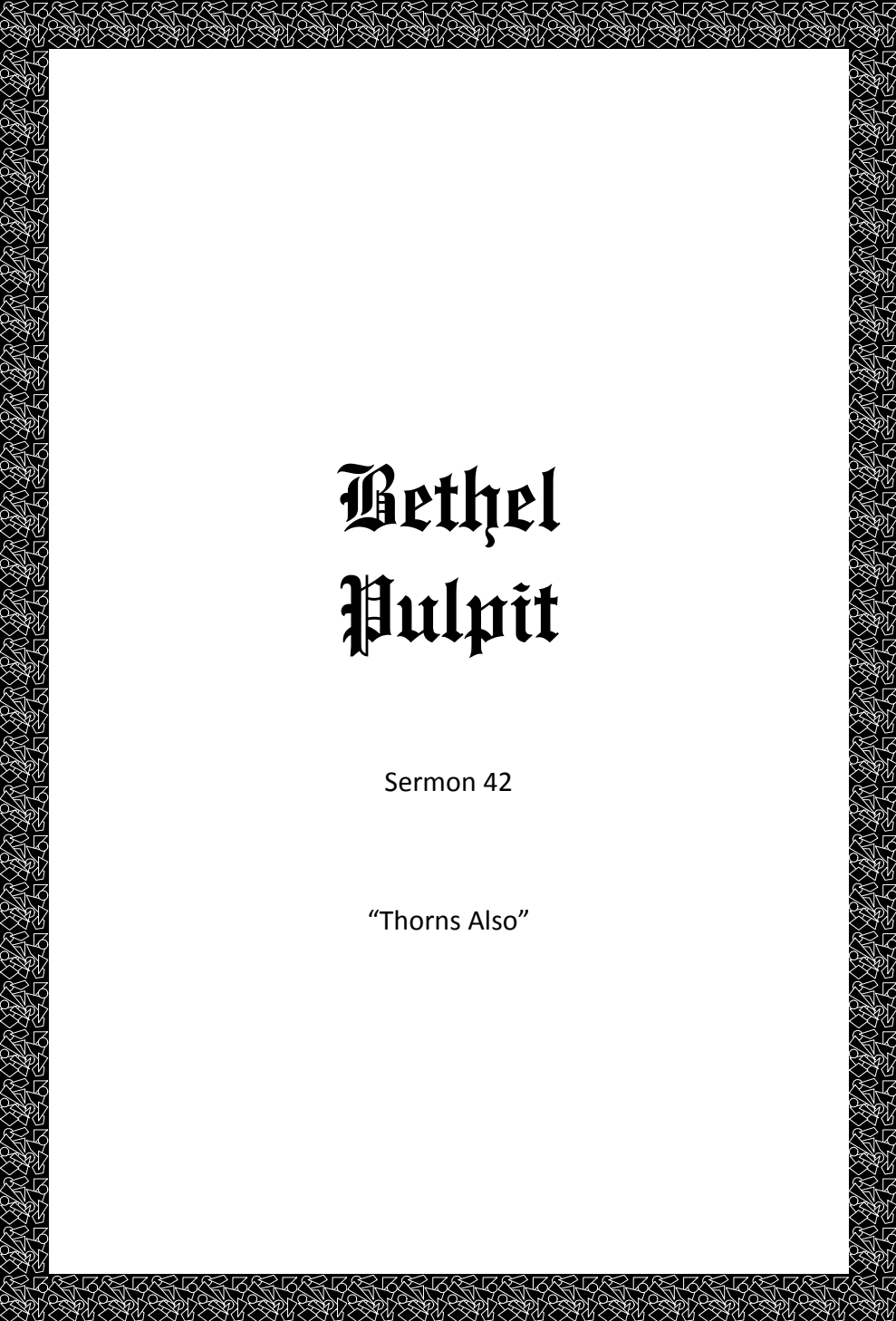




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 42

“Thorns Also”

