

Stepney Green Tabernacle Pulpit.

IS THERE A HELL?

No. 12.

A Sermon

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“What shall the end be of those who do not obey the gospel of God?” — 1PETER 4.17.

I am free to confess, dear friends, that I never came upon this platform with a greater sense of responsibility weighing upon me than I do this evening. I think I can in some measure take the language of the prophet as my own, and exclaim, “The burden of the Lord,” It is only the deep conviction that the subject demands an investigation which has induced me to select it as the subject of our evening’s meditation. The subject is in itself so immense, the destinies involved are so terrible and eternal, that in approaching the subject, one seems to hear a voice saying “take off your shoes from off your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground,” The subject lies in the answer that scripture gives to the question of the text, “What shall the end be of those who do not obey the gospel of God?” — or in other words — “What is the doom of those who die impenitent?” Is there a Hell or is there not?

The truths of God have suffered as severe a persecution as have ever the believers in them. No martyr burnt at Smithfield¹ or tortured in the Inquisition of Spain, suffered worse treatment than has the word of God, for which he died. Texts have been broken upon the wheel of unsanctified reason and put upon the rack of atheistic philosophy until meanings and interpretations have been dragged from them that they never possessed, and were never intended to convey. Men, not content to take their plain and apparent teaching — that which has been for centuries so clearly stamped upon their brow that none thought of any other — now endeavour to show their superior spiritual knowledge, by declaring that the whole Christian church has for centuries been mistaken; and that it is for them to prove that the doctrines held by God’s saints for over eighteen hundred years are nothing else than “traditional prejudices.”

While the attacks were confined to minor truths (if it is for us to call any truth a minor one) it was perhaps wisest for God’s watchmen to take but little notice, and continue straight on the simple work of preaching the gospel; but waxing bolder, they now attempt to undermine the very foundations of the faith of the church.

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The blows are now aimed, not merely at the minarets of the temple of truth, but at the deepest laid stones of its basis. The very existence of Hell itself is now called in question. That which we in our ignorance always thought beyond the shadow of a doubt is now declared not only to be doubtful, but merely a prejudice of man’s, and something irreconcilable with the nature of God. Most certainly if this is true, we have indeed been under a most grand delusion. When the psalmist said “the wicked shall be turned into hell,” [Psa 9.17](#) we were simple enough to believe that

¹ One of the places where Mary I of England, “Bloody Mary,” had Protestants burned at the stake, some 288 in all.

he meant hell; but it appears he must have meant something else altogether different from what we suppose by the word. Are we prepared, beloved, at once to give up the faith of our fathers, and adopt the new-fangled notions of would-be divines? I trust not. But in order to have our faith strengthened, let us with deepest humility, reverence, and prayerfulness, try and find out the answer of Scripture to the awfully-momentous question of the text, "What *shall* the end be of those who do not obey the gospel of God?"

In order that the subject may have a close personal bearing on us all, notice the persons concerning whose end the question is asked. It is not "what shall be the end of the open and licentiously profligate?" Not "what shall be the end of the profane swearer that belches out his blasphemous oaths?" Nor "the end of him whose very life is a crying disgrace." No such thing. Were it so, many might say, "the matter has nothing to do with me, for I am neither the one nor the other." No! the question is, What will be the end of those who, whatever other good qualities they may possess, yet die without having obeyed the invitations of the gospel? — what will be the end of those who have never complied with the command "believe on the Son of God?" To put the question in a form that will give it a more tremendous interest — What will be the end of ultimate doom of that portion of this evening's congregation which dies without having rendered any obedience to the gospel of God? May the Lord enable us to speak upon this theme in the right spirit and in the right way. It was that noble man of God, McCheyne, who, when a brother minister told him that on the previous Sabbath he had been preaching on Hell, asked, "Were you able to preach it *with tenderness*, brother? God is our witness that in such a spirit we desire to preach it tonight. If we seem to say hard and severe things, believe they are said in love. Love to your souls, which we would rather wound than permit them to be chloroformed to perdition with the pernicious doubt of its existence. With heart full to overflowing then, and eyes directed to the Master for teaching, we will try and answer the question, "What shall the end be of those who do not obey the gospel of God?"

