

## GRACE FOR THOMAS BILNEY

THERE was in Trinity College, Cambridge, in the 1500s, a young doctor, much given to the study of the canon law, of serious turn of mind, and of bashful disposition, and whose tender conscience strove, although ineffectually, to fulfil the commandments of God.

Anxious about his salvation, Thomas Bilney applied to the priests, whom he looked upon as physicians of the soul. Kneeling before his confessor, with a humble look and pale face, he told him all his sins and even those of which he doubted. The priest prescribed at one time, fasting; at another, prolonged vigils: and then, masses and indulgences, which cost him dearly. The poor doctor went through all these practices with great devotion but found no consolation in them.

Being weak and slender, his body wasted away by degrees, his understanding grew weaker, his imagination faded, and his purse became empty.

"Alas," said he with anguish, " my last state is worse than the first." From time to time, an idea crossed his mind, " May not the priests be seeking their own interests and not the salvation of my soul." But, immediately rejecting the rash doubt, he fell back under the iron hand of the clergy.

One day Bilney heard his friends talking about a new book; it was the Greek Testament, printed with a translation, which was highly praised for its Latinity. Attracted by the beauty of the style, rather than by the divinity of the subject, he stretched out his hand; but, just as he was- going to take the volume, fear came upon him, and he withdrew it hastily. . . . Was it not the Testament of Jesus Christ? Might not God have placed therein some word which perhaps might heal his soul. At last, he took courage, urged by the hand of God, he slipped into the house where the volume was sold in secret, bought it with fear and trembling, and then hastened back and shut himself up in his room. As he read it—his eyes caught these words:— "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief." He laid down the book and meditated on the astonishing declaration. " What! St Paul, the chief of sinners, and yet St Paul is sure of being saved!" He read the verse again and again. " What an assertion of St Paul, how sweet thou art to my soul!" he exclaimed.

This declaration of Paul 's continually haunted him; and, in this manner, God instructed him in the secret of his heart. He could not tell what had happened to him: it seemed as if a refreshing wind were blowing over his soul, or as if a rich treasure had been placed in his hands. The Holy Spirit took what was Christ's, and announced it to him. " I also am like Paul," he cried, with emotion; " and, more than Paul, the greatest of sinners; but Christ saves sinners. At last, I have heard of Jesus." His doubts were ended—he was saved! " I see it all," said Bilney; " my vigils, my fasts, my pilgrimages, my purchase of masses and indulgences, were destroying instead of saving me." All these efforts were a

running out of the right way! Bilney never grew tired of reading his New Testament. . . .  
A witness to Jesus Christ had been born by the same power that had transformed Paul,  
Apollos, and Timothy.

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Note: Bilney became a minister in the Anglican Church and was eventually defrocked for  
preaching the gospel. He was burned at the stake Norwich on 19 August 1531.