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning 6th November, 1988**

Text: *"Thorns also" (Genesis 3. 18).*

"Thorns also" - the effect of the Fall, the emblem of the curse! When God created man, placed him in that wonderful paradise, the Garden of Eden, there was not a single weed, not a single brier, not a single thorn. It must have been a magnificent sight, God's unspoiled, unmarred creation. But as we solemnly know, Adam fell, sin entered the world and death by sin, and so God cursed the ground for Adam's sake. We have it in the Epistle to the Romans: "The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain" - not just man, the whole creation, as the result of the Adam fall, as the result of sin. So the Lord placed that solemn curse on that creation, that fair creation that was now marred. "Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field." We have to say, painfully say it, feelingly say it,

"O thou hideous monster, sin,
What a curse hast thou brought in!
All creation groans through thee,
Pregnant cause of misery."

So whenever you see a thorn, whenever you see a thistle, whenever you see a brier, think of the Fall, think of the curse. You see, a thorn is that which hurts, which cuts, which causes sorrow. So throughout the earth and throughout our lives there will be the thorns. Man through the Fall is "born to trouble as the sparks fly upwards." Wherever you find the most beautiful rose, you will still find the sharpest thorns. And I make that statement both ways, literally and also typically. Wherever you find the fairest rose, you will still find the sharpest thorns. For "sin is the cause of all the woes the world has felt or seen."

The reason that we have all these things in our lives, these sorrows, these perplexities, the little things day by day that mar and destroy and irritate, things that seem to go wrong, the disappointments, all these things,

which are as so many thorns in our lives; the reason is that they are the effect of the Fall. We shall never be free of the thorns this side of heaven.

Now beloved friends, I think you will find that the Word of God has so much to say about thorns. It is one of those subjects that come up again and again throughout Scripture. So often in the prophets when God promised punishment to any country, any land, any city, the mark of it was that where there were once beautiful buildings, once fruitful fields and vines, now it would be the thorn, the thistle and the brier, the mark of divine displeasure, the mark of the curse.

Now I think you will understand what I mean when I say that Genesis chapter 3 is one of the key chapters in Scripture, because it gives an account of the Fall. I think when you come to these key passages of Scripture you will find a link going right through Holy Writ. Also when you look at any subject in the Word of God, whether it is doctrinal or any other subject, it is usually a good thing to trace it right back to the first mention of it in Scripture. It is as if the first mention of it in Scripture gives you a key to the meaning, the significance, the interpretation of it right throughout the Word of God. This is the first mention we have of thorns, but you will find it coming over and over again right through Scripture, and we do not leave it there. You find it coming over and over again in the experience of the people of God and in your own experience. "Thorns also."

Now with God's help let me try to bring a few things before you this morning. I think we can say here concerning these thorns and the Lord's dealings with His people what our hymnwriter says, though in a slightly difference context:

"Yet, gracious God! Thy power and love
Have made the curse a blessing prove."

Now I realise Dr. Watts there is speaking in a slightly different context. But we can say it concerning these "thorns also," the effect of the Fall, the emblem of the curse, when sanctified in the hearts and lives of God's people.

"Yet, gracious God! Thy power and love
Have made the curse a blessing prove."

Now let me begin with the beginning of a work of grace. When God in His sovereignty begins a good work of grace in any sinner's heart, to fit that sinner and prepare him for heaven, then He places a thorn in the nest. "As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings: so the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him." I understand that the mother eagle builds this nest and she puts a thorn in the bottom. Then she covers it over with all kinds of down and feathers and so on. But when the time comes that the little eaglets have grown big, and it is time for them to leave the nest, they try to settle down. They do not want to leave it. But the more they try to settle down, the more the thorn cuts, till at length they have to come out. Then the mother takes them on her wings, bears them up, flutters over them. So I had to prove it, that thorn in the nest, at the beginning of the Lord's work. It was something like Job. We say, "I shall die in my nest." We are at ease in the world. We are comfortable. We are at rest. We have a false peace. We do not want disturbing. And then the Lord puts that thorn in your nest. "Arise ye, and depart; for this is not your rest: because it is polluted." O that awful, solemn awareness that you have an immortal soul, that one day for ever and ever you must be in heaven or in hell, a realisation of your lost condition, the vanity of the world, the awfulness of the judgment day and eternity.

