

Matthew Sermons

THE ETERNITY OF HELL'S TORMENTS

George Whitefield

Matthew 25:46

The excellency of the gospel dispensation, is greatly evidenced by those sanctions of rewards and punishments, which it offers to the choice of all its hearers, in order to engage them to be obedient to its precepts. For it promises no less than eternal happiness to the good, and denounces no slighter a punishment than everlasting misery against the wicked: On the one hand, It is a favor of life unto life," on the other, "A favor of death unto death." And though one would imagine, the bare mentioning of the former would be sufficient to draw men to their duty, yet ministers in all ages have found it necessary, frequently to remind their people of the latter, and to set before them the terrors of the Lord, as so many powerful dissuasives from sin.

But whence is it that men are so disingenuous [insincere, deceitful]? The reason seems to be this: The promise of eternal happiness is so agreeable to the inclinations and wishes of mankind, that all who call themselves christians, universally and willingly subscribe to the belief of it: but then there is something so shocking in the consideration of eternal torments, and seemingly such an infinite disproportion between an endless duration of pain, and short life spent in pleasure, that men (some at least of them) can scarcely be brought to confess it as an article of their faith, that an eternity of misery awaits the wicked in a future state.

I shall therefore at this time, beg leave to insist on the proof of this part of one of the Articles of our Creed; and endeavor to make good what our blessed Lord has here threatened in the words of the text, "These (that is, the wicked) shall go away into everlasting punishment."

Accordingly, without considering the words as they stand in relation to the context; I shall resolve all I have to say, into this one general proposition, "That the torments reserved for the wicked hereafter, are eternal."

But before I proceed to make good this, I must inform you that I take it for granted,

All present do steadfastly believe, They have something within them, which we call a soul, and which is capable of surviving the dissolution of the body, and of being miserable or happy to all eternity.

I take it for granted farther, That you believe a divine revelation; that those books, emphatically called the Scriptures, were written by the inspiration of God, and that the things therein contained, are founded upon eternal truth.

I take it for granted, That you believe, that the Son of God came down to die for sinners; and that there is but one Mediator between God and man, even the man Christ Jesus.

These things being granted, (and they were necessary to be premised) proceed we now to make good the one general proposition asserted in the text, That the torments reserved for the wicked hereafter are eternal. "These shall go away into everlasting punishment." The

First argument I shall advance to prove that the torments reserved for the wicked hereafter, are eternal, is, That the word of God himself assures us, in line upon line, that it will be so.

To quote all the texts that might be produced in proof of this, would be endless. Let it suffice to instance only in a few. In the Old Testament, in the book of Daniel, chap. 12, ver. 2 we are told, that "some shall wake to everlasting life, and others to everlasting contempt." In the book of Isaiah, it is said, that "the worm of those that have transgressed God's law, and die impenitently, shall not die, nor their fire be quenched." And in another place the holy Prophet, struck, no doubt, with astonishment and horror at the prospect of the continuance of the torments of the damned, breaks out into this moving expostulation, "Who can dwell with everlasting burnings?"

The New Testament is still fuller as to this point, it being a revelation which brought this and such-like particulars to a clear light. The Apostle Jude tells us of the profane despisers of dignities in his days, that "for them was reserved the blackness of darkness forever." And in the book of the Revelation, it is written, that "the smoke of the torments of the wicked ascendeth for ever and ever." And if we believe the witness of men inspired, the witness of the Son of God, who had the Spirit given him, as Mediator, without measure, is still far greater: and in St. Mark's gospel, He repeats this solemn declaration three several times, It is better for thee to enter into life maimed;" that is, it is better to forego the gratification of thy lust, or incur the displeasure of a friend, which may be as

dear to thee as a hand, or as useful as a foot, "than having two hands and feet, (that is, for indulging the one, or disobeying God to oblige the other) to be cast into hell, where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."

And here again, in the words of the text, "These (the wicked) shall go away into everlasting punishment."

I know it has been objected by some who have denied the eternity of hell-torments, That the words everlasting and ever and ever, are often used in the Holy Scriptures (especially in the Old Testament) when they signify not an endless duration, but a limited term of time.

And this we readily grant: but then we reply, That when the words are used with this limitation, they either manifestly appear to be used so from the context; or are put in opposition to occasional types which God gave his people on some special occasions, as when it is said, "It shall be a perpetual or everlasting statute," or, "a statute for ever;" that is, a standing type, and not merely transient or occasional, as was the pillar of cloud, the manna, and such-like. Or, lastly, they have a relation to that covenant, God made with his spiritual Israel; which, if understood in a spiritual sense, will be everlasting, though the ceremonial dispensation be abolished.

Besides, it ought to be observed, that some of the passages just now referred to, have neither of these words so much as mentioned in them, and cannot possibly be interpreted, so as to denote only a limited term of years.

But let that be as it will, it is evident even to a demonstration, that the words of the text will not admit of such a restrained signification, as appears from their being directly opposed to the words immediately following, "That the righteous shall go into life eternal." From which words, all are ready to grant, that the life promised to the righteous will be eternal. And why the punishment threatened to the wicked should not be understood to be eternal likewise, when the very same word in the original, is used to express the duration of each, no shadow of a reason can be given.

But, Secondly, There cannot be one argument urged, why God should reward his saints with everlasting happiness, which will not equally prove that he ought to punish sinners with eternal misery.

For, since we know nothing (at least for a certainty) how he will deal with either but by a Divine Revelation; and since, as was proved by the foregoing argument, he hath as positively threatened eternally to punish the wicked, as to reward the good; it follows, that his truth will be as much impeached and called in question, did he not inflict his punishments, as it would be, if he did not confer his rewards.

To this also it has been objected, That though God is obliged by promise to give his rewards, yet his veracity could not be called in question, supposing he should not execute his threatenings, as he actually did not in the case of Nineveh; which God expressly declared by his Prophet Jonah, "should be destroyed in forty days:" notwithstanding the sequel of the story informs us, that Nineveh was spared.

But in answer to this objection we affirm, that God's threatenings, as well as promises, are without repentance; and for this reason, because they are both founded on the eternal laws of right reason. Accordingly we always find, that where the conditions were not performed, on the non-performance of which the threatenings were denounced, God always executed the punishment threatened. The driving Adam out of Eden, the destruction of the old world by a deluge of water, and the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, are, and will be always so many standing monuments of God's executing his threatenings when denounced, though to our weak apprehensions, the punishment may seem far to exceed the crime.

It is true, God did spare Nineveh, and that because the inhabitants did actually repent, and therefore performed the conditions upon which it was supposed, by the Prophet's being sent to warn them, the threatened punishment should be withheld.

And so in respect to gospel threatenings. If men will so far consult their own welfare, as to comply with the gospel, God certainly will not punish them, but on the contrary, confer upon them his rewards. But to affirm that he will not punish, and that eternally to, impenitent, obstinate sinners, according as he hath threatened; what is it, in effect, but to make God like a man, that he should lie, or the son of man, that he should repent?

But the absurdity of such an opinion will appear still more evident from

The Third argument I shall offer to prove, that the torments reserved for the wicked hereafter are eternal, From the nature of the Christian covenant.

And here I must again observe, that it was taken for granted at the beginning of this discourse, that you believe the Son of God came down to save sinners; and that there is but one Mediator between God and men, even the Man Christ Jesus.

And here I take it for granted farther, (unless you believe the absurd and unwarrantable doctrine of purgatory) that you are fully persuaded, this life is the only time allotted by Almighty God for working out our salvation, and that after a few years are passed

over, there will remain no more sacrifice for sin.

And if this be granted (and who dares deny it?) it follows, that if the wicked man dieth in his wickedness, and under the wrath of God, he must continue in that state to all eternity. For, since there is no possibility of their being delivered out of such a condition, but by and through Christ; and since, at the hour of death, the time of Christ's mediation and intercession for him is irrecoverably gone; the same reason that may be given, why God should punish a sinner that dieth under the guilt of his sins for a single day, will equally hold good, why he should continue to punish him for a year, an age, nay all eternity.

But I hasten to the Fourth and last argument, to prove, That the torments reserved for the wicked hereafter are eternal, Because the devil's punishment is to be so.

That there is such a being whom we call the devil; that he was once an angel of light, but for his pride and rebellion against God, was cast down from heaven, and is now permitted, with the rest of the spiritual wickednesses, to walk to and fro, seeking whom they may devour; that there is a place of torment reserved for them, or, to use the Apostle's words, "That they are reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day;" are truths all here present were supposed to be convinced of, at the beginning of the discourse, you believing the Holy Scriptures to be written by the inspiration of God, wherein these truths are delivered.

But then if we allow all this, and think it no injustice in God to punish those once glorious spirits for their rebellion; how can we think it unjust in him, to punish wicked men for their impenitency to all eternity?

