

THE END OF THORNS.

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

OUR sins are thorns to others ; some wounding with their direct blows, others with their wipes, all with their examples. Man only hath not felt their blows ; our Saviour also so found them, when he was fain for our sakes to set his naked breast, his naked heart, his naked soul, against them. They say the nightingale sleeps with her breast against a thorn to avoid the serpent. Christ was content to be wounded, even to death, with thorns, that he might deliver us from that devouring serpent, the great infernal dragon. His head was not only raked and harrowed with material thorns,—*caput angelicis spiritibus tremebundum, coronatur spinis*,* that head which the angelical spirits adore and tremble at, was crowned with thorns,—but these mystical thorns, our iniquities, with fiercer blows drew blood of his soul. They do in a sort still. Heb. vi. 8, ‘They crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.’ Not in himself, for they cannot ; but con them no thanks, they would if they could : and to themselves they do it. Wretched men ! will you not yet let Jesus Christ alone, and be at rest ? Will you still offer violence to your blessed Saviour, and labour to pull him down from his throne to his cross, from his peaceful glory at the right hand of his Father to more sufferings ? You condemn the merciless soldiers, that ‘plaited a crown of thorns,’ Matt. xxvii. 29, and put it on his innocent head. Sinful wretch, condemn thyself ! Thy sins were those thorns, and far sharper. Thy oppressions, wrongings, and wringings of his poor brethren offer him the violence of new wounds ; thy oaths, thy frauds, thy pride scratch him like briers. Hear him complaining from heaven, ‘Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me ?’ These thorns grow on earth, yet they prick Jesus Christ in heaven. Oh, we little know the price of a sin, that thus play the executioners with the Lord of life ! Think, think : Christ felt your sins as sharp thorns.

Lastly, you find them thorns yourselves, if Christ did not for you. When God shall enliven and make quick the sense of your numbed consciences, you shall confess your own sins cruel thorns to your souls : 2 Cor. xii. 7, ‘a thorn in your flesh,’ that shall buffet you with terror. For a while

* Bern.

men are insensible of their iniquities. Christ, Matt. xiii. 22, calls the riches of this world thorns, which choke the good seed of the gospel.

The common opinion of the world is, that they are goodly, fine, and smooth things : furs to keep them warm, oil to cheer their faces, and wine to their hearts ; of a silken softness to their affections. But Christ saith, they are thorns, stinging and choking thorns. And the covetous conscience shall one day perceive in them *triplicem puncturam*, a threefold pricking : * *laboris in acquisitione*,—they are gotten with trouble ; *timoris in possessione*,—they are kept with fear ; *doloris in amissione*,—they are lost with grief.

Men commonly deal with their sins as hedgers do when they go to plash thorn bushes ; they put on tining gloves, that the thorns may not prick them : so these harden their hearts, that their own thorns may give them no compunction. But all vanities are but like the fool's laughter, which Solomon compares to 'the crackling of thorns under a pot,' Eccles. vii. 6 ; they make a noise, and suddenly go out. But sin never parts with the wicked without leaving a sting behind it.

Luther saith,† there are two fiends that torment men in this world ; and they are sin and a bad conscience. The latter follows the former ; or, if you will, the former wounds the latter : for sin is the thorn, and the conscience the subject it strikes. This thorn often pricks deep, to the very heart, Acts ii. ; to the very bones, Ps. xxxviii. 3, 'There is no rest in my bones, because of my sin.' *Vis nunquam esse tristis ? bene vive. Nunquam securus est reus animus.* ‡ Wouldest thou never be sorrowful ? Live well. A guilty mind cannot be securely quiet. An evil mind is haunted and vexed with the thorns of his own conscience. Sin to the affections, whilst it is doing, is *oleum unguens*, supple oil. Sin to the conscience, when it is done, is *tribulus pungens*, a pricking thorn. What extreme contraries do often wicked conceits run into ! In their time of security they cannot be brought to think sin to be sin. At last desperately they think it such a sin that it cannot be forgiven. At first they are delighted with the sense and smell of their iniquity as of a sweet rose : but the rose of their delight withers, and there is a thorn under it that pricks the heart. Hereupon Solomon couples pleasant vanity and troublesome vexation together. If that tickles the flesh, this shall wound the spirit. You shall hear a usurer, in the madness of presumption, expostulating, 'What ! may I not make benefit of my money ?' Observe him, and in the end you shall hear him, in the madness of despair, cry out of his own damnation for it. At first they make question whether it be a sin ; at last they know it such a sin that they make question whether God will forgive it. So men will look to sin either too superficially or too superstitiously. There was no danger, saith the drunkard, when he is asked how he escaped such a passage : bring him back in the sober morning to see, and he falls down dead in astonishment.