And that thorn in the nest will prick your conscience. You will try to be rid of it. You will try to forget it. But you never will, you never can. And if your experience is like mine, you will wriggle and try to settle down in your nest. You will try to forget your convictions. You will try to cover them with all manner of things. But these thorns work in your conscience. The more you try to settle down in the world, the more you try to settle down in your nest, the more the thorn will prick you, cut into you, until you will have to come out and seek rest where only it may be found, in Christ. "There remaineth therefore a rest" - in Christ - "to the people of God." O but the sharpness of that thorn, and how it wounds you and how it cuts you! But you see the mercy and love of God in it to bring you out of the world, out of a false profession, out of your refuges of lies, out of your nest, and to bring you to that solid resting place in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus. "Thorns also." How many of you can look back and in greater or less measure trace out that experience in your life,

the thorn put in your nest? You did not like it, but the Lord did it in love and in mercy.

“Thorns also.” But beloved friends, it is not just at the beginning. Again and again in our soul’s experience we need to have our nest stirred up, because there is something in us that will always settle down in a state of carnal security or a state of indifference, inward backsliding if not outward backsliding, prayer languishing, communion with God becoming unknown. And then again the time comes when there is a thorn put in the nest and we hate it and fight against it. “Not in anger, but in His dear covenant love,” to stain your pride, to make you pray, to deliver you from carnal security, to save you from going to sleep on enchanted ground, and to bring you to learn that lesson: “One thing is needful,” to have it engraven on your heart, that personal, saving knowledge of the Son of God.

“Thorns also.” So inevitably our thoughts go to the Apostle Paul. The Lord had abundantly blessed him, given him such a revelation, carried him up to paradise, revealed to him things it was not lawful for him to utter. And he says, “Lest I should be exalted above measure, . . . there was given to me a thorn in the flesh.” O you see the danger of being exalted above measure! It is the spirit of the world. But our carnal hearts will even try to make grace something to exalt our flesh. We like to be well-thought-of. “Lest I should be exalted above measure, . . . there was given to me a thorn in the flesh.” God gave it to him. “What,” you say, “this thorn in my flesh, did God give it me?” Yes, He did. “Not in anger, but in His dear covenant love.” “Lest I should be exalted above measure.” It was a messenger of Satan. It was to buffet him. And yet God gave it. That is how the Lord “makes the curse a blessing prove.” The thorns are the effect of the Fall. They are the emblem of the curse. But the Lord uses even Satan to accomplish His own purpose.

So “there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me.” Paul does not tell us what his thorn in the flesh was. Different people have thought different things. Mercifully it is left open to include your thorn in the flesh, my thorn in the flesh. But the analogy is very striking, isn’t it? You might get a little thorn and it is stuck in your flesh. It may even be out of sight. People may not even be able to see it. But doesn’t it cut you and doesn’t it prick? It is something that is there all

the time. You cannot have any peace, any comfort, until you get rid of it. Paul's immediate thought was to get rid of this thorn in the flesh, and that is always our thought. How can we get out of this difficulty, this perplexity, this disappointment? "For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me."

Now the Lord did not take away the thorn in the flesh. He left it there. But He gave Paul something better. He sanctified it. God will answer your prayer, but He will do it in His way, not yours. And His way is always best. Mind you, it is often afterwards when you look back, and you can bless God for the thorn in the flesh then. You could not at the time, but when you look back, you would not have one thing different. Now this is it: "And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." It was as that thorn in the flesh, that sorrow, that trial, that affliction was overruled by God, sanctified by Him, that Paul was brought as never before to know and experience the value, the all-sufficiency of God's grace. That is the emphasis: it is all sufficient, at all times, in all places, in all circumstances. It is all-sufficient. It will never fail you, never let you down. It is all-sufficient. It can never be exhausted. It is all-sufficient. You can lean upon it. It will support you. So it is needful that there should be these thorns in order that you might prove the all-sufficiency of God's grace. "And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

"Thorns also." Now you will find that as God speaks of the effect of the preaching of the gospel, He describes it in this way, that "instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle, and it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off." Of course that word comes at the end of the beautiful gospel chapter, Isaiah 55. You remember how it begins: "Ho everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters." It is full of the gospel and it goes on to speak of the gracious effect of the gospel. "My Word shall not return unto Me void." And then we have the effect: "Instead of the thorn." There is going to be fruitfulness instead of barrenness. Think of William Cowper:

"I need that grace that comes from Thee,
And quickens all things where it flows,

And makes a wretched thorn like me
Bloom as the myrtle or the rose.”

