

THE ETERNAL PUNISHMENT OF THE WICKED

S.M. Houghton

We here consider the teaching of infallible Scripture concerning “the eternal punishment of the wicked;” as terrible a subject as can ever engage the human soul. The death of Christ in which the Shepherd is smitten for the sake of the flock leads us to the consideration of depths of suffering than which hell itself knows no greater, but in the Lord’s case the suffering had its wondrous terminus and its glorious reward. On the third day He rose again from the dead in the power of an endless life. “In that He died, He died unto sin once: but in that He liveth, He liveth unto God” (Romans 6:10). For believers, the Lord’s anguish “teems with boundless bliss.”

Gloom

But when we consider the punishment of the wicked in hell, the theme is one of darkness itself, of unrelieved gloom, of outer darkness interminable in its duration; it includes the dread thought that “the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched.” On this the Scripture speaks with such emphasis that at times even those whose faith cannot be doubted have been tempted to yield to unbelief and to entertain ideas based upon sentimentality rather than upon the unmistakably plain assertions of the inspired Book. John Ruskin rightly said that “the denial of hell is the most dangerous because the most attractive form of modern infidelity.”

A belief in the eternal punishment of the ungodly has been a part of Christian orthodoxy throughout the long centuries, even as it is also found in the Old Testament Scriptures. “Ye shall not surely die” was the devil’s earliest, and, alas, all too successful effort to inject into man’s veins the virus of sin. Thereafter “sin reigned unto death” (Romans 5:21). And when we come to the close of the last Book of Scripture, we find the unbelieving unrepentant sinner confirmed eternally in his sin by a divine sentence. Against him the divine writ runs its unswerving course, “He that is unjust, let him be unjust still; and he which is filthy let him be filthy still” (Revelation 22:11).

Second birth

There is no change of character after death. For all who have not experienced the second birth (from above) during this life, the “second death” (Revelation 20:14) becomes as inevitable as it is inescapable. By grace it is sin’s overcomer during the earthly life who cannot be hurt of the second death (Revelation 2.11). The man who is only born once dies twice; the man born twice dies but once. For the latter the lake of fire and brimstone, which God has prepared for the devil and his angels, has no relevance. But it is appointed for those whose pleasure is found in sin, and whose misery it is to have remained unrepentant and to have despised the Gospel (Matthew 25:41; Revelation 20:10).

The words which curse the ungodly lie close to those which pronounce blessing on the righteous, just as, in this earthly life, the wheat and the tares, the sheep and the goats, are so closely intermingled that none but elect angels are capable of parting them asunder. In ancient days, Gerizim and Ebal, two mounts in central Palestine, were chosen from which to sound forth, in the one case the blessings, in the other the cursings, upon the same two characters. The New Testament carries on the message. Blessed for ever are the righteous; cursed for ever are the wicked. “And let all the people say Amen.”

Deny

It is hard indeed for an unbeliever to deny that Bible teaching is plain and eloquent on this theme. Blessing and cursing in the life of the world to come - if one may, for the moment, call eternal death a “life” - are written so eminently and bountifully in the Word that their denial

virtually involves giving the lie to Scripture itself. The most part would say, "Yes, we admit that the teaching is there, but we deny its truthfulness. We prefer to believe in a God of infinite love who will never consign any of His creatures to unending perdition." Among such men it is possible to distinguish various types. Thus there are those who urge Conditional Immortality, that is, that the "eternal life" promised to the believer in Christ is itself the only immortality, and that the fitting reward of the wicked is extinction of life or "the cessation of conscious existence." Much could be written against such a view; for the moment we merely state it.

Another view is that, while future punishment is not to be denied, it has a termination in the case of such as, in the world to come, repent and turn to the Lord. This view depends upon the claim (contrary as it is to what has already been said) that a man's state and character at death do not remain necessarily unchangeable, but that under the further strivings of the Holy Spirit, a change of heart may be experienced.

And still others would plead that sentence passed upon the wicked in the hereafter is not "a life sentence," that is, eternal punishment, but one which will inevitably conclude when the divine judgement is satisfied. Whether or not character improves remains an unknown factor. Such a belief, nebulous and wishful, is normally termed Universalism. It is the claim that, ultimately, by one means or another, all creatures will finally partake in the salvation of God, and that evil will be banished from God's universe. Some indeed would even hold that the devil and his angels will finally participate in the blessing.