First. NOT ANNIHILATION. Doubtless many of you as well as myself have read with surprise some letters that have lately appeared in a widely circulated religious paper; letters written by men (one in particular) whose names are held in high repute by many. In these letters, sentiments are expressed so perfectly contrary to all we have ever been led to believe, that they challenge attention.

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I will not attempt to quote from memory, but read you a few lines from the letter of one known by name to most. It is as follows; —

"The dogma of eternal suffering is utterly unknown to Scripture and perfectly irreconcilable with the character of God: ... immortality is to be found only in union with the Lord Jesus Christ. I entreat Christian men to lay aside traditional prejudices, and look this great question fairly in the face. The "hell" of theology is the great weapon of infidelity, and I long to see this weapon wrested from its hands."

Now we may be mistaken, but it seems to us that these words teach as clearly as any words can, the annihilation of the sinner; if they do not mean this, we are at a loss to know what they *do* mean. We have read them over and over again in the hope of coming to some other conclusion, but have been obliged time after time to come to the same decision. If there is no immortality apart from union to Christ (and there is no union to Christ apart from obedience to the gospel), then the ultimate end of those who do not obey the gospel must be annihilation.

Let me here say before going into the particulars of what that punishment is, that *future punishment of some kind seems essential to the moral government of God*. To quote from President Edwards (to whom I acknowledge my indebtedness for many thoughts this evening) "unless there is such a state it will certainly follow, that God in fact maintains no moral

government over the world of mankind. For otherwise it is apparent that there's no such thing as rewarding or punishing mankind, according to any visible rule, or indeed, according to any order or method whatsoever." Notice specially this sentence: "There is nothing in God's disposals toward men *in this world*, to make his distributive justice and judicial equity visible, but all things are in the greatest confusion."² Take away future punishment, and is this not so? The wicked prosper on every hand. Sin walks along triumphantly, while virtue is often pushed to the wall. The base and the mean succeed, while the true and the right often languish. The unscrupulous tradesman who sticks at no dirty trick in his trade, makes his fortune and retires; and the godly tradesman next door, after a manly struggle against his difficulties is obliged to succumb, a ruined man. The scales of God are not, and were never meant to be, even on earth, though they are adjusted to a hair in eternity.

It was this very thing that was David's difficulty, and this very explanation that removed it. Will all of you who have bibles turn to the seventy-third Psalm, and commencing from the third verse, read for yourselves.

"I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked,
For there are no bands in their death; but their strength is firm.
They are not in trouble as other men; nor are they plagued like other men.
When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me."

There you have, beloved, David's source of trouble, and many others have had it besides him; but see in the next verse what caused his murmurings to cease and convinced him of the equity of God.

"Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end."

And that end thrown into the balances, righted them. Yet again.

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There was once a godless wretch clothed in purple, who fared sumptuously every day, and lying at his gate was a godly beggar whose sores were licked by the rich man's dogs. Here is a mystery. Yes, but one soon solved. Affairs were righted after death. The rich man died and went to hell. The poor man died, and was carried by an angelic escort to Abraham's bosom, while God's perfect equity was taught to the rich man, in those memorable words — "Son, remember that in your lifetime, you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus received evil things; but now he is comforted, and you are tormented." [Luk 16.25](#)

In order that God's infinitely judicial equity may be manifested, a state of future punishment is indispensable. But the question is, what is that punishment? Is it merely a cessation of being, a lack of immortality, or in other words, annihilation? I venture to answer "No;" for if it is so, it lacks what is certainly a necessity in order to make it a punishment at all, viz. — a knowledge of its infliction. That can be no punishment which I never feel and of which I am never conscious. It seems to me to stand to reason that the punishment of the sinner must be such as to make him see its connexion with his guilt, and make him learn that the threatenings of God cannot be despised with impunity. These lessons can never be learned by annihilation. Moreover, the Scriptures declare that the sinner "shall drink of the wrath of the Almighty," [Job 21.20](#) which, if it implies anything, implies that the wrath shall be actually tasted, which it could never be in an utter lack of existence. No, in that same verse I think it states, "he shall see his destruction," or in other words, the sinner shall behold his misery and doom, which would be a sheer impossibility if that doom were annihilation.

