

The Punishment of the Wicked

Everlasting bliss for the righteous, and eternal punishment for the ungodly, are plainly taught in the Scriptures. That God should reward His people with eternal life, and mete out just retribution to the wicked for their evil deeds, appears to most men as reasonable and equitable, and in harmony with both the love and the justice of God.

In certain scriptures we are given glimpses of the glory land, and are able, at least to some extent, to form an idea of what heaven will be like. However, no matter how glorious the picture may appear to be, it will still be true that "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Cor. 2:9).

The fate of the unrighteous is likewise emphasized in many places in Holy Writ. There will surely be punishment, according to the Word, and there will also be degrees of punishment. And this punishment, moreover, will not be remedial, but punitive and final.

I. Punishment Yet Future, Not Now Going On

It is commonly believed that at death the righteous go immediately to heaven, and the wicked forthwith to hell, where they are punished. There are persons, how ever, who believe that the wicked are punished in this life for their sins. They argue that when a man is cast into prison, or perhaps is executed on the gallows, he is then suffering punishment for his iniquities. In a way this is true, but not strictly so. That he thus suffers, there can be no doubt, but such suffering is not primarily the penalty for his sins. He suffers in this life the penalty for his crimes. The state punishes for infraction of human laws, but its punishments are meted out for crimes, not sins. Sin is infringement of the divine law, the Decalogue, the commandments of God. And God will be the judge, and will mete out punishment according to His justice.

It is, of course, true that in this life men may lose their health because of wrong habits of living. Men may drink to excess and not only suffer all kinds of sickness but also incur premature death. But these consequences do not constitute actual punishment for sin. They are the physical results of wrongdoing. Punishment for sin, as such, will finally be meted out when the wicked stand before the bar of God and receive the just rewards of their deeds.

Neither evil angels nor wicked men are now receiving final punishment for their transgressions. Such punishments are still future. In the days when Jesus was on earth, the devils asked Him, "Art thou come hither to torment us before the time?" (Matt. 8:29). Evil angels are "reserved unto judgment" (2 Peter 2:4), or "unto the judgment of the great day" (Jude 6). Concerning the wicked we read that God reserves "the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished" (2 Peter 2:9)

II. What Constitutes the Punishment of the Wicked?

The only safe and reliable source of information on this question is, of course, the Word of God. No dictums from tradition, from the writings of heathen authors, or even from the apocryphal writings of either the Hebrews or the early Christians, whether expressed in prose or in verse, should influence us in this matter. Unless the contentions expressed are based upon the authoritative Word of God they should have no weight with us. We

therefore note some of the expressions used by the Lord in this connection. We read that as the final penalty for their transgressions and their rejection of the Son of God—

1. **The Wicked Will Die**.—On more than one occasion we are told that "the soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Eze. 18:4). But some may say, "That is in the Old Testament." True; but is not the Old Testament as much the Word of God as is the New? The fact is that the same truth is taught in the New Testament, for we read, "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).

And in this verse a unique contrast is drawn. Life is promised to the righteous; death to the unrighteous.

Over and over again death is emphasized as the punishment of the wicked. Sinners are declared "worthy of death" (Rom. 1:32); the end of sin is death (Rom. 6:21); and "sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death" (James 1:15). In ancient days God in His love and mercy pleaded with Israel through His servants the prophets. Time after time His appeal was, "Why will ye die, O house of Israel? . . . I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth" (Eze. 18:31, 32).

2. **The Wicked Will Be Cut Off**.—This thought is emphasized repeatedly, especially in the Old Testament. The psalmist, looking forward to the time when sin would be abolished, declares, "Evildoers shall be cut off" (Ps. 37:9); and again, "The wicked are cut off" (verse 34). The words "cut off" are, in the main, rendered from the Hebrew word karath. This is a strong word, and is several times translated "destroy," as in Ezekiel 28:16.

3. **The Wicked Will Perish**.—This expression is repeatedly used in relation to the destruction of the wicked hosts. The word "perish" is translated from the Hebrew abad, and means "to be cut off" or "to be cut down." It will be observed in the following texts: "The wicked shall perish" (Ps. 37:20); "The wicked perish at the presence of God" (Ps. 68:2). Another significant expression occurs in Psalm 37:10, where we read, "The wicked shall not be." This is paralleled in the New Testament by our Lord's statement that "whosoever believeth in him should not perish" (John 3:16).

