

THE FOREST OF THORNS.

But that which beareth thorns and briars is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned.—HEB. VI. 8.

THIS verse begins with a word of disjunction, *But*. The rain of grace falls upon the good ground: it returneth herbs, it receiveth blessing; '*but that which beareth thorns and briars is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing,*' &c. It is undeniably true, that St Paul knew no purgatory: otherwise, he that 'shunned not to declare to men all the counsel of God,' Acts xx. 27, would not in a voluntary silence have omitted this mystery. He delivers two sorts of grounds, the good and the bad; the one blessed, the other near unto cursing. He knew no mean, either betwixt good and evil men, or betwixt reward and punishment, blessing and cursing. It seems that Christ himself was ignorant of that point, which the Papists know so soundly and believe so roundly. For he says, In God's field, whatsoever grows is either corn or cockle, Matt. xiii. 24; for the one whereof a barn is provided, for the other unquenchable fire. A third sort, between herbs and weeds, had either the Master or the servant known, they would have acknowledged.

This first word of the text, *but*, is a strong engine set to the walls of purgatory, to overturn them, and overburn them with the fire of hell. For they are imaginary pales, that divide hell and purgatory; take away your conceit, and they are both one—all is hell. For surely hell was raked when purgatory was found; and it is nothing else but a larder to the Pope's kitchen. What fancy soever founded it, their wits are foundered that labour to maintain it. For they cannot tell us *vel quid sit, vel ubi*,—what it is, nor where it is. They cavil with us for want of unity and consent in judgment. Yet Bellarmine* recites eight several opinions amongst them about the place; and concludes at last, that it must remain among those secrets *quæ suo tempore aperientur nobis*,—which shall be unfolded to us in their times. Some think the torments of it to consist in fire, others in water; some that the afflictors are angels, other that they are devils. So they teach *omni modo*, that which is *nullo modo*; and because it is *ubique*, is therefore *nullibi*. Howsoever, it being the Pope's peculiar, and in his power to command the angels to fetch out whom he list, methinks the Popes are strangely unmerciful, that in all this time none of them hath made a general gaol-delivery.

* De Purgat., lib. ii., cap. 6.

But our purgatory is 'the blood of Jesus Christ,' which 'cleanseth us from sin,' 1 John i. 7. And they that have no portion in this blood shall be rejected, are nigh unto cursing, and their end is to be burned.

The barren, or rather evil-fruited ground, is the ground of my discourse : and according to the common distinction of evil, here is a double evil in the text : *unum, quod malus facit, alterum, quod malus patitur*,—an evil which the wicked man doth, and an evil which he suffers ; an evil that is sin, and an evil that is punishment for sin. In the former, the wicked are agents ; in the latter, patients. The one evil is done by them, the other upon them. They offend God's justice, and God in his justice offends them. 'They have loved cursing, and cursing shall be unto them : they desired not blessing, and it is far from them.' They produce thorns, and the end of thorns is to be burned. The first and worst evil (for the other, though evil to them, is good in God's good justice) is sin. Herein the wicked are compared to bad ground ; their iniquities to thorns and briers ; and the manner how so ill weeds arise from this ground is said to be bearing : 'The earth that beareth thorns,' &c. Here first observe—

1. The different word the Apostle useth. For the good earth, he says, it is *εὐκροῦσα βοράνη*, bringing forth herbs. For the evil, it is *ἐκπέπουσα*, bearing, not bringing forth. As if good works were brought forth like children, not without pain and travail : evil works but cast out like froth or scum ; as easily vented as invented. Therefore the earth is said *ebullire*, to bubble or boil out such things as mere excretions. Our proverb says, An evil weed grows apace. Herbs grow not without preparing the ground, planting, and watering them by seasonable dews and diligence. Weeds are common : it is hard to set the foot besides them. The basest things are ever most plentiful. *Plurima, pessima*. I have read of a kind of mouse that breeds six score young ones in one nest ; whereas the offspring of the lioness or elephant is but single. You shall find your furrows full of cockle and darnel, though you never sow them. The earth, saith the philosopher, is now an own mother to weeds, and naturally breeds and feeds them ; but a stepmother to good herbs. Man, by a proclivity of his own natural inclination, is apt to produce thorns and briers ; but ere he can bring forth herbs, graces, God must take pains with him. No husbandman so labours his ground as God doth our hearts. Happy earth, that yields him an expected harvest ! But that which beareth thorns is near to be cursed and burned.

2. Observe that a wicked man is compared to bad earth, and that fitly, in five respects :—

(1.) For baseness. The earth is the heaviest of all elements, and doth naturally sink downwards ; as if it had no rest but in the centre, which itself is. A wicked man is base-minded, and sinks with a dull and ponderous declination ; not regarding the things above, but those below. He hath commune with men *sursum os*, but with beasts, *deorsum cor*. All his affections have a low object, not of humility, but base dejection. His hope, desire, love, joy, are set on these inferior things ; and, like a mole, he digs still downward, till he come to his centre, 'his own place,' Acts i. 25—hell. *Telluris inutile pondus*.

