unavoidably draw the hatred of the world upon him; and he will be liable to be challenged in a reproachful way, “Thou art also one of them;” as Peter was by a man in the high priest’s hall, and who had not then courage enough to own it, but denied it.

3. Especially if such a man comes into a church in a regular manner, by previously submitting to the ordinance of baptism, and to that as it was first delivered and practiced; if he declares against the sprinkling of infants, as an innovation, and openly avows the true doctrine of baptism, as to be administered only to such who profess faith in Christ, and that by immersion; and if he will proceed accordingly, and follow Christ in this now despised ordinance of his, he must be content to be nicknamed, and to have reproach plentifully poured upon him; not only by the profane world, but by the generality of the professors of religion.

But when a man is satisfied that what he is called to do is his duty; that it is a command of God, and ought to be obeyed, though attended with some things disagreeable to flesh and blood, he will take courage, and “be strong, and do it;” as David advised his son Solomon, with respect to building the temple: and when he is encouraged with the divine presence, as Zerubbabel,

Joshua, and the Jews were to be “strong and work; for I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts;” and as the apostles were, when ordered by Christ to preach his gospel, administer his ordinances, and teach men to observe all that he commanded; and added, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world!” this will inspire a good man with courage and resolution to do his duty; nor will he be deterred from it by the edicts of men, though urged with the severest menaces; as the three companions of Daniel bravely refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar’s image, though threatened to be cast into a fiery furnace, as they were; and Daniel, when an edict was obtained from the king, that no man should pray to his God for such a time, under the penalty of being cast into the den of lions; he boldly went on in the performance of his duty; opened his windows, and prayed to the God of heaven, as he had been wont to do in times past: and as the apostles, when strictly charged by the rulers to preach no more in the name of Jesus, and were severely threatened if they did, with great firmness of mind and intrepidity answered, “We ought to obey God rather than man.” Promises of grace and strength will animate saints to a cheerful obedience to the will of God, and to the discharge of their duty, amidst all discouragements and difficulties; if God says, as their day is their strength shall be; and that his strength shall be made perfect in their weakness, and his grace be sufficient for them; and bids them, “Fear not, I am with thee; I will strengthen thee!” &c. this will give them a fortitude of mind which will overcome all their fears; and they will say, with David, “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? the Lord is the strength of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?” (Isa. 41:10; Ps. 27:1, 3, 4), this is now active fortitude, and shows itself in doing the duties of religion.

Secondly, Christian fortitude shows itself in bearing afflictions with constancy, and enduring sufferings with a firmness of mind, whether from the hands of God or men; and which may be called passive fortitude.

1. From the hands of God, from whom Job was sensible he received his, even his loss of substance, children, and health, and bore it all with an invincible fortitude of mind: this appears when a man’s spirits do not sink under the weight of an affliction; but has strength of mind, a fortitude of soul under adversity; “The spirit of a man,” of a saint, animated with Christian courage, “will sustain his infirmity,” his bodily infirmity, a tedious consumption, or racking pains; or go through any severe operation he may be called unto, with a becoming resolution and manliness (Prov. 24:10; 18:14).

2. From the hands of men; and especially for the sake of the gospel, the truths and ordinances of it; as when saints are called to suffer shame and reproach for the sake of Christ, they, in imitation of him, despise the shame,

and account it an honour to bear reproach for his sake; of suffering as a Christian, they are not ashamed, but rather glorify God on that behalf, the Spirit of glory and of God resting upon them; and when they endure cruel mockings, as some of the Old Testament saints did, bear them patiently, and with an invincible firmness of mind; as Christ did on the cross; and as the apostles, when made a spectacle to the world, to angels, and men; when made the filth of the world, and the offscouring of all things; when reviled, and persecuted, and defamed, they bore all with a temper of mind which showed them to be possessed of Christian fortitude. Others have suffered confiscation of substance, and took joyfully “the spoiling of their goods,” as the believing Hebrews did; and as our forefathers in the last century: and others, “scourging, bonds, and imprisonment;” as did the apostles of Christ, as well as the Old Testament saints; and particularly the apostle Paul, who received of the Jews five times the scourging of forty stripes save one, and was thrice beaten with rods which perhaps left those marks on him which he calls, “the marks of the Lord Jesus” he bore “in his body;” and who was in prisons frequent; and who seems to take a pleasure, and even to glory, in his being a prisoner of Christ, and in chains for his sake; of such an heroic spirit, and with such fortitude was he endued, that none of these things moved him from the gospel of the grace of God. Death itself, in its most formidable shapes, has been endured by the saints with an invincible courage; as by the martyrs in the ten pagan persecutions, and by the witnesses of Jesus against the papal hierarchy; and particularly by our reformers in queen Mary’s days, such as Latimer, Ridley, Bradford, and others; who, surrounded with faggots, and these in flames about them, expressed their undaunted courage, firmness, and fortitude of mind to the last. These, with multitudes of others, loved not their lives unto death.