² Jonathan Edwards, *Remarks on Important Theological Controversies*, Chap. I, "Of God's Moral Government," sec 11. par. 1, *Works*, Vol. II (London 1839, ed. Edw. Hickman), p. 513.

Another argument is *the fact that there are various degrees in punishment, which makes it impossible for that punishment to be annihilation.*

Nothing is more clearly taught in the Word than that all men do not receive the same amount of punishment. Let me quote a few passages.

Looking upon the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida, Our Saviour said, "It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment than for you." To Capernaum, the scene of his mightiest works, he declared "it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you." [Mat 11.22-23](#) It was he who pronounced that the doom of him who knew his Lord's will but did not do it, was greater than that of him who never knew it. It was he who turning upon those whited sepulchres — the Pharisees — who could pray all day in the streets, and prey all night on widows' houses, declared that they would receive the greater damnation; and the greater implies the lesser. But if annihilation is the sinner's doom, what room is there for any degrees whatsoever? I cannot be any less annihilated than I can be more annihilated. This theory at once puts all punishment upon a perfect equality.

All that is said about the sinner's doom shuts out the idea of annihilation. Concerning Judas, that wretched, double-dyed traitor, our Lord said it would have been better for him "if he had never been born." [Mar 14.21](#) Why so?

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Surely because he foresaw that the traitor's punishment was something so dreadful, that never to have seen the light would have been a boon. Had cessation of existence been his punishment, there would have been no need for such a statement; for never having been born, and being annihilated, come to one and the same thing. Kindly turn with me to a few passages, and see if they do not bear on their very face future torment rather than future nothingness. The first you will find in Luke 12, the fourth and fifth verses. Let us read them; they are our Master's words. "And I say to you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you of whom you shall fear. Fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell. Yes, I say to you, fear him." Here there is certainly something more than death threatened; there is death *and hell*. Turn to Matthew 13, which we read at the commencement of this service. Read the 41st and 42nd verses. "The Son of Man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and those who do iniquity; and he shall cast them into a furnace of fire; there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth." Can annihilation be compared to a furnace of fire, and can annihilated men be said to wail and gnash their teeth? Impossible. Yet once again refer to Mark 9 from the 43rd verse. "And if your hand offends you, cut it off; it is better for you to enter in life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched; where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." It is plain that here Christ meant something more than the grave by the word "hell." For the grave-worm *does* die, but *this one* never does. In the grave there is no fire, but in this hell there *is*.

The resurrection says, "No annihilation." It is certainly taught that all will have to rise, whether saint or sinner. For there to be any mistake about that seems impossible. Now if the sinner is to be annihilated, when is it to take place? Before the resurrection? Impossible. For how then is he to arise? After the resurrection? Then where has his *soul* been from the moment of death until the resurrection morn? Besides which, what is the sinner's doom after the resurrection? Turn to John 5, the 28th and 29th verses, "the hour is coming in which all who are in their graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth: those who have done good to the resurrection of life; and those who have done evil to the resurrection of damnation."

The doom of the sinner and the doom of the devil are identical. The verdict passed is "Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels." [Mat 25.41](#) The

master and the servants share one common woe. Is the devil's punishment annihilation? Most assuredly we find out to our cost that it is not, and it never will be. Scripture sets it beyond a shadow of a doubt; for it declares that he "shall be tormented day and night, *for ever and ever.*" [Rev 20.10](#) Satan would leap for joy, and clash his chains in mad glee if he could look forward to such a termination of his torments. But his doom is forever and ever, and the wicked are to share it.