(2.) For coldness. Experience teacheth that the earth is cold ; and coldness is a natural quality pertaining to it, though accidentally there be bred in it fiery vapours. The wicked man hath a cold heart, frozen up in the dregs of iniquity ; though there be an unnatural heat sometimes flaming in him, the fire of lust and malice tormenting his bowels : but this is no kindly heat to warm his conscience. That is derived from the fire of the temple,

that never goes out, and only given by Jesus Christ, that 'baptizeth with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.'

(3.) For foulness. The squalid earth (for we speak not here of any good ground) is called *lutulenta terra*, miry and noisome; yet is it neat and clean in comparison of a sin-contaminated soul. The body was taken from the earth, not the soul; the body shall resolve to the earth, not the soul; yet the polluted soul is more sordid than either a leprous body or a muddy earth. In the eye of God, there is no beauty so acceptable, no foulness so detestable, as the soul's. The dove carried the praise of beauty from the peacock, by the eagle's judgment: because though the peacock living had the fairer plumes, yet dead he hath but a black liver. God's judgment of all men's fairness is by the liver, the 'cleanness of the heart in his eyesight.'

(4.) For obscurity and darkness. The earth is called a 'place of black darkness, the land of forgetfulness.' So Job and David term it. The wicked soul is full of darkness, thickness of sight, cæcity of understanding; not 'seeing the glorious liberty of the sons of God.' 'Our gospel is hid to them that are lost: whose minds the god of this world hath blinded,' 1 Cor. iv. 4. There is in them *hebetudo mentis*, which is *acutæ rationis obtusio*, *carnalis intemperantia crassis sensibus inducta*.* They are so utterly ignorant of heaven that, as it is in the proverb, *ne pictum quidem viderunt*,—they have not seen it so much as in the map or picture; as to men shut up in the low caverns of the earth, not so much as the sun, and stars, and the lights of heaven's lower parts have appeared. *Tolerabilior est pœna, vivere non posse, quam nescire*. Ignorance is a heavier punishment than death, saith the philosopher.† Darkness is their desire, 'because their deeds are evil.' Perhaps at last, after a long dotage on their dark delight, earth, they come to hear of a better and richer country, and then take only with them the lantern of nature to find it. But so *erepto lumini candelabrum quærunt*,—having lost the light, they grope for the candlestick. A man that comes into his house at midnight sees nothing amiss; in the daylight he finds many things misplaced. Nature is but a dark lantern, when by it we endeavour to ransack the conscience. Only the light of grace can demonstrate all the sluttish and neglected misorders in our souls.

(5.) The main resemblance between an evil ground and worse man consists in the ill fruits that they both produce: briars and thorns, and such not only unhelpful, but hurtful vices. This is the principal analogy which our Apostle intends; the pith and marrow of this comparison. But before we come to a particular survey of this wood, some observable doctrines fall profitable to our instruction. Observe therefore—

[1.] The word of God will work some way. It falls not upon any ground in vain; but will produce herbs or weeds. It is such physic as will either cure or kill. It mollifies one, makes another more hard. Some hearts it pricks, Acts ii.; others it terrifies, though converts not, as it made Felix tremble. None ever heard it, but they are either better or worse by it. 'We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, unto the Gentiles foolishness; but unto them which are called, both of Jews and Greeks, the power of God, and the wisdom of God,' 1 Cor. i. 23. It is either a converting or convincing power; sealing receivers to redemption, contemners to rejection, Heb. iv. 12. 'The word which I have preached shall judge you in the latter day,' John xii. 48.

If this doctrine were considerably digested in hearers' hearts, what a zeal-

* Hugo.

† Sen.

ous preparation would it work in their souls! It would bring us to these seats with other minds, if we remembered that we return not back to our own doors the very same we came out, but either somewhat better or much worse. Sergius Paulus was turned, Elymas obdurate, at one sermon, Acts xiii. 7, 8. After our Saviour's heavenly sermon, John vi. 66, 'some went back, and walked no more with him;' that Christ bespake his apostles, 'Will ye also go away?' Others stuck more close: 'Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life,' ver. 68. The prophet Isaiah speaks fully to this purpose: 'As the rain cometh down, and returneth not back, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater; so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it,' Isa. lv. 10.

The word that we have preached shall either save you or judge you. It shall be either a copy of your pardon or a bill of your indictment at the last day. John Baptist calls the gospel a fan, that will distinguish between true and false children, between wheat and chaff, Matt. iii. 12. It will make known the faithfulness of those that with honest hearts embrace it, and scatter hypocrites like chaff, by reason of their insolid levity. Simeon so prophesied to Mary the virgin of her Son, that 'he should be the fall and the rising,' Luke ii. 34, the reparation and ruin, of many; and whiles 'he is set for a sign which shall be spoken against,' by this means 'the thoughts of many hearts shall be revealed.' The word is like fire, that hath a double operation upon the several subjects it works on—stubble or gold. It fires the one and fines the other. Some hearts it inflames with zeal to it; other it sets on fire to impugn, persecute it. It is to conversion, if believed; to confusion, if despised. Lo, Christ himself preaching, some faithfully entertain, others reject, as the Gergesenes, that had rather have their hogs saved than their souls, Matt. viii.