You will say, perhaps, that they have sinned against greater light, and therefore deserve a greater punishment. And so we grant that the punishment of the fallen angels may be greater as to degree, than that of wicked men; but then we affirm, it will be equal as to the eternal duration of it: for in that day, as the lively oracles of God inform us, shall the Son of Man say to them on his left hand, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels." Where we find that impenitent sinners are to be cast into the same everlasting fire, with the devil and his angels; and that too very justly. For though they may have sinned against greater light, yet christians sin against greater mercy. Since Christ took not hold of, did not die for, the fallen angels, but for men and for our salvation. So that if God spared not those excellent beings, assure thyself, O obstinate sinner, whoever thou art, he will by no means spare thee.

From what then has been said it plainly appears, that verily the torments reserved for the wicked hereafter, war eternal. And if so, brethren, how ought we to fly to Jesus Christ for refuge; how holy ought we to be in all manner of conversation and godliness, that we may be accounted worthy to escape this wrath to come!

But before I proceed to a practical exhortation, permit me to draw an inference or two from what has been said.

And First, If the torments reserved for the wicked hereafter are eternal, what shall we say to those, who make an open profession in their creed to believe a life everlasting, a life of misery as well as happiness, and yet dare to live in the actual commission of those sins which will unavoidably, without repentance, bring them into that place of torment? Thou believest that the punishments of the impenitently wicked in another life, are eternal: "Thou dost well, the devils also believe and tremble." But know O vain man, unless this belief doth influence thy practice, and makes thee bid adieu to thy sins, every time thou repeatest thy creed, thou doest in effect say, I believe I shall be undone for ever.

But, Secondly, If the torments reserved for the wicked hereafter are eternal, then let this serve as a caution to such persons, (and it is to be feared there are some such) who go about to dissuade others from the belief of such an important truth: There being no surer way, in all probability, to encourage and promote infidelity and profaneness, than the broaching or maintaining so unwarrantable a doctrine. For if the positive threats of God concerning the eternity of hell-torments, are already found insufficient to deter men from sin, what a higher pitch of wickedness may imagine they will quickly arrive at, when they are taught to entertain any hopes of a future recovery out of them; or, what is still worse, that their souls are hereafter to be annihilated, and become like the beasts that perish? But woe unto such blind leaders of the blind. No wonder if they both fall into that ditch. And let such corrupters of God's word know, that I testify unto every man that heareth me this day, "That if any one shall add unto, or take away from the words that are written in the book of God, God shall take his part out of the book of life, and shall add unto him all the plagues that are in that book."

Thirdly and Lastly, If the torments reserved for the wicked hereafter are eternal, then this may serve as a reproof for those who quarrel with God, and say it is inconsistent with his justice, to punish a person to all eternity, only for enjoying the pleasures of sin for a season. But such persons must be told, that it is not their thinking or calling God unjust, will make him so, no more than a condemned prisoner's saying the law or judge is unjust, will render either duly chargeable with such an imputation. But knowest thou, O worm, what blasphemy thou are guilty of, in charging God with injustice? "Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, why hast thou made me thus?" Wilt thou presume to arraign the Almighty at the bar of thy shallow reasoning? And call him unjust,

for punishing thee eternally, only because thou wishest it may not be so? But hath God said it, and shall he not do it? He hath said it: and let God be true, though every man be a liar. "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" Assuredly he will. And if sinners will not own his justice in his threatenings here, they will be compelled ere long to own and feel them, when tormented by him hereafter.

But to come to a more practical application of what has been delivered.

You have heard, brethren, the eternity of hell-torments plainly proved, from the express declarations of holy scriptures, and consequences naturally drawn from them. And now there seems to need no great art of rhetoric to persuade any understanding person to avoid and abhor those sins, which without repentance will certainly plunge him into this eternal gulf. The disproportion between the pleasure and the pain (if there be any pleasure in sin) is so infinitely great, that supposing it was only possible, though not certain, that the wicked would be everlastingly punished, no one that has the reason of a man, for the enjoying a little momentary pleasure, would, one might imagine, run the hazard of enduring eternal pain. But since the torments of the damned are not only possible, but certain (since God himself, who cannot lie, has told us so) for men, notwithstanding, to persist in their disobedience, and then flatter themselves, that God will not make good his threatenings, is a most egregious [gross, excessive] instance of folly and presumption.

Dives himself supposed, that if one rose from the dead, his brethren would amend their lives, but Christians, it seems, will not repent, though the Son of God died and rose again, and told them what they must expect, if they continue obstinate in evil-doing.

Would we now and then draw off our thoughts from sensible objects, and by faith meditate a while on the miseries of the damned, I doubt not but we should, as it were, hear many an unhappy soul venting his fruitless sorrows, in some such piteous moans as these.

"O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this body of death!" O foolish mortal that I was, thus to bring myself into these never-ceasing tortures, for the transitory enjoyment of a few short-lived pleasures, which scarcely afforded me any satisfaction, even when I most indulged myself in them. Alas! Are these the wages, these the effects of sin? O damned apostate! First to delude me with pretended promises of happiness, and after several years drudgery in his service, thus to involve me in eternal woe. O that I had never hearkened to his beguiling insinuations! O that I had rejected his very first suggestions with the utmost detestation and abhorrence! O that I had taken up my cross and followed Christ! O that I had never ridiculed serious godliness; and out of a false politeness, condemned the truly pious as too severe, enthusiastic, or superstitious! For I then had been happy indeed, happy beyond expression, happy to all eternity, yonder in those blessed regions where they fit, clothed with unspeakable glory, and chanting forth their seraphic hallelujahs to the Lamb that sitteth upon the throne for ever. But, alas! These reflections come now too late; these wishes now are vain and fruitless. I have not suffered, and therefore must not reign with them. I have in effect denied the Lord that bought me, and therefore justly am I now denied by him. But must I live for ever tormented in these flames? Must this body of mine, which not long since lay in state, was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day, must it be here eternally confined, and made the mockery of insulting devils? O eternity! That thought fills me with despair: I must be miserable for ever."

Come then, all ye self-deluding, self-deluded sinners, and imagine yourselves for once in the place of that truly wretched man I have been here describing. Think, I beseech you by the mercies of God in Christ Jesus, think with yourselves, how racking, how unsupportable the never-dying worm of a self-condemning conscience will hereafter be to you. Think how impossible it will be for you to dwell with everlasting burnings.

Come, all ye christians of a lukewarm, Laodicean spirit, ye Gallie's in religion, who care a little, but not enough for the things of God; O think, think with yourselves, how deplorable it will be to lose the enjoyment of heaven, and run into endless torments, merely because you will be content to be almost, and will not strive to be altogether christians. Consider, I beseech you consider, how you will rave and curse that fatal stupidity which made you believe any thing less than true faith in Jesus, productive of a life of strict piety, self-denial, and mortification, can keep you from those torments, the eternity of which I have been endeavoring to prove.

But I can no more. These thoughts are too melancholy for me to dwell on, as well as for you to hear; and God knows, as punishing is his strange work, so denouncing his threatenings is mine. But if the bare mentioning the torments of the damned is so shocking, how terrible must the enduring of them be!

And now, are not some of you ready to cry out, "These are hard sayings, who can bear them?"

But let not sincere christians be in the least terrified at what has been delivered: No, for you is reserved a crown, a kingdom, an eternal and exceeding weight of glory. Christ never said that the righteous, the believing, the upright, the sincere, but the wicked, merciless, negatively good professors before described, shall go into everlasting punishment. For you, who love him in sincerity, a new and living way is laid open into the Holy of Holies by the blood of Jesus Christ: and an abundant entrance will be administered unto you, at the great day of account, into eternal life. Take heed, therefore, and beware that there be not in any of you a root of bitterness springing up of unbelief: but on the contrary, steadfastly and heartily rely on the many precious promises reached out to you in the gospel, knowing that he who hath promised is faithful, and therefore will perform.

But let no obstinately wicked professors dare to apply any of the divine promises to themselves: "For it is not meet to take the children's meat and give it unto dogs:" No, to such the terrors of the Lord only belong. And as certainly as Christ will say to his true followers, "Come, ye blessed children of my Father, receive the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world;" so he will unalterably pronounce this dreadful sentence against all that die in their sins, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels."

From which unhappy state, may God of his infinite mercy deliver us all through Jesus Christ; to whom, with thee O Father, and thee O Holy Ghost, three Persons and one eternal God, be ascribed, as is most due, all honor, power, might, majesty, and domini

Hell's Eternal Torments

by Jonathan Edwards

April, 1739

Matthew 25:46 These shall go away into everlasting punishment.

Subject: The misery of the wicked in hell will be absolutely eternal.

IN this chapter we have the most particular description of the day of judgment, of any in the whole Bible. Christ here declares that when he shall hereafter sit on the throne of his glory, the righteous and the wicked shall be set before him, and separated one from the other, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. Then we have an account how both will be judged according to their works: how the good works of the one and the evil works of the other will be rehearsed, and how the sentence shall be pronounced accordingly. We are told what the sentence will be on each, and then we have an account of the execution of the sentence on both. In the words of the text is the account of the execution of the sentence on the wicked or the ungodly, concerning which, it is to my purpose to observe two things.