I need not further amplify this point. Christ gives a *Væ ridentibus !*—'Woe to them that laugh, for they shall weep !' and every smile of sin shall be turned to a groan of sorrow. They that exhibit their lives as sacrifices *risui et lubentiae*, shall one day feel pricks and goads and thorns scratching and piercing their hearts, when (like the stricken deer, with the arrow-head ranking in his side) they shall not be able to shift or change pains with places. Let this teach our souls two instructions :—

1. That we labour our hearts betimes to a sensibleness of these thorns. A thorn swallowed into the flesh, if it be not looked to, rankles. Sin with-

* Ludolph.

† In Galat., cap. i., ver. 3.

‡ Isid., lib. ii. Soliloquiorum :—'Mens enim mala conscientia propriis agitatur stimulis.'

out repentance will fester in the soul, and is so much more perilous as it is less felt. Oh the number of thorns that lie in many consciences, who complain no more than if they ailed nothing! The prick of a thorn is not so painful at first, while the blood is hot, as after a cold pause. Every man hath his complaints; and who liveth out of the reach of discontent? You shall hear tradesmen complaining of few or false customers; labourers of little work and less wages. Beggars complain the want of charity, and rich men the want of money; merchants of rocks and pirates; lawyers of short fees, and clients of long suits. But no man complains of the thorns in his own bosom. He nourisheth briars there that wound him; and the heart is as *dedolent** as if it were past feeling. But where there is no discovery of the disease, the recovery of the health is in vain looked for.

2. After sense of the smart, will follow a desire of remedy. The throbbing conscience would be at ease, and freed from the thorn that vexeth it. David 'roars out for the very disquietness of his heart.' The aching heart will make a crying tongue, and wet eyes. Lo the mercy of God! a remedy is not sooner desired than offered. The sacred gospel directs us to a medicine that shall supple the heart, and draw out these thorns, though they stuck as thick in it as ever the arrows did in Sebastian.

They speak of the herb *dictamnium*, called of some dittany, that it hath a secret virtue to draw out anything fastened in the body. Pliny saith† that this herb drunk, *sagittas pellit*. Experience telleth that it is sovereign to exhale a thorn out of the flesh. Our only *dictamnium* is the precious blood of our merciful Saviour Jesus Christ. A plaster of that is truly virtual to draw out all thorns from our consciences. *Saucia anima*, which is *nullis medicabilis herbis*, is thus cured. Our sins drew blood of him, that his blood might save us. He was crowned with thorns, that we might not be killed with thorns. He was wounded for us, that we might not perish ourselves.

Take we heed that we despise not this medicine. The law was so far from drawing out these thorns, that it would drive them in further, and cause them to rankle in the heart, without any hope of ease. It did but exasperate their stings, and give them a deeper continuance of pricking. The mollifying and healing gospel extracts their venom, and sucks out their poison. Let us not dare, then, to vilipend this cordial and sovereign medicine.

You perceive that our sins are thorns, and what is their only remedy. Know now, that if they be not drawn out in this world, they shall be found thorns hereafter, when the owners shall hear Christ's sentence: 'Go, ye cursed,' &c.; for 'the end of them is to be burned.' So I come to the punishment; but I will soon have done with that, which shall never have done with those that must undergo it.

There is a threefold gradation in the penalty: rejection, malediction, combustion—'is rejected,' 'is nigh unto cursing,' 'and the end thereof is to be burned.' And it seems to have a relation to a threefold distinction of time:—1. For the present, 'it is rejected;' 2. For instance, or appropinquation, 'it is nigh unto cursing;' 3. For future certainty, 'the end of it is to be burned.' As men commonly deal with thorns: first, they cut them up with bills and mattocks; then they lay them by to wither; and, lastly, burn them in the furnace.

1. Rejection. This which we here translate 'is rejected,' is in the original, *ἀδόκιμος*, which may signify *reprobus*, or *reprobatus*,—so Beza hath it,—is reprov'd, or disallowed of God. This ground shall have no ground in

* That is, free from pain.—Ed.