[2.] That thorns are produced, the fault is not in the good rain, but the ill ground. 'What could I,' saith God, 'have done more to my vineyard?' Isa. v. 4: I have done enough to make it bear good grapes; 'wherefore then,' or from what cause, 'brings it forth wild grapes?' The earth desires the influence of heaven and showers from the clouds to make it fruitful. It is granted: the sun shines, the dews fall. The garden hereupon brings forth herbs, the desert thorns. If these blessings of heaven were the proper cause of the weeds, why hath not then the good ground such cursed effects? The everlasting lamp of heaven sends forth his saving rays; and the sacred dews of the gospel fall on the pure and unclean heart. There it is requited with a fertile obedience; here with an impious ingratitude. Let not the mercy of God be blamed for this man's misery. *Perditio ex se*; God hath done enough to save him. St Augustine directly to this purpose: *Simul pluit Dominus super segetes, et super spinas. Sed segeti pluit ad horreum, spinis ad ignem. et tamen una est pluvia.** God at once rains upon the herbs and the thorns: upon the herbs or good seed, to shoot it up for his barn, for himself; upon the thorns, to fit them for the fire: yet is it one and the same rain.

This shall cover the faces of libertines with everlasting confusion, who are evermore rubbing their own filthiness on God's purity, and charging him as the author of their sins. If the devils in hell should speak, what could they say more? We have fallen from our happiness, and God caused it. Repro-

* De Benedict. Esau et Jacob.

bate thoughts! Men have spilt blood, defiled forbidden beds, struck at princes with treasons, ruined countries with depopulations, filled the earth with rapes, and shot at heaven with blasphemies; and lay their damnation on their Maker, deriving from his purpose excuses of their wickedness. The inevitable decree of God's counsel is charged; the thought of that hath made them careless: so with good food they poison themselves. Willing fools, rack not your belief with impossibilities. Behold, God is so far from authorising your sins and falls, that he rains on you the holy dews of his word to mollify your hearts; justifying himself by this proffered means of your salvation that he would not the death of a sinner. Oh, but his hidden will is to damn us! Madmen! that forsake that signed will, written in tables, published with trumpets, commanded with blessings, cursings, promises, menaces, to which every soul stands bound, and fall to prying into those unsearchable mysteries, covered with a curtain of holy secrecy, not to be drawn aside till the day comes wherein we shall know as we are known.

Cease, aspiring man, to root thy wickedness in heaven, and to draw in God as an accessory to thy profaneness. God would have thee saved, but thou wilt bear thorns and briars, though thou endangerest thyself to cursing. Is this the requital for his mercy? Are all his kindnesses to thee thus taken? That when he hath done so much to bring thee to heaven, thou wilt tax him for casting thee to hell? when he hath so laboured to make thee good, thou wilt lay to his charge thy own voluntary badness? No; justify God, and magnify his mercy. Accuse thine own corrupt heart, that turns so good and alimmental food into offensive crudities. Say, heaven is good, but thy ground is naught. Fatness and juice hath been bestowed on thee, but thou hast yielded pestilent and noisome fruits. Lay not the fault on heaven, but on the native corruption of thy own heart, that hath decocted the goodness of God into venom.

[3.] This observation shall make way and give place to another: That the ground is very unthankful which answers the kindness of heaven in raining on it, with briars and thorns. Wretched man, that receives so blessed dews from the fountain of mercy, and returns an ungrateful wickedness! Unthankful it is, as failing in both those essential parts of gratitude, acknowledging and requiting a benefit; and so guilty both of falsehood and injustice. Say the wicked did confess God's mercies, yet where is their obedience? True thankfulness is called *gratiarum actio, non dictio*. Whiles for holy dews they render unholy weeds, this disobedience is the greatest ingratitude. The silence of our tongues, the not opening our lips to let our 'mouth shew forth his praise,' is a grievous unthankfulness. He is of an evil disposition that conceals or dissembles a benefit. This is one branch of ingratitude. But our speech hitherto keeps but low water: let us rise up to view the mountainous billows of that ingratitude here taxed—a real, actual, sensual, senseless unthankfulness; if it be not a degree beyond it, and unthankfulness too poor a word to express it. Mere ingratitude returns nothing for good; but this sin returns evil for good. Silence in acknowledging is too short: we must think of a contumacious and contumelious retribution. God, after his merciful rain, looks for some herbs of grace, when he walks down into his 'garden, to see whether the vine flourished, and the pomegranates budded,' Cant. vi. 11. And, behold, weeds, stinking weeds, stinging weeds, thorns and briars! Here is ingratitude in full proportion, with all the dimensions of his ugly, stigmatic form. This is that wickedness which brings the ground here to rejection, malediction, combustion. Observe further that—