Thirdly, Christian fortitude appears in the spiritual warfare of the saints. There is a warfare for men on earth, and especially for good men, who are soldiers, and must endure hardness, as good soldiers of Christ, and to which Christian fortitude is necessary; and therefore should be, as Joshua was exhorted to be, “strong and of a good courage,” when he was called to fight the Lord’s battles, and against the enemies of the people of Israel; and as Joab said to Abishai his brother; “Be of good courage, and let us play the man, for our people, and for the cities of our God” (2 Sam. 10:12). And Christian fortitude will show itself,

1. In the defence of the cause of God and truth, in appearing for, and on the behalf of the church of God: “the bed which is Solomon’s” which seems to design the church of Christ, “threescore valiant men” are said to be “about it, of the valiant of Israel” (Song of Sol. 3:7), who are valiant for the truth on

earth, who are concerned for the welfare of the church, and for the protection of it from errors and heresies; and will not give way, no not for an hour, that the truth of the gospel may continue with the church, and its ordinances remain pure and incorrupt; and these are not only the ministers of the word, who are set for the defence of the gospel, and who war a good warfare, and fight the good fight of faith, and speak with the enemy in the gate, and are bold in their God to preach the gospel of Christ, as it ought to be spoken; but all professors of religion, and members of the church of Christ, should “stand fast in one Spirit, striving together for the faith of the gospel, and should contend earnestly, eve to an agony, for the faith once delivered to the saints;” and in so doing they show a fortitude of mind.

2. This also appears in fighting against spiritual enemies; as sin, and the lusts of it, which war against the soul; the law in the members warring against the law of the mind; the flesh lusting against the spirit; which are, as it were, a company of two armies. Now one of Christian fortitude will strive against sin, be an antagonist to it, and act the manly part against it; and will wrestle against Satan, and his principalities and powers, and give no place to the devil; but by faith resist him, who, when resisted, will flee, for he is an arrant coward, and does not care to be handled with the armour of Christians; and those young men who are strong, possessed of Christian fortitude, and in whom the word of God dwells, overcome the wicked one: the world also with all its flattering lusts and frowning fury, is overcome by the saints in the exercise of faith (1 John 5:4, 5).

3. The saints have great reason, in their militant state, to be of good courage; since more are they that are for them, than they that are against them; and if God be for them, as he is, who can be against them? and through God they shall do valiantly: the Christian has a good cause, in which he is engaged; he wars a good warfare, and fights the good fight of faith; he has a good Captain, under whose banner he fights, the great Captain of salvation: saints have good weapons, with which they are accoutred; the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit; which weapons are not carnal, but spiritual and mighty, through God, and are such as are proved, and may, with confidence, be made use of; and they are sure of victory beforehand; for all their enemies are conquered, sin is made an end of, Satan, who had the power of death, is destroyed, the world is overcome by Christ, the warfare is accomplished, and believers are made more than conquerors, through him that has loved them; and therefore may be sure of the crown of life, righteousness and glory, laid up for all that love the appearing of Christ. All which may serve to fill them with an holy fortitude in their spiritual warfare.

Fourthly, Christian fortitude manifests itself in the hour of death. Death is very terrible to nature, and to natural men; the philosopher [54] calls it “the most terrible of all terribles;” and no wonder he should call it so, since he adds, according to his opinion, it is “the end of all things, and that to one that is dead there is neither good nor evil;” such a notion of death, as being an extinction, must be terrible; and the wise man, when he suggests what is most grieving, distressing, and intolerable, says, it is “more bitter than death;” as if besides there was nothing more grievous than that (Eccl. 7:26). To Christ less sinners death is the “king of terrors,” and even some gracious persons have been all their lifetime through fear of death subject to bondage; but as formidable as it is, there are some things which fortify the Christian against the fears of it. As,

1. That Christ has abolished death as a penal evil, so that it will never be inflicted on the believer by way of punishment. The sting of death is taken away by Christ, which is sin, and a very venomous sting it is, and death thus armed is to be feared; but when its sting is taken out of it, it is not to be dreaded. Any insect with a sting we are naturally afraid of, but if its sting is removed we have no fear of it, though it flies and buzzes about us; so in a view of death being unsung, the believer may sing and say, Death, “where is thy sting?” and be fearless of it.