† Lib. xxvi, cap. 14.

heaven, no part in God's inheritance. It is reprobate silver, not current with the Lord. No man desires to purchase land that will bring forth nothing but weeds; he will not cast away his silver upon it. And shall God buy so base ground, that will be no better, at so inestimable a price as the in-corruptible blood of his own Son? It despiseth the Lord's goodness, and the Lord's goodness shall despise it. 'It is rejected.' If any man saith, This is *durus sermo*, let him consider of whom the Apostle speaketh, ver. 4, against whom he concludes *ab impossibili*,—'It is impossible,' &c. A hard saying to understand, but more, most, hard to undergo. If God be driven to lose all his pains and cost upon an ungrateful heart, he will at last renounce it, and give it over as a desperate nature. As he in the comedy, *Abeat, pereat, profundat, perdat*. 'If it will be filthy, let it be filthy still.' If nothing will bring it to goodness, it shall 'be rejected.'

2. The second degree of the punishment is cursing; and this may seem to exceed the former. God's curse is a fearful thing. If you would view (though but in part) the latitude and extension of it, I refer you to Deut. xxviii. But I purpose not to be curiously punctual in the demonstration of these particular degrees of the punishment. That which I will observe is this: That God is more propense and inclined to blessing than to cursing, more prone to shew mercy than to inflict judgment. It is said in the former verse, 'the good ground receives blessing of God'—receives it presently, receives it at once. But here of the evil ground, 'it is nigh unto cursing'—it is not presently cursed, but nigh unto it. There is some pause and delay, some *lucida intervalla misericordiæ*. The whole vial of wrath is not poured on at once; but first there is a despising or rejection, to let the wicked see how hateful their vices are in God's sight. If this serve not, they are not suddenly cursed; but there is a breathing time, and a merciful space between that and cursing, and between cursing and burning. So slowly doth God proceed to judgment, so little haste he makes to the execution of his vengeance. He is speedy to deliver, to save, to give his blessing; but he hath leaden feet when he comes to strike.

The use of this to ourselves is, that the patient forbearance of God may lead us to repentance, Rom. ii. 4. The prophet Joel bids us 'rend our hearts,' and fall to weeping and mourning, 'because the Lord is merciful and slow to anger,' chap. ii. 13. God's long-suffering is as a hand reached out that points us to repentance. Such is his goodness, that when all his terrors and menaces are set in their places, yet he makes room for repentance, whensoever it comes. And though they be as ready to strike as Abraham's hand was to Isaac's sacrifice, yet repentance, *tanquam vox angeli*, shall stay them. O blessed repentance, how sweet and amiable art thou! Yet how few love thee!

The great man, that thinks he may securely be wicked, because he is honourably great, and dares affront the pulpit, though the greatest bishop in the land were preaching in it, cares not for repentance. The wealthy gentleman that can bung up hospitality into a Diogenes's tub, nestle himself warm in a city chamber, while owls and daws parlour themselves in his country-manors,—that (as it is storied of that Jew for the use of his money) takes his rent in blood, the heart-blood of his racked tenants,—cares not for repentance.

The country Nabal, that hoards his grain, and with it locks up his soul in a garner, that the sun of God's blessing may not come at it,—that starves the poor, his family, himself,—cares not for repentance. The avarous citizens, whom the tempter can never find without a false measure in one hand, and a cozening weight in the other,—that have tricks in their sconces to over-

reach the devil himself, but that (like a cunning fencer) he that taught them all their tricks kept one to himself, to cheat them of their souls,—care not for repentance. The muffled lawyer, that hath no sense left alive but his feeling, and weighs all causes by the poise of gold,—that talks against others' right and his own conscience, that leads jury into perjury with his fraudulent circumventions,—cares not for repentance.

The sharking officer, that (like Menelaus, an Armenian archer in the wars betwixt Constantius and Magnentius*) can shoot three arrows at once, at one loose, wherewith he wounds not one, but three at the least,—the prince whom he serves, the person whom he draws blood of, and the body of the commonwealth,—cares not for repentance.