Lastly, the atonement is an argument for the existence of Hell. From what does my Saviour save me? Simply from cessation of being, or from a short residence in Hell, to be followed by total forgetfulness of all its pains?

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The very idea is incompatible with the ransom price he paid. Gethsemane's bloody sweat — the bloodier scourging in Pilate's Hall — and the awful death of Calvary — all seem to point to a punishment beyond description. If I believe (as I do) that Christ suffered in his own person the pangs and anguish I must otherwise have endured, O tell me, what must they have been that forced from the quivering lips of incarnate love that terrific death-shriek, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabacthani!" "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" [Mat 27.46](#) O, take your stand, believer, at the foot of that cross, stained crimson with your Saviour's heart-blood; look up into that face of anguish; listen to those deep-drawn sighs of misery; and then ask yourself "from what kind of a doom *must such* a sacrifice have rescued me?" What then will be our answer to the question, "What shall the end be of those who do not obey the gospel of God?" We have only one to give, and that we utter with melting heart; it is "Hell," and that hell is one of torment.

Having tried to prove that the punishment of the wicked will be no mere cessation of being, but actual torment, I now turn to my second answer to the text, namely: —

II. THAT IT WILL NOT BE MERELY A TEMPORARY PUNISHMENT.

Most of those who hold the view of immortality being only in union with Christ, still believe that when the sinner dies he enters an actual hell as described in scripture, but he only remains there a limited time, and at last is doomed to non-existence. There are others who, though believing in the immortality of the soul apart from union with Christ, still hold that after the sinner has endured the terrors of hell for some period, either short or long, he will come from there forgiven and purified, and join the ransomed throng in heaven. Without attempting to compare the merits or demerits of the two theories, I will try and prove what both equally deny — the eternity of suffering. The most general argument brought against eternal punishment is that *it is opposed to the perfect justice of God.* "The punishment," they say, "being eternal, must at last exceed the sin." That, we reply, has yet to be proved; and if we can but show that the punishment is only proportionate to the sin, then the charge of injustice falls to the ground. In order to understand aright the nature of the sin, you must bear in mind the being against whom the sin is committed. It is against Jehovah, the infinite one; against one who is infinitely worthy of honour and worship, and against one to whom we are under infinite obligations. If then God and his gospel are infinitely worthy of obedience, those "who do not obey the gospel of God" [2The 1.8](#) are guilty of an infinite sin; and not a word can be said against the justice that visits an infinite sin with an infinite punishment. Do you find in *our* courts of justice that the length of the punishment is regulated by the length of time the offence took in being committed? The act of forgery or theft took but perhaps five minutes. And yet the punishment for that act may be incarceration "for the term of natural life." And who impugns the justice of the sentence?

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"But," say others, "*God is infinitely merciful, and the very idea of eternal suffering is opposed to that attribute.*" It may be according to your idea of that mercy, and yet not against that mercy itself. Remember, God is as just as he is merciful. His mercy provided the gospel; his mercy invited the sinner to obey it; his mercy stood waiting to save: but the sinner spurned his mercy

offered, and declined “to obey the gospel.” Then as he would not have the mercy, he must have the Justice. Justice never interfered with the sweet work or mercy, and mercy can never interfere with the righteous acts of justice. God’s mercy is not a mere passion over which he has no control, and which steps in to overturn the execution of his own righteous judgments. That misery and sorrow *are* compatible with God’s being merciful, can be seen in a hundred instances around us. Shall we say “he has ceased to be merciful” because sometimes we hear of an awful colliery³ explosion in which hundreds are suffocated in a moment, and a whole neighbourhood plunged in grief? Does infinite mercy look on, and yet stretch out no hand to save, when a whole ship’s crew and crowds of passengers (as in the case of the “London”) sink in the wild waves?