[4.] Wicked men prove commonly so much the worse as they might have been better, and divert the means of their conversion to their confusion. The more rain of the gospel they receive, the more abundantly they thrust forth the thorns of iniquities. The roots of these briars are earthed in their hearts, and do boil out at the warm dews of the word. It fares with them as with a man of a surfeited stomach : the more good meat he eats, the more he increaseth his corruption. The former crudities undigested, unegested, having the greater force, turn the good nutriment into themselves. There is such an antipathy betwixt the good word of God and the heart of a reprobate, that the more it wrestles to bring him to heaven, the more he wrestles against it that he might be damned. Tully mentions a country wherein a great drought and heat maketh abundance of mire and dirt, but store of rain causeth dust. It is here experimentally true : the plentiful rain of God's blessed word is answered with the dusty and sandy barrenness of men's evil lives. So the sun, shining upon unclean dunghills, is said to cause a greater stench ; yet no wise man blames the beams of the sun, but the filthiness of those putrefied heaps, for such offence. The Sun of righteousness hath sent down the glorious rays of his gospel among us ; the wicked hereupon steam out the more noisome and stenchful fruits. Upon whom shall the accusation light ? God's comfortable heat of mercy, or our putrid and rank iniquities ? Sometimes the sun's heat working upon a muddy and baneful object breeds horrid serpents. No wonder, then, if this rain of the gospel engender in reprobate minds weeds and prickles. The Cicones have a river that doth harden the bowels, and make the entrails stony :* a strange operation in them that drink it ! But if the water of life do harden the hearts of Pharaohs, and exasperate the mischiefs of a malicious Elymas, let the imputation of fault light where it is deserved. It was a strange protestation that God had against Israel, ' I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me,' Isa. i. 2 ;—I have brought them up in my house, and taught them my precepts, and yet (as if my instructions and favours had made them worse) they have rebelled against me. Thus when the sun is hottest, the springs are coldest ; and the more fervent the love of God is to us, the more cold is our charity to him, and to others for him. As if the sweet dews of Hermon had made the hill of Zion more barren.

It is written of the Thracian flint, that it burns with water, and is quenched with oil ; a fit emblem of those wicked souls that are the worse for God's endeavour to better them. But such contrary effects hath the gospel in contrary natures. As by the heat of the sun wax is softened, and yet clay is hardened : so by the preaching of the word the hearts of such as shall be saved are mollified ; but the hearts of the lost are further obdurate. God in his wise justice will be even with men : since they will not be the better for his favours, they shall be the worse. Seeing they will not bring forth herbs, they shall cast forth weeds ; and he that might not in their salvation, will be glorified in their subversion. For application :—

This rain hath fallen upon us all : how have we entertained it ? where be our herbs ? It is objected against us that our forefathers, who wanted this rain, brought forth more herbs than we that have it. That they, in the days of ignorance, did more than they knew ; that we, in the light of the gospel, know more than we do. Apollonius, among other wonders, writes one most wonderful : that there was a people which could see nothing in the

* Ovid.

day, but all in the night. What! hath the sun blinded us? Cannot we see to serve God so well in the light as they did in the dark?

It was once said, *Ignoti nulla cupido*; and now it may be inverted, *Noti nullus amor*; we little esteem the gospel, because it is frequent amongst us. The long enjoying it hath dulled our estimation. Full children are weary of their bread, and play with it; like the Indians, that have such store of gold and precious stones, that they truck them away for glasses and rattles. Perhaps the cold legs of custom will bring us to church, and we are content to hear the preacher taxing our frauds, usuries, oaths, oppressions. Maybe for some show of devotion, we will ask counsel at his lips; but say what he will, we will not part with our sins.

The princes of Israel came to Jeremiah, and entreat him to inquire of the Lord for them, Jer. xlii., promising that whatsoever direction the Lord should send they would obey. The prophet accordingly presents their supplication to God. God answers, 'You shall not go unto Egypt, lest you be destroyed: but abide still in Judah, and you shall be safe,' Jer. xliii. When they heard this oracle, because it was not to their humours, they replied, 'We will go into Egypt.' This was their purpose from the beginning, (though they dissembled a will to know God's mind,) which if God's command crosseth they will cross his command: they will go into Egypt. So people will be content to hear what God saith to them by his ministers; but if he speak not what pleaseth them, they will follow their own affections. We are such nice and froward pieces, that the more God woos us we are the further off. As it is with some shallow professor of music, saith the poet—

'Omnibus hoc vitium cantoribus, inter amicos,
Ut nunquam inducant animum cantare rogati.*

When they are most earnestly entreated, they make most daintily to sing or play. So the more the Lord calls for our praises, the more hoarse are our voices, the more harsh our notes; or perhaps we will not sing at all. But if God hath given us music, and we will not dance, as Christ reprov'd the Jews, we shall mourn in sadness for our obstinate refusal of proffered mirth. You have heard Herodotus's tale of the piper. He came to the water side, and piped to the fishes; they would not dance. He took his net, and caught some of them; and being thrown upon dry land, they began to leap and skip up. 'Nay,' quoth the piper, 'I offered you music before, and you would none; now you shall dance without a pipe.' Men commonly regard the songs of Zion as they do music heard late at night in the streets, whiles they are in bed. Perhaps they will step to the window, and listen to it a while, and presently to bed again. So men step from the couch of their lusts and sins to church, hear the sermon, and then to bed again, lulling themselves in their former security.