Testimony

Against such notions in all their varying forms, the Word of God in all its parts bears unflinching testimony, and in no part more emphatically than in the four Gospels which give us the teachings of the Lord Himself in the days of His flesh. It is from His lips that we read of a furnace of fire (Matthew 13:50), of the outer darkness where there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:12), of the undying worm and the unquenched fire (Matthew 18:8). Men may turn a blind eye to such scriptures; they may argue that a God of love could not well be spoken of in such terms; but the fact remains that the Son of God Himself, who knew the Father, His Father, as none other knew the Father, spoke thus. The "wrath to come" is writ large in the Scriptures. From it believers have been delivered by the One "raised from the dead, even Jesus" (I Thessalonians 1:10); to it unbelievers are hastening. It is in stark contrast with "life" (John 3:36), and it abides on the man who rejects the counsel of God against himself. He cannot escape it as long as he continues in his sins, and accounts his sin more precious than the salvation of Christ.

In the narrative - not termed a parable - of the rich man and Lazarus is the Lord's vivid portrayal of the future existence of the ungodly in misery and torment (Luke 16:19-31). The great unbridgeable gulf is indicative of the absolute impossibility of any transference from hell to heaven. The gulf is fixed, immovable. The one class lacks desire to transfer from bliss to torment, the other lacks power to move from torment to bliss, even if (which is unthinkable) a soul from hell could find joy in the joy of heaven. The blessed have been "afore prepared unto glory," the sins of the cursed have "fitted them to destruction" (Romans 9:22-23).

One of the chief of all passages that teach the endlessness of the misery of the wicked reaches its climax in Matthew 25:46: "These (the goats - professed Christians at that) shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal" - (the adjective "everlasting" and "eternal" in the original is the same in both cases). It is impossible to regard the blessed life as eternal and the life of torment as terminable, for this would do violence to the Lord's words. He plainly teaches the eternity of hell torment. Not that it would be of the same intensity in all cases. He as plainly tells us that it "shall be more tolerable" for some than for others; for ancient Sodom and Gomorrah than for those who rejected the Gospel message of the Twelve (Matthew 10:15); for Tyre and Sidon than for Chorazin and Bethsaida which refused the message of mercy from the lips of the Saviour in person (Luke 10:13-14). We are left in no doubt that

unbelief of the Gospel is a sin of sins, and that for such as die in their sins, there is no hope beyond the grave.

Sombre

The apostles carry on the same sombre theme in their Letters. The Thessalonians are assured by Paul that at the second advent of Christ vengeance will be taken on “them that know not God and obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.” “They will be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9). There is nothing in the Word to indicate that the punishment of the wicked is remediable. Much of the punishment meted out in this world is intended to be remediable. The chastening by the Father of His (Christian) children, if it is comparable to punishment, is certainly intended to lead to holiness and to the production of the fruit of righteousness (Hebrews 12:10). Paul explains to the Corinthians that the chastening of the Lord was meant to prevent the Christian from being condemned with the world (1 Corinthians 11:32).

Here, however, we are especially considering the case of the ungodly. The measure of punishment short of death which this life brings upon them may well be used by God to lead them to repentance. The goodness of God even via calamity is meant to do just this, for except they repent they will all likewise perish (Luke 13:3). But once evil men have passed life’s limit, neither repentance nor faith is possible. The day of grace and long-suffering does not extend for them into the world to come. If men die in their sins there is no remedy; into captivity they go.

The Gospel of mercy to the undeserving will never again fall upon their ears. “Abandon hope, all ye that enter here” may well be written over the portals of hell, even as Dante imagined. Of the sufferings of men in hell it will never be said as it was said by the Lord concerning His own sufferings, “It is finished.” As there is no possible change of character there can be no possible change of lot. The lost suffer and sin, and sin and suffer. We state the matter as plainly as we can, and certainly no plainer than the Word of God itself.

As for men who hold and teach that, if a hell exists, as it may, its purpose is remediable, and in the case of some at least it will lead to final salvation, we state the case against them in the words of one who was simultaneously “mighty in the Scriptures” and expert in British criminal law: “If hell is a punitive and purgatorial discipline through which the sinner will pass into heaven, we disparage the atonement and undermine the truth of grace. If the prisoner gains his discharge by serving out his sentence, where does grace come in? If the sinner’s sufferings can expiate his sin, the most that can be said for the death of Christ is that it opened a short and easy way to the same goal that can be reached by a tedious and painful journey.” But it is not so. The death of Christ which does not avail to keep a man out of hell when he dies will never avail to take him out of hell once he has entered upon its miseries.

Christ died for all who, in this present earthly life, are by grace brought to believe on Him to life everlasting. His sheep shall “never perish. None can pluck them out of His hand or out of His Father’s hand. But such as remain by choice in their unbelief and in the kingdom of darkness will share the fate of “the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation” and are now “reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day” (Jude 6).

Yet we close with a Gospel word from the lips of the Lord of all grace: “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up (i.e. in crucifixion), that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:14-15).