I. The duration of the punishment on which they are here said to enter: it is called everlasting punishment.

II. The time of their entrance on this everlasting punishment, viz. after the day of judgment, when all these things that are of a temporary continuance shall have come to an end and even those of them that are most lasting — the frame of the world itself, the earth which is said to abide forever, the ancient mountains and everlasting hills, [and] the sun, moon, and stars. When the heavens shall have waxed old like a garment and as a vesture shall be changed, then shall be the time when the wicked shall enter on their punishment.

Doctrine. — The misery of the wicked in hell will be absolutely eternal.

There are two opinions which I mean to oppose in this doctrine. One is that the eternal death with which wicked men are threatened in Scripture, signifies no more than eternal annihilation: that God will punish their wickedness by eternally abolishing their being.

The other opinion which I mean to oppose is that though the punishment of the wicked shall consist in sensible misery, yet it shall not be absolutely eternal, but only of a very long continuance.

Therefore, to establish the doctrine in opposition to these different opinions, I shall undertake to show,

I. That it is not contrary to the divine perfections to inflict on wicked men a punishment that is absolutely eternal.

II. That the eternal death which God threatens is not annihilation, but an abiding sensible punishment or misery.

III. That this misery will not only continue for a very long time, but will be absolutely without end.

IV. That various good ends will be obtained by the eternal punishment of the wicked.

I. I am to show that it is not contrary to the divine perfections to inflict on wicked men a punishment that is absolutely eternal.

This is the sum of the objections usually made against this doctrine: that it is inconsistent with the justice, and especially with the

mercy, of God. And some say [that] if it be strictly just, yet how can we suppose that a merciful God can bear eternally to torment his creatures.

First, I shall briefly show that it is not inconsistent with the justice of God to inflict an eternal punishment. To evince this, I shall use only one argument, viz. that sin is heinous enough to deserve such a punishment, and such a punishment is no more than proportionable to the evil or demerit of sin. If the evil of sin be infinite, as the punishment is, then it is manifest that the punishment is no more than proportionable to the sin punished, and is no more than sin deserves. And if the obligation to love, honor, and obey God be infinite, then sin which is the violation of this obligation, is a violation of infinite obligation, and so is an infinite evil. Again, if God be infinitely worthy of love, honor, and obedience, then our obligation to love, and honor, and obey him is infinitely great. — So that God being infinitely glorious, or infinitely worthy of our love, honor, and obedience, our obligation to love, honor, and obey him (and so to avoid all sin) is infinitely great. Again, our obligation to love, honor, and obey God being infinitely great, sin is the violation of infinite obligation, and so is an infinite evil. Once more, sin being an infinite evil, deserves an infinite punishment. An infinite punishment is no more than it deserves. Therefore such punishment is just, which was the thing to be proved. There is no evading the force of this reasoning, but by denying that God, the sovereign of the universe, is infinitely glorious, which I presume none of my hearers will venture to do.

Second, I am to show that it is not inconsistent with the mercy of God, to inflict an eternal punishment on wicked men. It is an unreasonable and unscriptural notion of the mercy of God, that he is merciful in such a sense that he cannot bear that penal justice should be executed. This is to conceive of the mercy of God as a passion to which his nature is so subject that God is liable to be moved, and affected, and overcome by seeing a creature in misery, so that he cannot bear to see justice executed: which is a most unworthy and absurd notion of the mercy of God, and would, if true, argue great weakness. — It would be a great defect, and not a perfection, in the sovereign and supreme Judge of the world, to be merciful in such a sense that he could not bear to have penal justice executed. It is a very unscriptural notion of the mercy of God. The Scriptures everywhere represent the mercy of God as free and sovereign, and not that the exercises of it are necessary, so that God cannot bear justice should take place. The Scriptures abundantly speak of it as the glory of the divine attribute of mercy, that it is free and sovereign in its exercises, and not that God cannot but deliver sinners from misery. This is a mean and most unworthy idea of the divine mercy.

It is most absurd also as it is contrary to plain fact. For if there be any meaning in the objection, this is supposed in it, that all misery of the creature, whether just or unjust, is in itself contrary to the nature of God. For if his mercy be of such a nature that a very great degree of misery, though just, is contrary to his nature, then it is only to add to the mercy. And then a less degree of misery is contrary to his nature (again to add further to it), and a still less degree of misery is contrary to his nature. And so the mercy of God being infinite, all misery must be contrary to his nature, which we see to be contrary to fact. For we see that God in his providence, does indeed inflict very great calamities on mankind even in this life.

However strong such kind of objections against the eternal misery of the wicked, may seem to the carnal, senseless hearts of men, as though it were against God's justice and mercy, yet their seeming strength arises from a want of sense of the infinite evil, odiousness, and provocation there is in sin. Hence it seems to us not suitable that any poor creature should be the subject of such misery, because we have no sense of anything abominable and provoking in any creature answerable to it. If we had, then this infinite calamity would not seem unsuitable. For one thing would but appear answerable and proportionable to another, and so the mind would rest in it as fit and suitable, and no more than what is proper to be ordered by the just, holy, and good Governor of the world.

That this is so, we may be convinced by this consideration, viz. that when we hear or read of some horrid instances of cruelty, it may be to some poor innocent child or some holy martyr — and their cruel persecutors, having no regard to their shrieks and cries, only sported themselves with their misery, and would not vouchsafe even to put an end to their lives — we have a sense of the evil of them, and they make a deep impression on our minds. Hence it seems just, every way fit and suitable, that God should inflict a very terrible punishment on persons who have perpetrated such wickedness. It seems no way disagreeable to any perfection of the Judge of the world. We can think of it without being at all shocked. The reason is that we have a sense of the evil of their conduct, and a sense of the proportion there is between the evil or demerit and the punishment.

Just so, if we saw a proportion between the evil of sin and eternal punishment, i.e. if we saw something in wicked men that should appear as hateful to us, as eternal misery appears dreadful (something that should as much stir up indignation and detestation, as eternal misery does terror), all objections against this doctrine would vanish at once. Though now it seem incredible, [and] though when we hear of such a degree and duration of torments as are held forth in this doctrine and think what eternity is, it is ready to seem impossible that such torments should be inflicted on poor feeble creatures by a Creator of infinite mercy. Yet this arises principally from these two causes: 1. It is so contrary to the depraved inclinations of mankind, that they hate to believe it and cannot bear it should be true. 2. They see not the suitability of eternal punishment to the evil of sin. They see not that it is no more than

proportionable to the demerit of sin.

Having thus shown that the eternal punishment of the wicked is not inconsistent with the divine perfections, I shall now proceed to show that it is so far from being inconsistent with the divine perfections, that those perfections evidently require it; i.e. they require that sin should have so great a punishment, either in the person who has committed it, or in a surety. And therefore with respect to those who believe not in a surety, and have no interest in him, the divine perfections require that this punishment should be inflicted on them.

This appears as it is not only not unsuitable that sin should be thus punished, but it is positively suitable, decent, and proper. — If this be made to appear, that it is positively suitable that sin should be thus punished, then it will follow that the perfections of God require it. For certainly the perfections of God require what is proper to be done. The perfection and excellency of God require that to take place which is perfect, excellent, and proper in its own nature. But that sin should be punished eternally is such a thing, which appears by the following considerations.

1. It is suitable that God should infinitely hate sin, and be an infinite enemy to it. Sin, as I have before shown, is an infinite evil, and therefore is infinitely odious and detestable. It is proper that God should hate every evil, and hate it according to its odious and detestable nature. And sin being infinitely evil and odious, it is proper that God should hate it infinitely.

2. If infinite hatred of sin be suitable to the divine character, then the expressions of such hatred are also suitable to this character. Because that which is suitable to be, is suitable to be expressed. That which is lovely in itself, is lovely when it appears. If it be suitable that God should be an infinite enemy to sin, or that he should hate it infinitely, then it is suitable that he should act as such an enemy. If it be suitable that he should hate and have enmity against sin, then it is suitable for him to express that hatred and enmity in that to which hatred and enmity by its own nature tends. But certainly hatred in its own nature tends to opposition, and to set itself against that which is hated, and to procure its evil and not its good, and that in proportion to the hatred. Great hatred naturally tends to the great evil, and infinite hatred to the infinite evil, of its object.

Whence it follows that if it be suitable that there should be infinite hatred of sin in God, as I have shown it is, it is suitable that he should execute an infinite punishment on it. And so the perfections of God require that he should punish sin with an infinite, or which is the same thing with an eternal, punishment.

Thus we see not only the great objection against this doctrine answered, but the truth of the doctrine established by reason. I now proceed further to establish it by considering the remaining particulars under the doctrine.

II. That eternal death or punishment which God threatens to the wicked, is not annihilation, but an abiding sensible punishment or misery. — The truth of this proposition will appear by the following particulars.

First, the Scripture everywhere represents the punishment of the wicked, as implying very extreme pains and sufferings. But a state of annihilation is no state of suffering at all. Persons annihilated have no sense or feeling of pain or pleasure, and much less do they feel that punishment which carries in it an extreme pain or suffering. They no more suffer to eternity than they did suffer from eternity.