I need not speak of the church-robber, the usurer, the drunkard, the proud, the unclean adulterer. No man can think that they care for repentance. Oh, but they all purpose to repent. Spare them a while; they are but new set into the oven, not yet fully baked in their hot vanities; let them soak a little in their pleasures, and at last they will return: 'They are as an oven heated by the baker,' Hos. vii. 4. Repentance is an ascent of four steps; many get up three of them, but climb not to the fourth and best:—

(1.) Some there are that purpose to amend their lives. But purpose without performance is like a cloud without rain; not unlike Hercules's club in the tragedy—of a great bulk, but the stuffing is moss and rubbish. If the tree be fairly blossomed, and naked of fruit, it may speed as the fig-tree in the gospel—be cursed; or at least, it is as the evil ground here, 'nigh unto cursing.' Many that purposed to repent are now in hell: as the five foolish virgins that intended to go in with the bridegroom, but before the time their lights dropped out.

One said, that hell is like to be full of good purposes, but heaven of good works. If a bare intention would serve, God's church on earth would be fuller of saints, and his court in heaven fuller of souls. Ignorance and sloth adulterating, bring forth this lank brood, this abortive embryo—purpose. Such a man is like an ill debtor, who will not pay God his due of devotion till he is old, and then he cannot pay, for want of time and money, space and grace to repent. We make, in these days, our purposes like our eyes, and our performances like the holidays: servants work hard upon the eyes, that they may have the more liberty to play upon the holidays; so we are earnest, and labour hard on our purposes, but are idle and play upon our performances. But resolution without action is a golden couch to a leaden jewel.

(2.) The second round of this ladder is preparation. Some there are that will prepare, and almost set themselves in a readiness for their journey to heaven, yet never set one step forward. Preparation is indeed as necessary as the door is to the house, but as idle, if there be no house to the door. It may, as John the Baptist did for Christ, 'prepare the way of the Lord' into our hearts; and it may be as vain as the apothecary's beast,† which he promised his patient would help him of all diseases, but before morning it had eaten up itself. Preparation is a necessary antecedent to all great works: 'Prepare to meet thy God, O Israel,' Amos iv. 12. But a man may prepare meat, and not feed; prepare garments, and not wear them. Preparation does well, if reparation follows. A man may climb both these rounds, and yet fall short of the true height of repentance.

(3.) The third stair is a beginning to abstain from some horrid iniquities, and, as it were, an entering into a new path; but not going one step in it

* Zosim., lib. ii.

† Bestia Pharmacopola.

without a voluntary revolting. But beginning is nothing to perfection. Some begin in the Spirit, and end in the flesh: that salute Christ in the market-place, take acquaintance of him in the street, but never bid him home to their houses. It is *vox prætereuntem derisoria*,—the speech of them that pass by: 'This man began to build.' A house but begun is not fit to dwell in; and shall we think that God's Spirit will dwell in an inchoate habitacle, and not likely to be finished? The Apostle saith, 'It had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them,' 2 Pet. ii. 21.

(4.) The fourth round only pleaseth God, and is good for our souls—repentance; without which the evil ground is near to cursing, as it were at next door by, and it shall come on him with a speedy visitation, *nisi interveniente poenitentia*. This is the bulwark to defend us from the shot of God's thunder from heaven; this hedgeth us in from his judgments on earth. Woe to sinful man without this! for he is near to cursing, and 'his end is to be burned.' Blessed soul that hath it! Wheresoever it dwells, mercy dwells by it. If England hath it, it shall ease her of her thorns: 'There shall be no more a pricking brier unto the house of Israel, nor any grieving thorn of all that are round about them,' Ezek. xxviii. 24.

3. The last and sorest degree of the punishment is burning. I will not discourse whether the fire of that everlastingly hot furnace be material or spiritual. Surely it is strangely terrible; and we are blessed if we neither understand it nor undergo it. The misery of the damned is usually distinguished into the pain of loss and the pain of sense; both implied in this verse, and expressed 2 Thess. i. 8, 9: Christ shall 'take vengeance on such as know not God, and obey not the gospel of Jesus Christ;' there is pain of sense. 'They shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power;' there is pain of loss.