4. **The Wicked Will Be Burned Up**.—This also is a strong expression, and is used on many occasions. Malachi speaks of the day when the wicked shall be burned up (Mal. 4:1). Matthew writes of their being bound "in bundles to burn them" (Matt. 13:30), and mentions also that "the tares are gathered and burned" (verse 40). Peter declares that "the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up" (2 Peter 3:10). We read of the final destination of the unrighteous as being in "the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:15), and this the Revelator calls "the second death" (Rev. 21: 8).

5. **The Wicked Shall Be Destroyed**.—This thought occurs in a number of instances. "All the wicked will be destroyed" (Ps. 145:20). Evil angels once declared, in the presence of Jesus, "Art thou come to destroy us?" (Mark 1:24). Again, the wicked will be "punished with everlasting destruction" (2 Thess. 1: 9); and even the devil himself, the one who introduced iniquity into our fair world, will be destroyed (Heb. 2:14).

Some of the strongest words, it seems, were used by the sacred writers to emphasize the fate of the wicked. They will not only burn, Greek, kaio (Rev. 19:20; 21:8), but they shall be burned up, Greek, katakaio (2 Peter 3:10; Matt. 3:12). They shall not only be destroyed, apollumi (Matt. 21:41; Mark 1:24), but be "utterly destroyed," exolothreuo (Acts 3:23). They

shall not only be "consumed," tamam (Ps. 104: 35) and "consume away," kalah (Ps. 37:20), but be "utterly consumed," apollumi (Ps. 73:19; LXX 72:19).

III. Figures and Similes Illustrate Fate of Wicked

Not only in language clear and plain does the Lord reveal to man the fate of the ungodly, but He has sought to bring this truth home to us in familiar illustrations, figures of speech, and various similes. Observe:

1. **The Wicked Are Likened to Combustible Materials.**—The psalmist likens the wicked to something he saw repeatedly in the Temple of ancient days—"The enemies of the Lord shall be as the fat of lambs" (Ps. 37:20). Furthermore, the ungodly are likened to "the chaff which the wind driveth away" (Ps. 1:4). Isaiah says that "the whirlwind shall take them away as stubble" (Isa. 40:24). And Malachi also declared that in that day the wicked "shall be stubble" (Mal. 4:1).

2. **Overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah Is a Type of Destruction of Wicked.**—The fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, in days of old, is graphically described in the Biblical record. We read that they were overthrown (Deut. 29:23; Isa. 13:19), and that the cities were destroyed (Gen. 19:29). The destruction was complete, for we read that the fire "destroyed them all" (Luke 17:29).

The punishment meted out to Sodom and Gomorrah was not of long duration, for we read that they were "overthrown as in a moment" (Lam. 4:6). Furthermore, another Biblical writer tells us how utterly they were overthrown—they were turned "into ashes" (2 Peter 2:6). And Peter further declares that this experience was "an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly." Jude added a unique expression, which indicates that the destruction was not only complete but

it was "the vengeance of eternal fire" (Jude 7). This could not mean fire that would be eternally burning, for the cities are not burning today. Rather, this fire would be eternal in its results.

IV. The Terms "Everlasting" and "Eternal"

These words are not used in the Old Testament in relation to the fate of the wicked; they are found, however, in the New Testament in the following texts: "Depart . . . ye cursed, into everlasting fire" (Matt. 25:41); "and these shall go away into everlasting punishment" (Matt. 25:46); "punished with everlasting destruction" (2 Thess. 1:9); "in danger of eternal damnation" (Mark 3:29); "suffering the vengeance of eternal fire" (Jude 7). In each instance, whether translated "everlasting" or "eternal," the words are from the Greek *aionios*. For instance, in Matthew 25:46, the "everlasting" (*aionios*) punishment is contrasted with "eternal" (*aionios*) life in the same verse.

In view of this, it might be observed that if the "eternal life" referred to is forever and ever, will not the "everlasting punishment" be for the same duration, inasmuch as precisely the same Greek word is used in both instances? Decidedly so! The eternal life will continue throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity; and the punishment will also be eternal—not eternal duration of conscious suffering, however, but punishment that is complete and final. The end of those who thus suffer is the second death. This death will be eternal, from which there will not, and cannot, be any resurrection.

