

435 Pricking Briers and Grieving Thorns

In last week's Reflection we came across the people of Israel demanding a king, so as to achieve a "sameness" with their neighbours and do away with differences. But under God's merciful covenant the Israelites were bound to be different as they obeyed the Lord God, thereby displaying to the surrounding heathen nations the nature and requirements of the one true God. In applying this principle to our own situation as Christians today, we saw that for us too obedience to the Lord remains our first priority, which will in turn produce obvious differences between ourselves and others around us. Thus we also, by lifestyle, deed and word, are to serve as quiet "advertisements" for God's Gospel truths.

But these visible differences that exist between God's covenant people and others around us can often bring us trouble. Fundamentally this trouble arises from the warfare that has existed since Satan's rebellion against Almighty God, his, and our, Creator (eg., Ephesians 6.11-12). Despite Jesus' death and resurrection sealing his doom (egs., I Corinthians 15.55-57 / Hebrews 2.14-15 / I John 4.4), Satan still strives to thwart God's promises of salvation wrought through His Son Jesus Christ, stirring up trouble for God's people whenever he and his willing or unwitting agents can do so.

Heathen nations, saturated in idolatrous wickedness, hated Israel and all that Israel stood for, and delighted in being to them "pricking briers" and "grieving thorns", as in Ezekiel 28.24. The Israelites had long been warned to drive such nations out from the land the Lord God was giving them, or else they would indeed become "pricks in (their) eyes ... thorns in (their) sides ... snares and traps ... scourges and traps ..." (from Numbers 33.55 and Joshua 23.13), KJV). What a warning for all the Christ-redeemed of today, for us to avoid sinful practices as well as we can, and to return in repentance to the Lord very quickly if and when we fail in this.

The Lord Jesus encountered Satan's wiles throughout His ministry while physically present with us, culminating in literal thorns being thrust on to His head, then nails and a spear as metaphorical thorns driven foully into His flesh (Matthew 27.29,35 & parallels / John 19.2,18,34). How true are His words of the previous evening, "In the world ye shall have tribulation", but see how He continues! – "but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16.33). Jesus' overcoming of Satan, sin and death through His appalling suffering sprang from His loving obedience

to His Father, and His gracious love for His Church (egs., Luke 22.40-44 / Galatians 2.20b / Ephesians 5.2,25-27).

True enough, our early Christian forebears knew all about the “briers and thorns” of persecution. Of Jesus’ original twelve disciples, ten were martyred rather than deny the truth of “Jesus Christ is Lord”, the truth which they had seen demonstrated before their eyes over the years (egs., Acts 1.1-3; 4.18-20 / I John 1.1-4). Throughout Christian history Bible-believing Christians have continued to suffer, notably at the hands of Barbarians, Rome, Islam and Atheism in its various guises, and this suffering is present today in many places and in many forms, including not least in the so-called “Christian West”. The Open Doors World Watch List report merits our regular attention - <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/world-watch-list>.

The Holy Spirit through Paul gives us much teaching about such “briers-and-thorns” suffering for Christ’s redeemed people: trials are normal, not exceptional, and blessings can flow from them as we react to them properly (egs., II Corinthians 1.3-4; 6.3-10; 12.7-10 / II Thessalonians 1.3-5 / I Peter 1.3-7; 4.19). In addition to our spiritual resources we can also use these days the various anti-discrimination secular laws that have been passed (eg., Matthew 10.16).

But thanks be to God, Jesus Christ remains Lord and Saviour. For Israel those “briers and thorns” of persecution mentioned in Ezekiel 28.24 shall pass away as the Lord fulfills His promises to gather and sanctify His original covenant people (egs., Luke 21.24 / Romans 11.25-32). “Then shall they dwell in their land ... safely therein ... shall build houses ... shall plant vineyards ... shall dwell with confidence” when the Lord God has judged the despisers of Israel; “and they shall know that I [am] the Lord” (from Ezekiel 28.24-26). We see how these gracious promises are coming to full bud right now “in their land that (the Lord) has given to (His) servant Jacob” – the land of Israel (28.25end).

The Lord’s plans for the removal of His Church are also therefore now surely nearly ripe (egs., I Corinthians 15.51-52 / I Thessalonians 1.10; 4.13-18). We remain ready and alert; watching, witnessing and praying; and coping faithfully with any “pricking briers” and “grieving thorns” that may come our way. These trials are known to the Lord, they “work together for good” under His gracious hand (Romans 8.28) - and their time will pass (egs., Psalm 23; 37.7 / Isaiah 11.1-9; 60.20 / Matthew 11.28 / Romans 8.38-39 / Hebrews 4.9-10 / James 5.7-8 / Revelation 14.13; 21.1-4).

(See also TWR 198 on the same theme – This Week page on website)

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