O that gracious effect of the preaching of the gospel, when the thorn begins to blossom as the myrtle and the rose! “The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose.” Beloved friends, we need to pray for this in the church of God, that gracious effect of gospel preaching, and we need to pray for it personally in our souls’ experience, that instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier the myrtle. “And it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”

“Thorns also.” Then you remember how solemnly, when the Lord Jesus took up this point of the preaching of the everlasting gospel, He spoke of the thorns in the parable of the sower. You remember that as the sower went forth, there was nothing wrong with the sower: he was a good sower. There was nothing wrong with the seed: it was good seed. The fault was in the ground, and we read of four different types of ground. There was the wayside. Then there was the stony ground. Then there was the good ground which brought forth fruit to eternal life. But what we think of here is the ground where the seed fell among thorns, and the thorns choked the growth. The usual interpretation of the thorny ground is that of a sinner dead in sin. I have often wondered if it is not, if this is a real work of grace, but it is as so often happens with you and me, there is so much within us and all about us which impedes the soul’s growth. Because we are told that the seed took root and it began to spring up, but it brought “no fruit to perfection.” I take it there was a little, but not much. Why? Because of these thorns.

And the Lord Jesus does not leave us in the slightest doubt as to what these thorns are - the pleasures of the world; the deceitfulness of riches; the cares of this life - and most of God’s dear people in one way or another are plagued, pricked by these thorns, but above everything else, solemnly made unfruitful. You cannot particularise, but over the years, thinking on this point: with young people really the thorns so often are the pleasures of this world. They are not the same temptation, perhaps, to aged people. But in the lives of so many young people who profess the Lord’s name there are these pleasures of this life, the attractions of this life. “Thorns also.” Now perhaps it is more people in middle life who

are in business and have got many ambitions and want to do well, and with them it is not so much the pleasures of this life: it is the deceitfulness of riches; they want to make money. And then you get the older people, perhaps in ill health or weakness. No longer have they the slightest temptation from worldly pleasures or the deceitfulness of riches. But O the cares of this life, to be swallowed up with care! Mind you, we cannot keep strictly to that three-fold definition, because how many who are not aged seem to be continually plagued by the cares of this life. There are so many thorns that continually prick us and harass us.

Now the Lord spoke that parable that His people might be warned. The good farmer looks out after his field has been infested with thorns or briars or weeds. What does he do? In some way or other he seeks to get rid of them, seeks to get rid of these thorns. The pleasures of this world. If the Lord gives you clear views of eternity and what His beloved Son suffered, then you will not want the pleasures of this world. When you are tempted to the pleasures of this world, think of a wounded, bruised, agonising Saviour. What of the deceitfulness of riches? O seek that the Lord might show you the vanity of this world and seek that the Lord might show you where true riches are to be found - only in Christ. And what if the thorns are the cares of this world? We cannot help having cares. We do need to seek to be kept from being choked by them. May we be led in this pathway: "Casting all your care upon Him, for He careth for you."

"Thorns also." Then you see we come to the judgment hall and we go to Calvary. There we see the dear Lord and Saviour Himself crowned with thorns, the emblem of the curse. The Lord Jesus when here upon earth never wore a royal diadem of glory and beauty, but He was crowned with thorns. We think of the time of the Crusades and the knight who was to be the first king of Jerusalem when it was seized from the Moslems. His coronation day came and the good man refused the crown. He said, "I can never wear a crown of gold in the city where my Saviour wore a crown of thorns."