There are some that care for hearing it no more, but sit down with a conceit of their own sufficiency. They know as much as the preachers can tell them; let the youth go to be catechised. So the sluggish and irreligious master sits at home, whiles he sends his servants to church. There is an old tale, idle in itself, the use may be good. A certain man that would never go to church, when he heard the saints'-bell would say to his wife, 'Go thou to church and pray for thee and me.' One night he dreamed that both he and his wife were dead, and that they knocked together at heaven-gate for entrance. St Peter (by the legend) is porter, and suffered the wife to enter in, but kept the husband out: answering him, *Illa intravit pro se et*

* Hor., lib. i., sat. 3.

te,—‘She is gone in both for herself and thee.’ As thy wife went to church for thee, so she must go to heaven for thee. The moral instructs every one to have a personality of faith, and a propriety of devotion; that himself serving God, himself may be blessed of God.

It now remains to examine more narrowly the nature of the sins these ungodly hearts produce. They are called thorns and briers. Pliny saith that the thorn is more soft than a tree, and more hard than an herb;* as if it were some unkindly thing, and but an unperfect excrement of the earth. For the philosopher saith, It is not the intent of kind that trees should be sharp with prickles and thorns, but he would have it caused by the insolidity and unfastness of the tree. By which means the cold humour is drawn out by the pores ere it be concocted: whereupon for scarcity of matter, it is hardened by the sun; and so shaped and sharpened into a thorn.

But it is unquestionable truth, that God created the thorns and briers on the earth. Some think, because it is said, Gen. iii., in man’s punishment, *Maledicta esto terra propter te*,—‘Cursed be the earth for thy sake: thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee,’ chap. iii. 18,—that therefore if mankind had not sinned, the ground should have produced no such thing. But the most received opinion, and consonant to truth, is, that these thorns and briers should have been though man had never fallen; but they should not have been noxious and hurtful to him. Now let us consider what resemblances may be found betwixt those natural and these allegorical thorns and briers:—

1. Where is abundance of thorns, there is most commonly a barren ground. For they hinder the happy influence of the heavens, the kindly heat of the sun, the dews of the clouds, and all those working causes of fertility. God pre-arms Ezekiel, that he should not wonder at the barrenness of Israel, ‘for briers and thorns shall be with thee,’ chap. ii. 6. Let no man marvel at our unprofitable times; we have too many briers and thorns among us, which do what they can to hinder the goodness of heaven to us, or our goodness to heaven. That which is sown nigh or among thorns, seldom prospers. Our Saviour saith, that the seed sown in some hearers brought forth no fruit; ‘for the thorns choked it,’ Matt. xiii. The very company of the wicked is harmful, for they are as thorns to stifle any goodness. ‘The companion of fools shall be afflicted,’ saith Solomon. He dwells among thorns, that shall wound him. To lay no more affliction upon him than Solomon there meant,—as appears by the opposite member of the verse,—he shall endure a privation of what good soever he had, and a position of their lewdness. A good man with ill company is like a living man bound to a dead corpse, that will sooner suffocate him, than he can revive that. The soul that lives among thorns shall hardly thrive. Therefore saith the Lord of the vineyard concerning the barren tree, ‘Cut it down, why troubles it the ground?’ Luke xiii. 7.

2. Thorns and briers grow most commonly on heaps, and seldom are found single, or destitute of company of their own kind; and though they be troublesomely harmful to other trees, yet they fold and embrace one another without hurt. It is so usually seen, that wicked men hold together, and sins grow in united clusters. There is a combination of the ungodly, even so far as to the very participation of their estates: ‘Cast in thy lot with us; we will have all one purse,’ Prov. i. 14. They are entangled in mutual amity, like beds of eels; nothing but thunder can break their knots. Is it much, saith Christ, that you purpose *diligere diligentes*, ‘to love them

* Lib. xxi., cap. 16.

that love you?' Matt. v. 46. Why, briars and thorns do it; 'even publicans do the same.' Yea, I would to God their unity did not shame ours. We see here, that one of the Papists' chief marks of their church is not infallible,—their consent or unity,—when briars and thorns have it. The Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians conspire against Christ; may be, they with the rest. Sins grow in heaps, like thorns in bushes: where are some, are many. The Apostle brings them in by couples and companies: 'Gluttony and drunkenness, chambering and wantonness, strife and envying,' Rom. xiii. 13. Methinks gluttony and drunkenness come in like an Englishman and a Dutchman; chambering and wantonness, like an Italian and a Venetian; strife and envy, like a Spaniard and a Frenchman. These sins being so national and natural to the countries: to over-drink in Germany; to over-eat in England; to wantonise in Italy and Venice; to quarrel in France; and to be envious in Spain, envy being ever the bosom-companion of pride.

3. Thorns and briars, by reason of their thickness and sharpness, are refuges for serpents, snakes, adders, and such other venomous beasts. Where the ungodly have a strong part, oppression, rapine, robbery, murder, and all those fatal serpents, are fostered. God, when he told Ezekiel, chap. ii., that 'briars and thorns should be with him,' adds in the very next words, 'and thou shalt dwell among scorpions.' Therefore in Latin, *rubetum* is a place of briars and brambles, and *rubeta* is a toad, and that land-toad, the most venomous of the kind. It is dangerous sleeping near such places. He that lives among the wicked hath no need of security, but to have clear and circumspect eyes; lest either the thorns prick him, or the serpents under the thorns sting him. 'Woe is me,' saith the Psalmist, 'that I must remain in Meshech, and dwell in the tents of Kedar!'