(1.) This *pœna damni*, or privation of blessedness, may seem to be implied in the first degree here mentioned—rejection. The reprobate are cast away of God. Much like that form of the last sentence, Matt. xxv. 41, 'Depart from me, ye cursed;' a fearful sentence, a terrible separation. 'From me,' saith Christ, that made myself man for your sakes, that offered my blood for your redemption, and received these and these wounds for your remedy. 'From me,' that would have healed, would have helped, would have saved you. 'From me,' that invited you to mercy, and you would not accept it. 'From me,' that purchased a kingdom of glory for such as believed on me, and will honour their heads with crowns of eternal joy. 'Depart from me.' This is a fearful rejection. My friendship, my fellowship, my paradise, my presence, my heaven, 'where is fulness of joy, and pleasure for evermore,' Ps. xvi. 11, are none of yours. They might have been; they are lost. Neither shall they only lose Christ, but all the company with Christ: the choir of glorious angels, the society of his blessed mother, the prophets, apostles, martyrs, all the happy and holy saints, with the whole host of heaven. They shall fret, and vex, and be ready to eat their own galls, to see those triumphing in glory whom they on earth persecuted, martyred, tortured. They could here exercise their savage tyranny over them, not only denying their own bread, but taking away theirs; they could despise, beat, malign, undo, burn them at stakes. Now the estate of both is changed; as Abraham told Dives, 'They are comforted, and thou art tormented,' Luke xvi. 25.

(2.) This is not all. The privation of blessed joys is not enough : there must follow the position of cursed torments. For their punishment is proportioned to their sin : ' They have committed two evils ; they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water,' Jer. ii. 13. As they turned from their Maker, so the Maker turns from them : there is *pœna damni*. As they fastened their delights on the creatures, so the creatures shall be their tortures : there is *pœna sensus*. They rejected God, and he rejects them ; they adhered to wickedness, and it shall adhere to their bones for ever, and bring them to burning.

Their torments, which are here expressed by fire, have two fearful conditions—universality and eternity.

(1.) They are universal, vexing every part of the body and power of the soul. It is terrible in this life to be pained in every part of the body at one time. To have ache in the teeth, gout in the feet, colic in the reins, &c., and to lie (as it were) upon a rack, for innumerable diseases, like so many executioners, to torture him, is intolerable. But the largest shadow of these torments to their substance is not so much as a little bonfire to the combustion of the whole world.

(2.) They are eternal. If it had but as many ages to burn as there be trees standing on the earth, there would be some, though a tedious hope of their end. But it is such a fire as shall never be quenched. This word *never* is fearful. Though they rain floods of tears upon it, they shall be but like oil to increase the flame ; for ' the worm never dies, the fire never goes out.' You see the end of thorns. ' Wickedness burneth as the fire ; it shall devour the briers and thorns, and shall kindle in the thickest of the forest, and they shall mount up like the lifting up of smoke,' Isa. ix. 18.

I resolved against prolixity. The general and summary doctrine is this : That since the wicked ground, which ' beareth thorns and briers, is near unto cursing, and the end thereof is eternal fire,' it follows necessarily, that all they which lay the foundation of ungodliness must needs build upon condemnation : ' Let no man deceive you : he that committeth sin is of the devil,' 1 John iii. 8. If the course of a man's life be wicked, covetous, unclean, malicious, idolatrous, adulterous, drunken, he lays the groundwork of his own destruction ; and precipitates himself to the malediction of God. He that lays the foundation in firework, must look to be blown up. Perhaps this meditation, though it be of unquenchable fire, may yet work coldly in our hearts, and leave no impression behind it ; yet you cannot deny this to be true. He that would deny it, must deny my text, must turn atheist, and reject the holy word of God. Nay, he must think there is no God, no revenge of wickedness, no devil, no hell. And he undertakes a very hard task, that goes about to settle this persuasion in his mind. No, no : ' Let no man deceive you with vain words ; for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience,' Eph. v. 6. And in this passage I must value all men alike, of what stuff or of what fashion soever his coat be ; if his life be full of briers and thorns, his end is to be burned. ' What shall we then do unto thee, O thou Preserver of men,' that we may escape it ? What, but ' repent, and believe the gospel !' Mark i. 15.

Let the commination of hell instruct us to prevent it, as the message of Nineveh's overthrow effected their safety. 1. Let us flee by a true faith into the arms of our Redeemer, that God reject us not. 2. Let us pour forth floods of repentant tears, that we be not nigh unto cursing. 3. And let us

bring forth no more briers and thorns, that our end may not be to be burned. Faith, repentance, obedience ; this same golden rule of three will teach us to work up our own salvation. This done, we shall not be rejected, but known to be elected ; we shall be so far from cursing, that we shall presently receive the blessing ; and our end shall be, not fire, but glory and peace. ' Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright : for the end of that man is peace,' Ps. xxxvii. 37.