But the crown of thorns was the mark of the curse and the Lord Jesus wore that crown of thorns because He came to deliver His people from the curse. I do not think any of us will ever get to the bottom of that solemn, glorious word (I have been thinking about it since my teenage days and have never got right to the bottom of it and never shall): "Christ

hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us; for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” Christ made a curse that His people might be delivered from the curse! Christ made a curse that His people might be eternally blessed! But you and I by nature, by birth, by indwelling sin, by wicked works, are under the curse of God’s broken law. “Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.” You and I are under the curse and the broken law can do nothing but curse. There is no blessing in a broken law, no blessing in a broken covenant, and if we live and die under the curse, then it is hell for ever and ever. “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us.” And so He wore the emblem of the curse, that crown of thorns. They “platted a crown of thorns, and put it on His head,” and from those many wounds His precious blood flowed even in the judgment hall, even before He went out to Calvary, there to be crucified.

Now tell me, sinner, did you ever by faith view the Lord Jesus wearing the crown of thorns? And did you see that every one of your sins was as a thorn in His crown, that your sins were those thorns that so wounded His head? I remember when the Lord led me into that. I would be about nineteen years old at the time. I never forget that.

“My sins, O how black they appear,
When in that dear bosom they meet!
Those sins were the nails and the spear
That wounded His side and His feet.”

Now this is it:

“’Twas justice that wreathed for His head
The thorns that encircled it round;
Thy temples, Immanuel, bled,
That mine might with glory be crowned.”

We read in the Revelation: “On His head were many crowns.” It is a beautiful meditation to think of the many crowns the Lord Jesus wears, but the most precious to His people is the crown of thorns that He wore in the judgment hall and then upon the cross. But faith’s delight is this, to

look beyond the cross and the grave to the skies and to see the dear Redeemer now for ever exalted in heaven.

“And glory, like a crown, adorns
Those temples once beset with thorns.”

And if you have wept and mourned and sympathised with a suffering Saviour, you will rejoice in His exaltation. And if it has caused you unspeakable sorrow to look upon Him wearing the crown of thorns, it will cause you unspeakable joy to see Him for ever wearing the crown of eternal glory.

“Thorns also.” And so, dear child of God, the Lord has appointed that your pathway and my pathway will be a thorny one. You will often find the thorns that are pricking you, wounding you, grieving you. Why? Well, because we are still in the flesh. And this world is still under the curse, and with all lost humanity we must be subject to the many effects of the Fall. But also our pride needs to be stained. We have to learn again and again that this is not our rest. We have to know something of a living sympathy and union with a suffering Saviour. We have to die to sin, to the world. The world is not to give us joy, give us pleasure. The Lord has never promised us two heavens. So to your dying day you will find the thorns. But it will be a wonderful mercy if you and I, though we have had ten thousand thorns, if when we come to die we find that we have not a thorn in our dying pillow. It is a wonderful thing if that thorn has been for ever removed in the atonement. But it will always be a thorny way and the Lord will have it so and you will have to pray your way to heaven. That is why He has promised you the shoes of iron and brass. You would not need them if there were no thorns in your pathway. “Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be.”

“Thorns also.” But when you come to the Book of the Revelation, have you ever noticed that the imagery (for want of a better word) is exactly that of the Book of Genesis? There is the garden where Adam fell, that garden that was cursed, the thorns. Then you see the garden of Gethsemane. Then you see the garden of the rock sepulchre. But in the Revelation, heaven is compared to a beautiful garden, the paradise of God. And the point is this: there is not one thorn there, not a single thorn, the curse for ever removed, no more sin, no more sorrow, no more suffering. There is that beautiful garden, and through the atonement of Christ, not a

single thorn there. It is everlasting spring, never-withering flowers, not a single brier, not a single thistle, not a single thorn. Until then it will be in greater or less measure a thorny way as you walk in fellowship with Christ in His sufferings. “Thorns also.” But in heaven, not a single thorn. Rutherford says,

“Deep waters crossed life’s pathway,
The hedge of thorns was sharp:
Now, these lie all behind me -
O! for a well-tuned harp!
O! to join Hallelujah
With yon triumphant band,
Who sing, where glory dwelleth,
In Immanuel’s land.