4. Neither do the wicked, only with their thorns and briars, hinder others' passage, but even their own. No marvel if it be so difficult for an ungodly man to get to heaven; for he hedgeth up his own way. Men multiply their transgressions to infinite, and cast up innumerable thorns; yet hope well to be saved. But in vain he purposeth to travel to Jerusalem, that hedgeth up his own passage. 'Thorns and snares are in the way of the forward,' Prov. xxii. 5; not of God's setting, but of their own planting. For (the next words testify) 'he that keepeth his soul shall be far from them.' There are hindrances enough to heaven, though the wicked make none themselves. The devil will look that the way shall not be easy. Neither hath God set salvation upon such terms, that we may play and get it: 'The kingdom of heaven is got by violence;' and they must strive, that will pass the narrow gate. Satan hath so many plots and tricks to deceive them, so many tentations and corruptions to oppose them, that they have no cause to fence up the way themselves, with a hedge of their own thorns. Heaven-gates will not fall down before men, as the iron gates of the city to Peter, of their own accord, Acts xii. 10. Nay, 'if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?' 1 Pet. iv. 18.

5. Sins are fitly compared to thorns and briars, for their wounding, pricking, and such harmful offences. Therefore they are called *tribuli*, *d tribulando*, from their vexing, oppression, and tribulation they give those that touch them. The wicked are such calthrops to the country, boring and bloodying her sides; either pricking the flesh, or tearing of the fleece: as briars and bushes that rob the sheep of their coats, which come to them for shelter. A great man wicked is like Abimelech, whom Jotham calls a bramble in his parable. The olive would not leave his fatness, nor the fig-tree his sweetness, nor the vine his goodness, to be promoted over the trees.

But the aspiring bramble usurps it ; and, as if he were some great cedar, he calls the trees to 'trust under his shadow.' But when poor men come to this bramble for refuge, here they lose a lock, and there a lock, till they are left naked ; yea, the clothes are not only rent from their backs, but, like the sons of Sceva exorcising the evil spirits, they depart not away naked only, but wounded, Acts xix. 16. Their garments satisfy not these briers, scarce their blood and lives.

These briers and thorns have such pricking and wounding effects in regard of three objects, whom they strike. For sins are like thorns—1. To men ; 2. To Christ ; 3. To the own consciences of the committers.

First, to men. Pliny* mentioneth three sort of briers :—

1. The moorish brier, that only grows in rank and fenny places, and is nourished with rotten mud, and such squalid putrefaction. There is a generation of men like these briers, given to drunkenness, whose affections are fed only with the moisture of the pot. They cannot live but in fenny and moorish places. Pliny saith, that adders and toads love and eat the fruits of these briers ; and it is the food of serpents. The effects of drunkenness (in like sort) are a condiment for the devil. Augustine somewhat near our purpose, when he compares drunken places to the fens ; where are bred snakes and serpents, and such vile noxious things, which every year must be burned. It were a good turn, if these moorish brambles were stocked up by the roots. If you ask how you should rid them, I will not point you to the fen-men, who to make quick despatch of their annoyances, set fire on their fens ; but I will give you another precedent. When a king asked how he might be rid of certain noisome fowls, which came abundantly flying into his land, one answered him, *nidos eorum ubique destruendos*,—that the only means was to destroy their nests in every place. So if you would be shut of these moorish briers, the course is to destroy their nests ; their haunts and rendezvous, as they term them ; the common quagmires of all filthiness. The alehouses are their nests and cages, where they exhaust and lavish out their goods, and lay plots and devices how to get more. Hence they fall either to robbing or cheating, open courses of violence or secret mischief, till at last the jail prepares them for the gibbet. For lightly they sing through a red lattice, before they cry through an iron grate. And when those briers are hampered, and put into prisons, it is said that those places teach them more villany than they knew before ; that when a lewd fellow comes out of prison, he is furnished with such a pack of mischiefs, that he now sets up school, and teacheth others. It is wonderful, that places ordained for reformation should be instructions of worse lewdness. I speak not against mercy ; but experience and truth witnesseth, that the mercy of some actions is cruelty. And the pity to a notorious malefactor argues us of a hard heart, and of unmercifulness to the commonwealth. The sparing of rapes, robberies, whoredoms, cheatings, frauds, unjust measures, false balances, occasioneth, yea, encourageth the like. If thou be a magistrate, deputed to judge it, and sparest a man that hath shed blood, the next blood he sheds thou art guilty of. Thou consentest to the second robbery of a thief, that hast remitted him the first.

A father brings in a notorious malefactor arraigning † at the bar before the judge : when the mother comes, *miseranda ululatione*, with bitter weeping, desiring mercy for her son ; the wife *lachrymabilis voce*, with mournful speech, imploring mercy for her husband ; the little children, *plorantibus ocellis*, with crying eyes, beseeching mercy for their father ; the people wish-

* Lib. xxi., cap. 16.