Second, it is agreeable both to Scripture and reason to suppose that the wicked shall be punished in such a manner that they shall be sensible of the punishment they are under: that they should be sensible that now God has executed and fulfilled what he threatened, what they disregarded and would not believe. They should know themselves that justice takes place upon them, that God vindicates that majesty which they despised, [and] that God is not so despicable a being as they thought him to be. They should be sensible for what they are punished, while they are under the threatened punishment. It is reasonable that they should be sensible of their own guilt, and should remember their former opportunities and obligations, and should see their own folly and God's justice. — If the punishment threatened be eternal annihilation, they will never know that it is inflicted. They will never know that God is just in their punishment, or that they have their deserts. And how is this agreeable to the Scriptures, in which God threatens, that he will repay the wicked to his face, Deu. 7:10. And to that in Job 21:19, 20, "God rewardeth him, and he shall know it; his eyes shall see his destruction, and he shall drink of the wrath of the Almighty." And to that in Eze. 22:21, 22, "Yea, I will gather you, and blow upon you in the fire of my wrath, and ye shall be melted in the midst thereof. As silver is melted in the midst of the furnace, so shall ye be melted in the midst thereof; and ye shall know that I the Lord have poured out my fury upon you." — And how is it agreeable to that expression so often annexed to the threatenings of God's wrath against wicked men, And ye shall know that I am the Lord?

Third, the Scripture teaches that the wicked will suffer different degrees of torment, according to the different aggravations of their sins. Mat. 5:22, "Whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause, shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say

to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell-fire." Here Christ teaches us that the torments of wicked men will be different in different persons, according to the different degrees of their guilt. — It shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah, for Tyre and Sidon, than for the cities where most of Christ's mighty works were wrought. — Again, our Lord assures us that he that knows his Lord's will, and prepares not himself, nor does according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knows not, and commits things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. — These several passages of Scripture infallibly prove that there will be different degrees of punishment in hell, which is utterly inconsistent with the supposition that the punishment consists in annihilation, in which there can be no degrees.

Fourth, the Scriptures are very express and abundant in this matter: that the eternal punishment of the wicked will consist in sensible misery and torment, and not in annihilation. — What is said of Judas is worthy to be observed here, "It had been good for that man if he had not been born;" Mat. 26:24. — This seems plainly to teach us, that the punishment of the wicked is such that their existence, upon the whole, is worse than non-existence. But if their punishment consists merely in annihilation, this is not true. — The wicked, in their punishment, are said to weep, and wail, and gnash their teeth; which implies not only real existence, but life, knowledge, and activity, and that they are in a very sensible and exquisite manner affected with their punishment, Isa. 33:14. Sinners in the state of their punishment are represented to dwell with everlasting burnings. But if they are only turned into nothing, where is the foundation for this representation? It is absurd to say that sinners will dwell with annihilation, for there is no dwelling in the case. It is also absurd to call annihilation a burning, which implies a state of existence, sensibility, and extreme pain: whereas in annihilation there is neither.

It is said that they shall be cast into a lake of fire and brimstone. How can this expression with any propriety be understood to mean a state of annihilation? Yea, they are expressly said to have no rest day nor night, but to be tormented with fire and brimstone forever and ever, Rev. 20:10. But annihilation is a state of rest, a state in which not the least torment can possibly be suffered. The rich man in hell lifted up his eyes being in torment, and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom, and entered into a particular conversation with Abraham: all which proves that he was not annihilated.

The spirits of ungodly men before the resurrection are not in a state of annihilation, but in a state of misery. They are spirits in prison, as the apostle says of them that were drowned in the flood, 1 Pet. 3:19. — And this appears very plainly from the instance of the rich man before mentioned, if we consider him as representing the wicked in their separate state between death and the resurrection. But if the wicked even then are in a state of torment, much more will they be, when they shall come to suffer that which is the proper punishment of their sins.

Annihilation is not so great a calamity but that some men have undoubtedly chosen it, rather than a state of suffering even in this life. This was the case of Job, a good man. But if a good man in this world may suffer that which is worse than annihilation, doubtless the proper punishment of the wicked, in which God means to manifest his peculiar abhorrence of their wickedness, will be a calamity vastly greater still, and therefore cannot be annihilation. That must be a very mean contemptible testimony of God's wrath towards those who have rebelled against his crown and dignity — broken his laws, and despised both his vengeance and his grace — which is not so great a calamity as some of his true children have suffered in life.

The eternal punishment of the wicked is said to be the second death, as Rev. 20:14, and 21:8. It is doubtless called the second death in reference to the death of the body, and as the death of the body is ordinarily attended with great pain and distress, so the like, or something vastly greater, is implied in calling the eternal punishment of the wicked the second death. And there would be no propriety in calling it so, if it consisted merely in annihilation. And this second death wicked men will suffer, for it cannot be called the second death with respect to any other than men. It cannot be called so with respect to devils, as they die no temporal death, which is the first death. In Rev. 2:11, it is said, "He that overcometh, shall not be hurt of the second death;" implying that all who do not overcome their lusts, but live in sin, shall suffer the second death.

Again, wicked men will suffer the same kind of death with the devils; as in verse 41 of the context, "Depart, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels." Now the punishment of the devil is not annihilation, but torment. He therefore trembles for fear of it. not for fear of being annihilated — he would be glad of that. Where he is afraid of is torment, as appears by Luke 8:28, where he cries out and beseeches Christ that he would not torment him before the time. And it is said, Rev. 20:10, "The devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night, for ever and ever."

It is strange how men will go directly against so plain and full revelations of Scripture, as to suppose notwithstanding all these things, that the eternal punishment threatened against the wicked signifies no more than annihilation.

III. As the future punishment of the wicked consists in sensible misery, so it shall not only continue for a very long time, but shall be absolutely without end.

Of those who have held that the torments of hell are not absolutely eternal, there have been two sorts. Some suppose that in the threatenings of everlasting punishment, the terms used do not necessarily import a proper eternity, but only a very long duration. Others suppose that if they do import a proper eternity, yet we cannot necessarily conclude thence, that God will fulfill his threatenings. — Therefore I shall,

First, show that the threatenings of eternal punishment do very plainly and fully import a proper, absolute eternity, and not merely a long duration. — This appears,

1. Because when the Scripture speaks of the wicked being sentenced to their punishment at the time when all temporal things are come to an end, it then speaks of it as everlasting, as in the text, and elsewhere. It is true that the term forever is not always in Scripture used to signify eternity. Sometimes it means “as long as a man lives.” In this sense it is said that the Hebrew servant, who chose to abide with his master, should have his ear bored and should serve his master forever. Sometimes it means “during the continuance of the state and church of the Jews.” In this sense, several laws, which were peculiar to that church and were to continue in force no longer than that church should last, are called statutes forever. See Exo. 27:21, 28:43, etc. Sometimes it means as long as the world stands. So in Ecc. 1:4, “One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth for ever.”

And this last is the longest temporal duration that such a term is ever used to signify. For the duration of the world is the longest of things temporal, as its beginning was the earliest. Therefore when the Scripture speaks of things as being before the foundation of the world, it means that they existed before the beginning of time. So those things which continue after the end of the world, are eternal things. When heaven and earth are shaken and removed, those things that remain will be what cannot be shaken, but will remain forever, Heb. 12:26-27.

But the punishment of the wicked will not only remain after the end of the world, but is called everlasting, as in the text, “These shall go away into everlasting punishment.” So in 2 Thes. 1:9-10, “Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; when he shall come to be glorified in his saints,” etc. — Now, what can be meant by a thing being everlasting, after all temporal things are come to an end, but that it is absolutely without end!

2. Such expressions are used to set forth the duration of the punishment of the wicked, as are never used in the scriptures of the New Testament to signify anything but a proper eternity. It is said, not only that the punishment shall be forever, but for ever and ever. Rev. 14:11, “The smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever.” Rev. 20:10, “Shall be tormented day and night, for ever and ever.” Doubtless the New Testament has some expression to signify a proper eternity, of which it has so often occasion to speak. But it has no higher expression than this: if this do not signify an absolute eternity, there is none that does.

3. The Scripture uses the same way of speaking to set forth the eternity of punishment and the eternity of happiness, yea, the eternity of God himself. Mat. 25:46, “These shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.” The words everlasting and eternal, in the original, are the very same. Rev. 22:5, “And they (the saints) shall reign for ever and ever.” And the Scripture has no higher expression to signify the eternity of God himself, than that of his being for ever and ever, as Rev. 4:9, “To him who sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever;” and in the 10th verse, and in Rev. 5:14; 10:6, and 15:7.

Again, the Scripture expresses God’s eternity by this: that it shall be forever, after the world is come to an end, Psa. 102:26-27, “They shall perish, but thou shalt endure: yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed. But thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end.”

4. The Scripture says that wicked men shall not be delivered till they have paid the uttermost farthing of their debt, Mat. 5:26. The last mite, Luke 12:59, i.e. the utmost that is deserved, and all mercy is excluded by this expression. But we have shown that they deserve an infinite, an endless punishment.