2. Death to believers is a privilege and blessing; it has a place in their inventory of goods that belong unto them, “death is yours;” it is an happiness to them, “Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord;” since they are by it delivered from all evils, from all outward afflictions and inward troubles; from a body of sin and death, under which they now groan being burdened; from the world and its snares, and from Satan and his temptations; and therefore are more happy than living saints; besides they are with Christ, enjoying communion with him, and beholding his glory, which is much better than to be in the present state.

3. Death, though it separates soul and body, and one friend from another, it does not separate from the love of God, but lets in to the more glorious discoveries and enjoyment of it. It is precious in the sight of the Lord, and therefore saints should not shrink at it themselves.

4. It is but once, it is appointed for men once to die, and no more; and it will soon be over, and issue in an happy endless eternity; and when the body dies the soul does not, but immediately enters into a state of glory; death is the inlet into it, and the beginning of it; the birthday of an eternal world [55] of bliss: besides there will be a resurrection of the body, when it will be fashioned like to the glorious body of Christ, and will be raised in incursion, in power, in glory, and a spiritual body; so the saints will be no losers but

gainers by, death, and therefore need not fear it: the resurrection of the body yields comfort in the view of death, and amidst present afflictions, as it did to Job (Job 19:25-27).

5. Be it that death is an enemy, as it is contrary to nature, it is the last enemy that shall be destroyed; and when that is conquered, the victory will be complete over every enemy, sin, Satan, the world, death, and the grave.

6. Besides these things which may serve to promote a fortitude of mind against the fear of death; it may be proper frequently to meditate upon it, to think of it as near at hand, and to make it familiar to us by saying as Job did (Job 17:14), by considering it as going to our God and Father, to our home, to our Father's house; by going to bed and resting in it; and by sleeping, and that in the arms of Jesus.

IV. From whence this fortitude flows, and what the causes of it, may be next considered. It is not from nature but from grace, it is a gift of God; it is he that gives strength and power to his people, not bodily strength only, but spiritual strength; it is he that girds them with strength, with an holy fortitude, and fills them with spiritual courage, and strengthens their hearts, and fortifies them against their spiritual enemies.

1. The efficient cause of Christian fortitude of mind is God, Father, Son, and Spirit. God the Father is prayed unto for it (Eph. 3:14, 16; Col. 1:11, 12), and he which "stablishes saints in Christ," gives them stability and firmness of mind, is God, that is, God the Father: and it is Christ who bids them "be of good cheer," to be strong and of good courage in the midst of tribulation, since he has overcome the world; and it is "through him" who "strengthens" them that they can do and suffer all things for his sake; and the Spirit of the Lord, as he rests as a "Spirit of counsel and might" on Christ the head, so on his members likewise; and it is a grant of God, a free grace gift of his, that his people be "strengthened with might his Spirit in the inner man" (Isa. 11:2; Eph. 3:16).

2. The word of God is the means of producing and increasing Christian fortitude; it is not only a part of the spiritual armour, called the "sword of the Spirit," but having a place and abiding in the heart, fortifies it against spiritual enemies, and by it victory is gained over them (1 John 2:14; Rev. 12:11), the precious promises contained in it, before hinted at, serve greatly to animate the saints, and to inspire them with fortitude amidst all surrounding evils.

3. Such a temper and disposition of mind is attainable by faith, prayer, and waiting upon God. By faith men so eminent for fortitude of mind performed those heroic exploits we read of in Hebrews 11:1-40, who by faith subdued kingdoms, stopped mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, endured

with such greatness of mind the many evils they did; and through constant prayer saints obtain a spirit of boldness both with God and before men; and by waiting upon the Lord in religious exercises their spiritual strength or fortitude is renewed; hence the exhortation, “Wait on the Lord” (Ps. 27:14).

4. The patterns of courage, the examples of fortitude in the saints who have gone before us, of the prophets, apostles, primitive Christians, and martyrs in all ages, may be a means of promoting a like disposition, particularly that cloud of heroes before referred to; and above all Christ himself, the pattern of courage set before us, whom we are directed to look unto and consider, lest we be weary and faint in our minds (Heb. 12:1-3).

5. The love of God, and a sense of that, a persuasion of interest in it, and that nothing shall separate from it, casts out fear, [56] and inspires with fortitude against every enemy (Rom. 8:35, 38, 39; 1 John 4:18).

[52] “Fortitudo, non est inconsulta temeritas, nec periculorum amor, nec formidabilium appetitio,” Seneca, Ep. 85.

[53] Which are observed by Aristot. Ethic. 1. 3. c. 11.

[54] ton phoberota ton o thanatos, Aristot. Ethic. 1. 3. c. 9.

[55] “Dies iste, quem tanquam extremum reformidas, aeterni natalis est,” Seneca, Ep. 102.

[56] “Non potest amor cum timore misceri,” Seneca, Ep. 47.