† That is, being arraigned.—Ed.

ing he may be spared for the goodliness of his person. Yet saith the judge, *Non misereor modo*,—I pity, but must not spare. *Pereat unus, potius quam unitas*,—Better one perish than all. Weed up the implacable thorns, for they will keep the ground barren. It hath been said, Bear one injury and provoke more; but here in case of justice, forgive one public injury,—I mean a fact of horrid nature, as I formerly taxed,—and you provoke and encourage many. The mariners would fain save Jonah; but when there is no remedy, they will rather lose one Jonah than all themselves.

2. Pliny's next sort of briers are *tribuli agrestes*, field-briers; which are, saith he, shrewd enemies to tillage, and the fruits of the earth. This island of ours, within these late days, hath bred a great number of these field-briers; which unnaturally turn their mother into barrenness. Oppressors, enclosers, depopulators, deportators, depravators; that run the land to ruin for a private benefit, and work out a particular gain from a public and general loss.

Gain, said I! Where is it? Did you ever know enclosers prosper? I will speak boldly: I never knew great man grow greater by his depopulations; and I hope no man will say he hath grown better by them. Corn-fields are turned to sheep-walks, once-inhabited towns feed oxen, and churches are made shepherds' cottages; and yet the doers of all this never the richer. They keep less hospitality, for a few rooms in London serve their turns; they extort sorer rents, and yet they have never the more money. It cannot be denied but the main end of these courses was profit, and enhancing their estates; and lo, in this very end God crosseth them. Speak what you will of their pride, of turning the alms they should give to the poor into feasts for the rich, of their infrugal courses; I say confidently, *Hic digitus Dei*,—Here is the very hand of God striking them. Man, though he hath authority, will not look to these field-briers, but let them waste and forage, and play the Abimelechs; but God will. But if ye do not look to it, let me say to you, as Jotham to the Shechemites, of that aspiring bramble, Judg. ix. 20, 'If fire come not out of Shechem to devour Abimelech, fire will come from Abimelech to devour Shechem.' If you undo not the oppressions of the field-briers, their oppressions will undo us all.

3. There is the town-brier too, which groweth in our mounds and fences, and about the closing of towns. You in the city have no great plenty of these briers; yet you are troubled (in a metaphorical sense) with town-briers and city-brambles, which would not a little vex you, if you were not those yourselves.

(1.) What say you to the usurer? Is he not a thorn amongst you? If you were not usurers yourselves, you would confess it. But they say, the most horrible usury in the world is here practised, to forty in the hundred; nay, to doubling of the principal in one year. A landed gentleman wants money: he shall have it, but in commodities, which some compacted broker buys of him, for half the rate they cost him, in ready money. Are these Christians? Dare they shew their faces in the temple? But I know you have been often told of these things. In a word, even the gentlest usury is a most sharp thorn, and pricks the side of the country till the blood follows. A usurer with his money is like a man that hath no work of his own, yet keeps a servant to let out; and takes not only hire of others for his day's labour; but chargeth him to steal somewhat besides, and never to return home empty. You understand me; I need not further apply it.

These are vile winding and wounding briers, that fetch away clothes, and

skin, and flesh too. Now the mercy of God rid us of these thorns; and let us know it is for our sins that God suffers usurers among us! It may be he permits them, as he did the Canaanites for a while in Israel, lest the wild beasts should break in upon them; lest pride, and haughtiness, and uncleanness should spill men's souls by a full estate of wealth. God suffers usurers, like horse-leeches, to suck and soak them; thereby, possibly, to humble them. Yet in the meantime, I may say of them, as Joshua did of those Canaanites, that 'they are pricks in our sides, and thorns in our eyes,' Josh. xxiii. 13.

(2.) What do you think of adultery? Is it not a thorn? Yes, a sharp thorn, wounding the purse, envenoming the body, condemning the soul. The ground that bears it is lust; the sap that feeds it is fulness of bread and idleness; the heat that makes it glow, grow, and shoot, is lewd and wanton speech, effeminate gestures; infamy is the bud, pollution the fruit, and the end hell-fire. And as Cajetan and Theophylact observe on 1 Thess. iv. 4, that the Apostle having bid men 'possess their vessel in holiness,' he adds, 'and let no man go beyond or defraud his brother in any matter;' that this circumvention may be applied to adultery, when a man is deceived of his bosom-spouse, who is hired to the subornation of bastards. So that lightly, concupisence and cozenage go together; as that wickedness, of all others, never goes but by couples. For adulterers *non possunt ire soli ad diabolum*,*—an adulterer cannot go alone to the devil.