5. The Scripture says absolutely that their punishment shall not have an end, Mark 9:44, “Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.” Now it will not do to say that the meaning is [that] their worm shall live a great while, or that it shall be a great while before their fire is quenched. If ever the time comes that their worm shall die, if ever there shall be a quenching of the fire at all, then it is not true that their worm dieth not and that the fire is not quenched. For if there be a dying of the worm and a quenching of the fire, let it be at what time it will, nearer or further off, it is equally contrary to such a negation — it dieth not, it is not quenched.

Second, there are others who allow that the expression of the threatenings do denote a proper eternity. But then, they say, it does not certainly follow that the punishment will really be eternal, because God may threaten, and yet not fulfill his threatenings. Though they allow that the threatenings are positive and peremptory, without any reserve, yet they say [that] God is not obliged to fulfill absolute positive threatenings, as he is absolute promises. Because in promises a right is conveyed that the creature to whom the promises are made will claim. But there is no danger of the creature's claiming any right by a threatening. Therefore I am now to show that what God has positively declared in this matter, does indeed make it certain that it shall be as he has declared. To this end, I shall mention two things:

1. It is evidently contrary to the divine truth, positively to declare anything to be real, whether past, present, or to come, which God at the same time knows is not so. Absolutely threatening that anything shall be, is the same as absolutely declaring that it is to be. For any to suppose that God absolutely declares that anything will be, which be at the same time knows will not be, is blasphemy, if there be any such thing as blasphemy.

Indeed, it is very true that there is no obligation on God, arising from the claim of the creature, as there is in promises. They seem to reckon the wrong way, who suppose the necessity of the execution of the threatening to arise from a proper obligation on God to the creature to execute consequent on his threatening. For indeed the certainty of the execution arises the other way, viz. on the obligation there was on the omniscient God, in threatening, to conform his threatening to what he knew would be future in execution. Though, strictly speaking, God is not properly obliged to the creature to execute because he has threatened, yet he was obliged not absolutely to threaten, if at the same time he knew that he should not or would not fulfill, because this would not have been consistent with his truth. So that from the truth of God there is an inviolable connection between positive threatenings and execution. They who suppose that God positively declared that he would do contrary to what he knew would come to pass, do therein suppose, that he absolutely threatened contrary to what he knew to be truth. And how anyone can speak contrary to what he knows to be truth, in declaring, promising, or threatening, or any other way, consistently with inviolable truth, is inconceivable.

Threatenings are significations of something, and if they are made consistently with truth, they are true significations, or significations of truth, that which shall be. If absolute threatenings are significations of anything, they are significations of the futurity of the things threatened. But if the futurity of the things threatened be not true and real, then how can the threatening be a true signification? And if God, in them, speaks contrary to what he knows, and contrary to what he intends, how he can speak true is inconceivable.

Absolute threatenings are a kind of predictions. And though God is not properly obliged by any claim of ours to fulfill predictions, unless they are of the nature of promises, yet it certainly would be contrary to truth, to predict that such a thing would come to pass, which he knew at the same time would not come to pass. Threatenings are declarations of something future, and they must be declarations of future truth, if they are true declarations. Its being future alters not the case any more than if it were present. It is equally contrary to truth, to declare contrary to what at the same time is known to be truth, whether it be of things past, present, or to come: for all are alike to God.

Beside, we have often declarations in Scripture of the future eternal punishment of the wicked, in the proper form of predictions, and not in the form of threatenings. So in the text, "These shall go away into everlasting punishment." So in those frequent assertions of eternal punishment in the Revelation, some of which I have already quoted. The Revelation is a prophecy, and is so called in the book itself. So are those declarations of eternal punishment. — The like declarations we have also in many other places of Scripture.

2. The doctrine of those who teach that it is not certain that God will fulfill those absolute threatenings, is blasphemous another way, and that is, as God, according to their supposition, was obliged to make use of a fallacy to govern the world. They own that it is needful that men should apprehend themselves liable to an eternal punishment, that they might thereby be restrained from sin, and that God has threatened such a punishment, for the very end that they might believe themselves exposed to it. But what an unworthy opinion does this convey of God and his government, of his infinite majesty, and wisdom, and all-sufficiency! — Beside, they suppose that though God has made use of such a fallacy, yet it is not such an one but that they have detected him in it. Though God intended men should believe it to be certain that sinners are liable to an eternal punishment, yet they suppose that they have been so cunning as to find out that it is not certain. And so that God had not laid his design so deep, but that such cunning men as they can discern the cheat and defeat the design, because they have found out that there is no necessary connection between the threatening of eternal punishment, and the execution of that threatening.

Considering these things, is it not greatly to be wondered at, that Archbishop Tillotson, who has made so great a figure among the new-fashioned divines, should advance such an opinion as this?

Before I conclude this head, it may be proper for me to answer an objection or two that may arise in the minds of some.

Objection 1. It may be here said [that] we have instances wherein God has not fulfilled his threatenings: as his threatening to Adam, and in him to mankind, that they should surely die, if they should eat the forbidden fruit. I answer, it is not true that God did not fulfill that threatening. He fulfilled it and will fulfill it in every jot and tittle. When God said, "Thou shalt surely die," if we respect spiritual death, it was fulfilled in Adam's person in the day that he ate. For immediately his image, his holy spirit and original righteousness, which was the highest and best life of our first parents, were lost, and they were immediately in a doleful state of spiritual death.

If we respect temporal death, that was also fulfilled. He brought death upon himself and all his posterity, and he virtually suffered that death on that very day on which he ate. His body was brought into a corruptible, mortal, and dying condition, and so it continued till it was dissolved. If we look at all that death which was comprehended in the threatening, it was, properly speaking, fulfilled in Christ. When God said to Adam, "If thou eatest, thou shalt die," he spoke not only to him, and of him personally, but the words respected mankind, Adam and his race, and doubtless were so understood by him. His offspring were to be looked upon as sinning in him, and so should die with him. The words do as justly allow of an imputation of death as of sin. They are as well consistent with dying in a surety, as with sinning in one. Therefore, the threatening is fulfilled in the death of Christ, the surety.

Objection 2. Another objection may arise from God's threatening to Nineveh. He threatened, that in forty days Nineveh should be destroyed, which yet he did not fulfill. — I answer, that threatening could justly be looked upon no otherwise than as conditional. It was of the nature of a warning, and not of an absolute denunciation. Why was Jonah sent to the Ninevites, but to give them warning, that they might have opportunity to repent, reform, and avert the approaching destruction? God had no other design or end in sending the prophet to them, but that they might be warned and tried by him, as God warned the Israelites, Judah and Jerusalem, before their destruction. Therefore the prophets, together with their prophecies of approaching destruction, joined earnest exhortations to repent and reform, that it might be averted.

No more could justly be understood to be certainly threatened, than that Nineveh should be destroyed in forty days, continuing as it was. For it was for their wickedness that that destruction was threatened, and so the Ninevites took it. Therefore, when the cause was removed, the effect ceased. It was contrary to God's known manner, to threaten punishment and destruction for sin in this world absolutely, so that it should come upon the persons threatened unavoidably, let them repent and reform and do what they would; Jer. 18:7, 8, "At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; if that nation against whom I have pronounced turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them." So that all threatenings of this nature had a condition implied in them, according to the known and declared manner of God's dealing. And the Ninevites did not take it as an absolute sentence of denunciation: if they had, they would have despaired of any benefit by fasting and reformation.

But the threatenings of eternal wrath are positive and absolute. There is nothing in the Word of God from which we can gather any condition. The only opportunity of escaping is in this world. This is the only state of trial, wherein we have any offers of mercy, or place for repentance.

IV. I shall mention several good and important ends, which will be obtained by the eternal punishment of the wicked.

First, hereby God vindicates his injured majesty. Wherein sinners cast contempt upon it, and trample it in the dust, God vindicates and honors it and makes it appear, as it is indeed infinite, by showing that it is infinitely dreadful to condemn or offend it.

Second, God glorifies his justice. — The glory of God is the greatest good. It is that which is the chief end of the creation. It is of greater importance than anything else. But this one way wherein God will glorify himself, as in the eternal destruction of ungodly men, he will glorify his justice. Therein he will appear as a just governor of the world. The vindictive justice of God will appear strict, exact, awful, and terrible, and therefore glorious.

Third, God hereby indirectly glorifies his grace on the vessels of mercy. — The saints in heaven will behold the torments of the damned: "the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever." Isa. 66:24, "And they shall go forth and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched, and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh." And in Rev. 14:10 it is said, that they shall be tormented in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb. So they will be tormented in the presence also of the glorified saints.

Hereby the saints will be made the more sensible how great their salvation is. When they shall see how great the misery is from which God has saved them, and how great a difference he has made between their state and the state of others, who were by nature (and perhaps for a time by practice) no more sinful and ill-deserving than any, it will give them a greater sense of the

wonderfulness of God's grace to them. Every time they look upon the damned, it will excite in them a lively and admiring sense of the grace of God, in making them so to differ. This the apostle informs us is one end of the damnation of ungodly men; Rom. 9:22-23, "What if God willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: and that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory?" The view of the misery of the damned will double the ardor of the love and gratitude of the saints in heaven.