That mercy *can* permit eternal suffering, is proved by the fact that it *does* permit it in the case of Satan and the rebel angels. Why should it permit it to be their doom and not ours? Is their sin greater than ours? Certainly not; there is only this difference: that they never rejected an offered Saviour, which the sinner has. Dispel the thought at once, believer, from your minds, that eternal punishment is opposed to the mercy of God.

There will be nothing in hell to refine or alter the sinner. Hell fire is no “refiner’s fire,” to purge the dross away. Hell’s torments are no “fuller’s soap,” to cleanse the guilty soul. The sinner will be as great a sinner in hell as ever he was on earth. His hatred to God in hell will be as fierce as its fire. The very idea of improvement seems to me preposterous. Shall they, without the means of grace, become what they never did when they had them? They had Moses and the prophets, and they did not believe them, and scripture says that if that testimony is refused, none other would ever be accepted. But in hell they will not even have these. The restraints also of earth will all be lacking, and sin will consequently be rampant. There will be no mother’s tears, no godly father’s entreaties, no ministry of love. All the barriers will be removed, and sin and hatred will roll through the infernal regions with unrestrained licence. He who was bad on earth will be worse in hell. In such a school as this, do you think the sinner will learn to love his God and obey his Gospel?

There is nothing in the Word about hell torments having a termination. — Do not think that although we preach it, we delight in the thought. If we could hold out a hope that those who are now lost would ever escape from their torments, believe us, we would do so with joy. But we search in vain for any ground for such a hope, Scripture holds out none, and therefore we dare not. Listen to the solemn words of inspiration and see if you can extract the shadow of a hope from them, that Hell is not eternal torment. “Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with *everlasting* burnings?” [Isa 33.14](#) “He will burn up the chaff with *unquenchable* fire.” [Mat 3.12](#) “The smoke of their torment ascends up *for ever and ever.*” [Rev 14.11](#)

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“These shall go away into *everlasting* punishment.” [Mat 25.46](#) The same word is used to describe the duration of misery as is employed to describe the duration of bliss. Let one mean anything else than “forever,” and the other does also. If it is possible for sinners to leave hell, it is equally possible for the saints to lose Heaven. The verdict of Scripture is that the torment of the lost shall last forever and ever, for ever and ever.

I would now occupy the few minutes that remain, in trying to apply these solemn truths to your heart. Do not be deceived, sinner, about your future doom by the sophistry of the present day. I entreat you by the value of your own soul, tread under foot these wretched theories, which, like opium, will lull you into a deadly sleep, only to awake in hell. It will be no consolation when there, to remember that when on earth you doubted its existence — and when by awful experience you have learned that hell is eternal, you will gain no comfort from the thought that

³ A workplace consisting of a coal mine plus all the buildings and equipment connected with it.

you had always doubted it. Awake! Awake!! Awake!!! sinner, to your danger. Hell is no ugly dream to be laughed at in the morning. It is a dread reality. It is no mere wretched scare-crow, placed in scripture to frighten children — no mere stock theme for the minister when all else fails him. It is the certain end of every sinner that dies in his sins. If indeed this is the case, then how momentous is the question, “Am I saved?” Poor, careless, thoughtless one, come in here this evening you scarce know why. — “Flee from the wrath to come.” Worldly pleasure seeker — cold professor, “flee from the wrath to come.” O sinners all, I implore you by the reality and eternity of hell to “flee from the wrath to come.” Do you say, “Where?” I answer, “to Christ.” Hide in the cleft of that “rock of ages,” and you are safe. As a lost sinner, as one who deserves eternal wrath, cast your whole soul upon Christ and you are secure. Trust him only, trust him wholly, trust him now and you shall be eternally saved.

The Lord have mercy upon all this great company, and grant that none may ever find out by experience that there is a hell and that it is an eternal one. God grant it may be so, for Jesus' sake. Amen.