(3.) Corrupt and conscienceless lawyers you will confess to be sharp and wounding brambles, and exceedingly hurtful. A poor client among them is as a blind sheep in a thicket of thorns; there is no hope of his fleece, it is well if he carry away his flesh whole on his back. A motion this term, an order next; instantly all crossed; scarcely the twentieth order sometime stands; execution is suspended, a writ of error puts all out of course. Oh the uncertain events of suits! I hope, says the poor blood-drawn wretch, I shall have an end of my suit next term. Nay, nor the next term, nor the next year. Fool! thou art gotten into a suit of durance, almost an immortal suit. And when the upshot comes, perhaps the mispleading of a word shall forfeit all. It is a lamentable uncertainty, and one politic addition of fickleness to the goods of this world, that no man might set his heart upon them, that an estate bought, truly paid for, and inherited, should be gone upon a word, sometimes upon a syllable, upon a very bare letter, omitted or miswritten by the scrivener. These are scratching briars. If what is wanting in the goodness of the cause be supplied by the greatness of the fees, their tongues shall excuse their tongues for their contraconscient pleadings. The Italians have a shrewd proverb against them: 'The devil makes his Christmas-pies of lawyers' tongues and clerks' fingers.' This proverb I leave with them, and come to their kinsmen:—

(4.) Corrupted officers, who are also sharp and sharking brambles. Their office is a bush of thorns at their backs, and they all to rend the country with bribery and extortion. These men seek after authority and commanding places, not with any intent of good to the commonwealth, but to fill their own purses, to satisfy their own lusts; as some love to be poring in the fire, not that they care to mend it, but only to warm their own fingers.

(5.) We have Papists among us; look to them, they are rankling thorns and rending briars. False Gibeonites they are; and howsoever they pretend their 'old shoes,' the antiquity of their church, we have ever found them thorns, ready to put out our eyes, and, if they could, the eye of the gospel.

* Jerom.

They exclaim against us for persecution, and cry themselves (louder than oyster-women in the streets) for patient Catholics, saints, martyrs. But match the peace they enjoy under us with the tyranny they exercised over us; the burning our fathers at stakes, the butchering our princes, their conspiracy against our whole realm, their continual bending their weapons against sovereigns' and subjects' throats, and you will say they are thorns. I have read of a bird, that when men are devout at their sacrifice, takes fire from the altar and burns their houses. All their black treasons and bloody intendments they derive from the altar, and plead the warrant of religion to set our whole land in combustion. Oh that these brambles were stocked up; that Ishmael were cast out of doors, that Sarah and her son Isaac might live in quiet!

(6.) There are furious malecontents among us, a contemptible generation of thorns, that, because their hands are pinioned, prick only with their tongues. They are ever whining, and upon the least cause filling the world with importunate complaints. These are savage and popular humours, that cannot suffer eminency to pass unreproached; but they must vellicate goodness and gird greatness, that neither the living can walk nor the dead sleep in quiet: affecters of innovation, that are ever finding fault with the present times; anything pleaseth them but what is. Even the best blessings of God scape not their censures, neither do they esteem by judgment or pronounce by reason; they find fault with things they know not wherefore, but because they do not like them. Beware these thorns; they are like the wheels of some cunningly wrought fireworks, that fly out on all sides, and offering to singe others, burn themselves. *Laudant veteres, &c.*, as if no times were so miserable as ours. As if the civil wars of France, or the bloody Inquisition of Spain, or the Turkish cruelty in Natolia, where he breeds his soldiers; or at home, the time of the barons' war; or yet later, the persecution of a Bonner, were none of them so cruel as these days, when every man sits and sings under his own fig-tree. Sure if they had once tasted the bitterness of war, they would better esteem of their peace. These are pestilent thorns; nothing but fear keeps them from conspiracy. Nay, so they might set the whole land on fire, they would not grudge their own ashes.

(7.) There are briars, too, growing near the church; too near it. They have raised church livings to four and five years' purchase, and it is to be feared they will shortly rack up presentative livings to as high a rate as they did their impropriations, when they would sell them. For they say, few will give above sixteen years' purchase for an impropriate parsonage; and I have heard some rate the donation of a benefice they must give at ten years, what with the present money they must have, and with reservation of tithes, and such unconscionable tricks; as if there was no God in heaven to see or punish it. Perhaps some will not take so much, but most will take some; enough to impoverish the church, to enrich their own purses, to damn their souls.

One would think it was sacrilege enough to rob God of his main tithes; must they also nim away the shreds? Must they needs shrink the whole cloth, enough to apparel the church, as the cheating tailor did, to a dozen of buttons? Having full gorged themselves with the parsonages, must they pick the bones of the vicarages too? Well saith St Augustine, *Multi in hac vita manducant, quod postea apud inferos digerunt*,—Many devour that in this life, which they shall digest in hell.

These are the church-briars, which, let alone, will at last bring as famous a church as any Christendom hath to beggary. Politic men begin apace

already to withhold their children from schools and universities. Any profession else better likes them, as knowing they may live well in whatsoever calling, save in the ministry. The time was, that Christ threw the buyers and sellers out of the temple, but now the buyers and sellers have thrown him out of the temple. Yea, they will throw the church out of the church, if they be not stayed. But some may say to me, as one advised Luther, when he began to preach against the Pope's usurpation and tyranny, 'You had as good hold your peace. This wickedness is so powerful, that you will never prevail against it. Get you to your study and say, "Lord, have mercy on us!" and procure yourself no ill-will.' But be it good-will, or be it ill-will, we come hither to speak the truth in our consciences. And if these church thorns will continue their wickedness, be it unto them as they have deserved. If they will needs go to hell, let them go; we cannot help it, let them perish. I had purposed the discovery of more brambles, but the time forbids it. I would to God we were well freed from those I have taxed.