Fourth, the sight of hell torments will exalt the happiness of the saints forever. It will not only make them more sensible of the greatness and freeness of the grace of God in their happiness, but it will really make their happiness the greater, as it will make them more sensible of their own happiness. It will give them a more lively relish of it: it will make them prize it more. When they see others, who were of the same nature and born under the same circumstances, plunged in such misery, and they so distinguished, O it will make them sensible how happy they are. A sense of the opposite misery, in all cases, greatly increases the relish of any joy or pleasure.

The sight of the wonderful power, the great and dreadful majesty, and awful justice and holiness of God, manifested in the eternal punishment of ungodly men, will make them prize his favor and love vastly the more. And they will be so much the more happy in the enjoyment of it.

APPLICATION

I. From what has been said, we may learn the folly and madness of the greater part of mankind, in that for the sake of present momentary gratification, they run the venture of enduring all these eternal torments. They prefer a small pleasure, or a little wealth, or a little earthly honor and greatness, which can last but for a moment, to an escape from this punishment. If it be true that the torments of hell are eternal, what will it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul, or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? What is there in this world, which is not a trifle and lighter than vanity, in comparison with these eternal things?

How mad are men, who so often hear of these things and pretend to believe them; who can live but a little while (a few years); who do not even expect to live here longer than others of their species ordinarily do; and who yet are careless about what becomes of themselves in another world, where there is no change and no end! How mad are they, when they hear that if they go on in sin, they shall be eternally miserable — that they are not moved by it, but hear it with as much carelessness and coldness as if they were no way concerned in the matter — when they know not but that it may be their case, that they may be suffering these torments before a week is at an end!

How can men be so careless of such a matter as their own eternal and desperate destruction and torment! What a strange stupor and senselessness possesses the hearts of men! How common a thing is it to see men, who are told from Sabbath to Sabbath of eternal misery, and who are as mortal as other men, so careless about it that they seem not to be at all restrained by it from whatever their souls lust after! It is not half so much their care to escape eternal misery, as it is to get money and land, and to be considerable in the world, and to gratify their sense. Their thoughts are much more exercised about these things, and much more of their care and concern is about them. Eternal misery, though they lie every day exposed to it, is a thing neglected, it is but now and then thought of, and then with a great deal of stupidity, and not with concern enough to stir them up to do anything considerable in order to escape it. They are not sensible that it is worth their while to take any considerable pains in order to it. And if they do take pains for a little while, they soon leave off, and something else takes up their thoughts and concern.

Thus you see it among young and old. Multitudes of youth lead a careless life, taking little care about their salvation. So you may see it among persons of middle age, and with many advanced in years, and when they certainly draw near to the grave. — Yet these same persons will seem to acknowledge that the greater part of men go to hell and suffer eternal misery, and this through carelessness about it. However, they will do the same. How strange is it that men can enjoy themselves and be at rest, when they are thus hanging over eternal burnings: at the same time, having no lease of their lives and not knowing how soon the thread by which they hang will break. Nor indeed do they pretend to know. And if it breaks, they are gone: they are lost forever, and there is no remedy! Yet they trouble not themselves much about it, nor will they hearken to those who cry to them, and entreat them to take care for themselves, and labor to get out of that dangerous condition. They are not willing to take so much pains. They choose not to be diverted from amusing themselves with toys and vanities. Thus, well might the wise man say, Ecc. 9:3, "The heart of the sons of men is full of evil. Madness is in their heart while they live; and after that they go to the dead." — How much wiser are those few, who make it their main business to lay a foundation for eternity, to secure their salvation!

II. I shall improve this subject in a use of exhortation to sinners, to take care to escape these eternal torments. If they be eternal, one would think that would be enough to awaken your concern, and excite your diligence. If the punishment be eternal, it is infinite,

as we said before. And therefore no other evil, no death, no temporary torment that ever you heard of, or that you can imagine, is anything in comparison with it, but is as much less and less considerable, not only as a grain of sand is less than the whole universe, but as it is less than the boundless space which encompasses the universe. — Therefore here,

First, be entreated to consider attentively how great and awful a thing eternity is. Although you cannot comprehend it the more by considering, yet you may be made more sensible that it is not a thing to be disregarded. — Do but consider what it is to suffer extreme torment forever and ever: to suffer it day and night from one year to another, from one age to another, and from one thousand ages to another (and so adding age to age, and thousands to thousands), in pain, in wailing and lamenting, groaning and shrieking, and gnashing your teeth — with your souls full of dreadful grief and amazement, [and] with your bodies and every member full of racking torture; without any possibility of getting ease; without any possibility of moving God to pity by your cries; without any possibility of hiding yourselves from him; without any possibility of diverting your thoughts from your pain; without any possibility of obtaining any manner of mitigation, or help, or change for the better.

Second, do but consider how dreadful despair will be in such torment. How dismal will it be, when you are under these racking torments, to know assuredly that you never, never shall be delivered from them. To have no hope: when you shall wish that you might be turned into nothing, but shall have no hope of it; when you shall wish that you might be turned into a toad or a serpent, but shall have no hope of it; when you would rejoice if you might but have any relief; after you shall have endured these torments millions of ages, but shall have no hope of it. After you shall have worn out the age of the sun, moon, and stars, in your dolorous groans and lamentations, without rest day and night, or one minute's ease, yet you shall have no hope of ever being delivered. After you shall have worn a thousand more such ages, you shall have no hope, but shall know that you are not one whit nearer to the end of your torments. But that still there are the same groans, the same shrieks, the same doleful cries, incessantly to be made by you, and that the smoke of your torment shall still ascend up forever and ever. Your souls, which shall have been agitated with the wrath of God all this while, will still exist to bear more wrath. Your bodies, which shall have been burning all this while in these glowing flames, shall not have been consumed, but will remain to roast through eternity, which will not have been at all shortened by what shall have been past.

You may by considering make yourselves more sensible than you ordinarily are. But it is a little you can conceive of what it is to have no hope in such torments. How sinking would it be to you, to endure such pain as you have felt in this world, without any hopes, and to know that you never should be delivered from it, nor have one minute's rest! You can now scarcely conceive how doleful that would be. How much more to endure the vast weight of the wrath of God without hope! The more the damned in hell think of the eternity of their torments, the more amazing will it appear to them. And alas, they will not be able to keep it out of their minds! Their tortures will not divert them from it, but will fix their attention to it. O how dreadful will eternity appear to them after they shall have been thinking on it for ages together, and shall have so long an experience of their torments! The damned in hell will have two infinites perpetually to amaze them, and swallow them up: one is an infinite God, whose wrath they will bear, and in whom they will behold their perfect and irreconcilable enemy. The other is the infinite duration of their torment.

If it were possible for the damned in hell to have a comprehensive knowledge of eternity, their sorrow and grief would be infinite in degree. The comprehensive view of so much sorrow, which they must endure, would cause infinite grief for the present. Though they will not have a comprehensive knowledge of it, yet they will doubtless have a vastly more lively and strong apprehension of it than we can have in this world. Their torments will give them an impression of it. — A man in his present state, without any enlargement of his capacity, would have a vastly more lively impression of eternity than he has, if he were only under some pretty sharp pain in some member of his body, and were at the same time assured that he must endure that pain forever. His pain would give him a greater sense of eternity than other men have. How much more will those excruciating torments, which the damned will suffer, have this effect!

Besides, their capacity will probably be enlarged, their understandings will be quicker and stronger in a future state, and God can give them as great a sense and as strong an impression of eternity, as he pleases, to increase their grief and torment. — O be entreated, ye that are in a Christless state and are going on in a way to hell, that are daily exposed to damnation, to consider these things. If you do not, it will surely be but a little while before you will experience them, and then you will know how dreadful it is to despair in hell. And it may be before this year, or this month, or this week, is at an end: before another Sabbath, or ever you shall have opportunity to hear another sermon.

Third, that you may effectually escape these dreadful and awful torments. Be entreated to flee and embrace him who came into the world for the very end of saving sinners from these torments, who has paid the whole debt due to the divine law, and exhausted eternal in temporal sufferings. What great encouragement is it to those of you who are sensible that you are exposed to eternal punishment, that there is a Savior provided, who is able and who freely offers to save you from that punishment, and that in a way which is perfectly consistent with the glory of God: yea, which is more to the glory of God than it would be if you should suffer the

eternal punishment of hell. For if you should suffer that punishment you would never pay the whole of the debt. Those who are sent to hell never will have paid the whole of the debt which they owe to God, nor indeed a part which bears any proportion to the whole. They never will have paid a part which bears so great a proportion to the whole, as one mite to ten thousand talents. Justice therefore never can be actually satisfied in your damnation. But it is actually satisfied in Christ. Therefore he is accepted of the Father, and therefore all who believe are accepted and justified in him. Therefore believe in him, come to him, commit your souls to him to be saved by him. In him you shall be safe from the eternal torments of hell. Nor is that all: but through him you shall inherit inconceivable blessedness and glory, which will be of equal duration with the torments of hell. For, as at the last day the wicked shall go away into everlasting punishment, so shall the righteous, or those who trust in Christ, go into life eternal

THE DARKNESS OF GOLGOTHA

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1863-1945

From the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour —Matthew 27:45.

THERE'S ALWAYS THE danger that we might read this verse too quickly. We treat it too often as though it were merely the record of something incidental.

As a matter of fact, it is the central verse in the story of the cross. Indeed, the cross itself is not mentioned in the verse—no word is spoken of it or of the Christ. They are alike hidden, and yet the period was one of three hours' duration, the very central hours of the experience of the Savior of men. Christ and the cross are alike hidden within that verse, and that fact is most suggestive because in those hours transactions were accomplished that through all eternity defy the apprehension and explanation of finite minds.

It is not to be passed over lightly that all the Synoptists record the fact of that darkness. Three hours of darkness and of silence! All the ribald clamor was over, the material opposition utterly exhausted, the turmoil ended. Man had done his last and his worst. Beyond that period of the three hours' silence, even human actions were expressive of pity. Nothing has impressed my own heart, or amazed me more in reading this story anew, and attempting to meditate upon it in view of this service, than what I shall venture to describe as the wonderful psychological conditions of those hours beyond the hours of silence.

It is as though that appalling silence and that overwhelming darkness had changed the entire attitude of man to the Savior. The very vinegar they offered Him to drink was offered Him in pity. What they said about Elijah was expressive of their desire to sympathize. The centurion's testimony was that of a man whose heart was strangely moved toward the August and dignified Savior. When presently they found Him dead, and therefore did not break His bones, the spear thrust was one of kindness, lest perchance He might still suffer, in spite of the fact that He appeared to be dead. Multitudes dispersed from the scene at Golgotha smiting their breasts, overwhelmed with a sense of awe, and strangely moved by some new pity. And there is no picture in all the New Testament more full of pathos and of power than that of the women standing silent and amazed through all those hours of His suffering, and still standing there beyond them.

Then also all of the cries that passed the lips of Jesus beyond the darkness were significant. "My God! My God, why didst Thou forsake Me!"—Matthew 27:46—for that was the tense; a slight change from the tense of the actual Psalm, a question asked by One who was emerging from the experience to which He referred. And then as John is most careful to record for us, "Knowing that all things were now finished, He said, I thirst"—John 19:28. Beyond that came the words of the great proclamation, "It is finished"—John 19:30. And as last the words of the final committal, full of dignity, were spoken: "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit"—Luke 23:46. Everything was changed beyond the hours of silence and of darkness.

Much has been written about these hours of darkness, much which is not warranted by any careful spiritual attention to the story itself. You will call to mind how, at great length many years ago, it was argued that the darkness was that of the sun's eclipse. But that is entirely impossible, for Passover was always held at full moon, when there could be no eclipse of the sun. The darkness has been described as nature's sympathy with the suffering of the Lord, but that is a pagan conception of nature, a conception of nature as having some consciousness apart from God and out of harmony with His work. It has been said that the darkness was brought about by an act of God, and was expressive of His sympathy with His Son. I admit that that is an appealing idea, and has some element of truth in it, in that we may discover the overruling of His government; but to declare that that darkness was caused by God because of His sympathy with His Son is to deny the cry of Jesus which immediately followed the darkness and referred to it. The darkness was to Him a period when He experienced whatever He may have meant by the words, "Thou didst forsake Me"—Matthew 27:46. If I have succeeded in these words spoken in reverent spirit, in suggesting to you the difficulty of those central three hours, then our hearts are prepared for going forward.

I submit thoughtfully that no interpretation of that darkness is to be trusted save that of the Lord who experienced it. Has He flung any light on the darkness which will enable us to apprehend the meaning of the darkness? Did any word escape His lips that will help us to explain those silent hours? I think the answer is to be found in these narratives, and to that teaching of the Lord we appeal in order that we may consider the meaning of the darkness, and the passing of the darkness, and thereafter attempt reverently to look back at the transaction in the darkness.

The Meaning of the Darkness

What was this darkness? How was it caused? What did it really mean? That this question is of importance is proved by that to which I have already drawn your attention, the fact that Matthew, Mark, and Luke alike carefully record that it took place at this very time. The reference is made by each of them in detail. It was something to be noted, something to be remembered, something that made its impression alike on the evangelist who saw the King, the evangelist who saw the Servant, and the evangelist who saw the Perfect Man. We cannot pass it over as though it were merely incidental, and consequently we shall attempt to discover its meaning in the light of what our Lord Himself said before He passed into the darkness.

Luke records for us a fact not mentioned by either of the other evangelists, that in Gethsemane Jesus said to the man who came to arrest Him, "This is your hour, and the power of darkness"—Luke 22:53. That was a most suggestive word, spoken as I have reminded you, in Gethsemane before He passed from the garden to and through those trial scenes with which you are familiar. After the High Priest cast the incense on the fire and just as He was leaving the garden, Jesus spoke to the men about Him, "This is your hour, and the power of darkness." This is your hour! I go back to this phrase again, not to tarry at length with it, but to ask you most carefully to ponder it.

At the beginning of our Lord's public ministry, He referred to an hour which was not yet, to an hour which was postponed. During the course of His ministry, you will find that the evangelists more than once allude to the same hour, and to that hour, whatever it might have been, as to a postponed hour. Men attempted to arrest Him, but they could not because His hour was not yet come. Men desired to encompass His death, and wrought with all their strength, all their wit so to do; but they were unable, because His hour had not yet come. And not always by the use of that particular phrase, but over and over again our Lord was looking forward toward some consummating, culminating hour which no man could hurry, and which no man could postpone, but which He did perpetually postpone until in the economy of God its set time should have come.

"We must work the works of Him that sent Me while it is day. The night cometh when no man can work"—John 9:4, was one of the profoundest sayings of Jesus in illuminating His own immediate ministry. It had larger values, I will readily admit, but often we miss the profoundest value because we fail to observe the first intention. There was an immediate application of that word, which the Revised Version helps us to appreciate by a change of number in the personal pronoun. "We"—He was speaking of Himself and His disciples—"We must work the works of Him that sent Me while it is day; the night cometh," a time of darkness and desolation, "when no man can work," when you must stand aside from cooperation and fellowship with Me. That was the consummating hour to which He looked, the night of darkness that at last would come, in which no man could work, but God alone must work.

Now, in light of that all too rapid examination of a very definite movement manifest in the ministry of our Lord, we come to Gethsemane. The soldiers were about to lay hands on Him and lead Him away to Caiaphas and to Pilate and to Herod, and then to Pilate and to death. Before they did, He said, "This is your hour, and the power of darkness." The night, the hour postponed had arrived, and this was its character. From the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land. We have no picture of the Son of God during those hours, no record of a word passing His lips. It was the period of the infinite silence, the period of the overwhelming darkness.

What, then, is this that Jesus said concerning the darkness? It was the hour of evil, it was the hour under the dominion of the powers of darkness. In those three hours we see the Savior in the midst of all that which resulted from the action of evil. Not without remarkable suggestiveness did the great apostle Paul speak in a letter written long afterwards of Satan as "prince of the power of the air"—Ephesians 2:2; and not without suggestiveness did he speak of him as presiding over the age as ruler of the darkness. Not without significance did John, the beloved apostle, when opening his gospel and writing concerning Jesus say that in Him was life, and the life was the light of men; that the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness apprehended it not, comprehended it not.

Neither the word apprehended nor the word comprehended means "understood" in this connection. The declaration is not that the darkness did not understand the light, but that the darkness did not extinguish the light. The apostle's declaration at the beginning of the gospel is that the light was always shining, and however deep and dense the darkness, it never succeeded in entirely extinguishing the light. The darkness apprehended it not—did not put it out. In that very negative declaration of the apostle you are brought face to face with the positive purpose of evil, with the purpose of Satan. What was Satan's supreme desire? To extinguish the Light. "There," said John of Jesus, "was the true Light . . . which lighteth every man, coming into the world"—John 1:9. Satan's purpose was to extinguish that Light.

From the very beginning of the shining of that Light, focused in history by the Incarnation, the one supreme purpose of the enemy was to apprehend it, to comprehend it, to extinguish it, to put it out. And in these three hours of darkness we are brought face to face with the time when all the force of evil was brought to bear on the soul of the Son of God, and all the unutterable intent and purpose of evil wrapped Him about in a darkness that is beyond our comprehension.

In that moment there was material darkness. It was the material symbol of the empire of sin. If the questioning of the heart shall become so material as to inquire—and I grant you it almost necessarily must—whether Satan did in some way actually produce the material darkness, I shall have to reply that I cannot tell, but I believe he did. I believe that by some action of those spiritual antagonisms, the world of principalities and powers, of which the early Christians were far more conscious than we are, and therefore more ready to fight with, under the captaincy and leadership of the prince of the power of the air, there was wrought out in material experience a symbol of the spiritual intention of hell.

I suggest for some quiet hour the study and examination of biblical symbolisms, and especially the use of the figure of darkness in biblical literature. For the purpose of illustration I confine myself entirely to the gospel of Matthew. Listen to these phrases, and immediately you will see how darkness is indeed a symbol of spiritual evil. "The people which sat in darkness"—4:16. "If thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is the darkness!"—6:23. "The sons of the kingdom shall be cast forth into the outer darkness"—8:12. "Cast ye out the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness"—25:30.

Wherever the word occurs in this gospel of Matthew, indeed wherever it occurs in the New Testament, or its equivalent in the Old, it is the symbol of spiritual evil in its issue and in its ultimate. Darkness is the twin sister of death. Death and darkness express the ultimate in evil. And in this hour, when the Lord Himself was passing to death, there was darkness. That material darkness which impressed the evangelists and the multitudes, and changed their attitude of mind toward Him, was but the outward and visible sign of the more mysterious and unfathomable spiritual darkness into the midst of which He had passed. Through the channel of His earthly life, all spiritual things were having material manifestation. The Incarnation itself was but the working out into human observation of the truth concerning God. And now, in the hour of the dying of the Son of God, in that infinite, awful mystery, spiritual evil had its material manifestation in the darkness that settled over all the land. The darkness was of Satan; it was coincident with the ultimate in the suffering of the Son of God.

The Passing of the Darkness

And now, before we ask the most difficult of all questions concerning the transaction of the darkness, in preparation for that inquiry, let us look once more at that at which we have already glanced, the passing of the darkness. In order that we may understand, let us listen again to the four words that passed the lips of the Lord beyond the ninth hour when the darkness was passing away and the light of material day was again breaking through on the green hill, on the cross, and on all those Judaeian lands. Notice reverently, then, the four cries that escaped His lips, and divide them, as they most certainly are divided, into two groups, the first two and the second two.

The first cry was the expression of a backward thought. "My God, My God, why didst Thou forsake Me?" It was the call of Jesus as He emerged from the darkness, and from all that happened therein, of which no single word is actually written. It was in itself a revelation, like a flash of light piercing the darkness. "My God, My God, why didst Thou forsake Me?"

In the next word we have the expression of His immediate experience, of that of which in His humanity He became then supremely conscious, "I thirst."

Almost immediately following it we have another expression of His immediate experience, that of which in the essential mystery of His Being He was conscious, "It is finished."

The final word described a forward glance. As the first word beyond the darkness expressed the backward thought, "My God, My God, why didst Thou forsake Me?" the last word expressed a forward confidence, "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit."

We have listened to these words simply in order that we may try to be near Him as the darkness passed, and with all reverence, by listening to Him, appreciate something of the thinking of His own mind. A backward thought, "My God, My God, why didst Thou forsake Me?" An immediate experience within human limitations, "I thirst." Spiritual accomplishment, "It is finished." Then the future, the glorious future, "Father into Thy hands I commend My Spirit." Then He died, not of a broken heart, not of human brutality, not of murder by human hands; but of His own volition He yielded up the Ghost, and His Spirit, commended to God, passed to God. The death that saves was not that physical dissolution, but the infinite spiritual mystery of the three hours and the darkness, which being passed, He Himself did say, "It is finished."

In all that remained of the story beyond the hours of darkness, we have no record of any word uttered by the foes of Jesus. They were not present, or they seem not to have been, during that time. Indeed, it is something to be meditated with thankfulness of heart

that no rude hand ever touched the body of the dead Christ. After the darkness, beyond the death and the dismissal of the spirit, they were loving disciple hands that took Him from the cross, wrapped Him round, and buried Him, giving Him the temporary resting place of a garden tomb. In death He was wonderfully preserved from all dishonor. The foes of Jesus seem to have withdrawn. Satan seems to have been absent.

Where was Satan? There is no answer in the records of the evangelists, and so I pass on to apostolic writings where I find this written concerning Christ: "Having put off from Himself the principalities and the powers, He made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it"—Colossians 2:15. In the deep darkness, and in the midst of the silence, He triumphed over the forces of evil, the principalities and powers, and made a show of them openly by the cross, putting off from Himself all that assaulted Him in, and by, and through the darkness.

As the darkness passed, we again see the attitude of the people. They were arrested, they were touched with pity; there came illumination to them concerning the dying and the dead One, and a great fear possessed them.

The Transaction Within the Darkness

So, finally, we come to the most impossible subject of all, that of the transaction within the darkness. We admit that this can have no final exposition. We admit immediately that any even partial thing that may be said is incomplete. Every aspect of the infinite whole is larger than we can know. Every theory is of value, but all theories fail. This is not the place, nor would it be within the highest purpose of our worship, to attempt to prove that statement. But at least I may be permitted to say that, so far as I know, for 25 years I have been reading—with ever growing gratitude—great books on the Cross, and from each one I have gained something and every one I have at last laid down, saying as I did so, Yes, yes! All that, but more; something not reached, something not spoken!

God cannot finally be expressed in finite terms. "The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes"—Matthew 21:42. It cannot be explained; it is the perpetual marvel. God must pity any man who thinks he understands this cross completely. God have mercy on any child of God if the day comes in which he has not to sing, "Love so amazing, so divine." When the amazement dies out, it is not that the cross has been analyzed, but that the gazer upon it has become blind.

Yet we may gain some light from the words of the Lord as He emerged from the darkness, and the darkness itself was suggestive. We remember the word we have in Matthew 4:16: "The people which sat in darkness." Into that darkness the Son of God experimentally passed. "If thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!"—6:23. That darkness had passed into His heart, when He said, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"—27:46. "The sons of the kingdom shall be cast forth into outer darkness"—8:12. The Son of God passed into that outer darkness.

That does not answer the inquiry as to what happened. I have no answer for that. Only this I know, that in that hour of darkness He passed into the place of the ultimate wrestling of evil in actual experience. There is light as I hear the final word, "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit"—Luke 23:46, for the word is a word which declares that whatever the transaction was, it was accomplished; that whatever the dying indicated, it was done.

Let us go a little further back, before the darkness, and listen to the chief priests who joined in the hellish clamor that beat on the suffering soul of the dying Savior. Among other things, they said, "He saved others; Himself He cannot save"—Matthew 27:42. That brings me nearer than anything else. Those were wonderful hours of the transmutation of basest things to high and noble things. That was the last taunt of His enemies; it has become the most illuminative word about the cross.

"He saved others; Himself He cannot." So they laughed at Him. Hear it again as a truth sublime and awful: because He saved others, He cannot save Himself. In order to save others He will not save Himself. Said the rabble, and said the rabbis joining in the unholy chorus, "Let Him come down from the cross"—27:42. He did not come down from the cross, He went up from the cross. The great Priest who already had burned the incense in the holiest place bore the symbolic mystery of His own shed blood into the holy place, but before He could do so, He passed into the darkness and abode in the silence three hours—a human measurement in order that we may somehow understand—and in those three hours He could not save Himself. That was because His heart was set upon saving others.

Why could He not save Himself? My question descends to the level of common, everyday human experience and capacity at its highest and its best. He might have saved Himself. He might never have gone to Gethsemane's garden. He might even in Gethsemane's garden have asked for twelve legions of angels, as He Himself did say. He might with one glance of His shining glory have swept the rabble from about the cross and descended to the deliverance of Himself. If He had spoken in terms of power He might have saved Himself. Why, then, was it that He could not save Himself? Because He is God, and because God is love, and love is never satisfied with the destruction of a sinner, but with the saving of a sinner. Love never finds its rest with holiness and

righteousness vindicated by the annihilation of the things that oppose. Love will find its rest only when those who have been swept from righteousness and holiness are restored thereto and are remade in the image of the Father, God. That is why.

Yes, but once more. If that be true, then on the ground of the mystery of the compulsion of the ineffable love of God in Christ, could love find no other way? Love could find no other way because sin knows no ending save by that way. The conscience of men demands that, the experience of men demands that. I base the twofold affirmation on the testimonies of the centuries and the millenniums. I base the affirmation on what I know within my own soul of sin.

Someone may say to me, "Cannot God forgive out of pure love?" I shall answer, "If He can, I cannot." If He could forgive me for the wrongs of which I am conscious, and that have left behind them their stain and pollution—if He could forgive me by simply saying, Never mind them, then I cannot so forgive myself. My conscience cries for a cleansing that is more than a sentiment of pity. Somehow, somewhere, in order that I may have forgiveness, there must be tragedy, something mightier than the devilish sin.

I do not know what happened in the darkness, but this I know, that as I have come to the cross and received the suggestions of its material unveiling, I have found my heart, my spirit, my life brought into a realm of healing spices, to the consciousness of the forgiveness of sins. And there is no other way and there is no other gospel of forgiveness.

In the darkness He saved not Himself, but He saved me. He declined to move toward His own deliverance in order that He might loose me from my sin. Out of the darkness has come a light. The word spoken to Cyrus long ago has been fulfilled in the spiritual glory to the Son of God, "I will give thee the treasures of darkness"—Isaiah 45:3. And because fulfilled to the Son of God by the Father who loved Him, and wrought with Him through the mystery of His forsaking, the word has been fulfilled also to the sons of God who are born not of blood, nor of man, nor of the will of the flesh, but of God. He gives us the treasures of darkness.

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land, and from the darkness have come the treasures of pardon, and peace, of power, and of purity.