That this is so, can be seen in the use of the word "eternal" in other relationships. We read of eternal redemption (Heb. 9:12) and of eternal judgment (Heb. 6:2). Surely this does not mean redemption going on through all eternity, or an unending work of judgment. No! The work of redemption is complete and eternal in its results. The same will be true of the judgment. The same principle applies concerning "eternal damnation" (Mark 3:29), "eternal fire" (Jude 7), "eternal punishment" (Matt. 25:46).

Let us repeat: In the expression "eternal punishment," just as in "eternal redemption" and "eternal judgment," the Bible is referring to all eternity—not as of process, but as of result. It is not an endless process of punishment, but an effectual punishment, which will be final and forever (aionios).*

V. The Expressions "Forever" and "Forever and Ever"

These expressions are found many times in Holy Scripture. In the Old Testament they are in the main from the Hebrew *olam*, which is translated quite often by the word "everlasting." It does have several other renderings, however, such as "ancient time," "old time," "beginning of the world," et cetera.

Another expression in the Hebrew is *netsach* ("forever"), and *lenetsach netsachim* ("forever and ever"). *Netsach* is variously rendered as "always," "constantly," "ever," "evermore," and "perpetually."

***"Scholars, discussing the Greek words *aion* or *aionios*, tell us:**

"The word *aion* can be used of a man's lifetime, as when Paul contemplates eating 'no flesh for evermore' (1 Cor. 8:13)."—Alan Richardson, *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, 1950, art. "Time," p. 266. (The K.J.V. reads, while the world standeth.)

"Describes duration . . . not endless."—W. E. Vine, *Dictionary of New Testament Words*, on "Eternal."

In the New Testament the words "for ever," et cetera, came from the Greek *eis tous aionas ton aionion*, literally, "to the ages of the ages," and is uniformly rendered "for ever and ever."

It must be recognized that these words are used at times with limitations, and the only way to understand them is in the light of the context. If they are applied to God, as they are on so many occasions, the meaning is obvious; but if to man, they can apply only as long as he lives. In other words, the term must be understood according to the object to which it is applied. That this is recognized by scholars will be seen in the following comments on the Hebrew word *olam*:

It more often refers to future time, in such a manner, that what is called the *terminus ad quem*, is always defined from the nature of the thing itself. When it is applied to human affairs, and specially . . . to individual men, it commonly signifies all the days of life.—Gesenius, on *Olam*, in *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon of the Old Testament Scriptures* (1846), S. P. Tregelles, tr. for ever:z i.e. till his life's end: cf. "for ever" in 1 S. i. 22, and esp. in the expression, "servant for ever," xxvii. 12, Job xli. 4 [xl. 28 Heb.]—*Cambridge Bible*, on Ex. 21:6.

The limitation in the use of these terms will be seen by the following: The Passover was to be observed forever (Ex. 12:17), the slave to serve his master forever (Ex. 21:6), the child Samuel to abide in the tabernacle forever (1 Sam. 1:22), Jonah to be in the belly of the

great fish forever (Jonah 2:6), and leprosy to cleave to Gehazi and his seed forever (2 Kings 5:27). Clarke, in his Commentary, has well said:

Some have thought, because of the prophet's curse, The leprosy of Naaman shall cleave unto thee and thy seed for ever, that there are persons still alive who are this man's real descendants, and afflicted with this horrible disease. Mr. Maundrell when he was in Judea made diligent inquiry concerning this, but could not ascertain the truth of the supposition. To me it appears absurd; the denunciation took place in the posterity of Gehazi till it should become extinct, and under the influence of this disorder this must soon have taken place. The for ever implies as long as any of his posterity should remain: This is the import of the word, leolam. It takes in the whole extent or duration of the thing to which it is applied. The for ever of Gehazi was till his posterity became extinct.

We find that the same limitation in meaning applies in the New Testament also, to the Greek words *aion* and *aiionios*—Philemon was counseled to receive Onesimus "for ever" (Philemon 15).

The Apocalypse also declares, concerning Babylon, that "her smoke rose up for ever and ever" (Rev. 19: 3); that the wicked "shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (Rev. 20:10); and that "the smoke of their torment ascended up for ever and ever" (Rev. 14:11). These are strong expressions, and can be rightly understood only in the light of Biblical usage. A good illustration of this appears in Isa. 34:8-10:

For it is the day of the Lord's vengeance, and the year of recompences for the controversy of Zion. And the streams thereof shall be turned into pitch, and the dust thereof into brimstone, and the land thereof shall become burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night nor day; the smoke thereof shall go up for ever: from generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it for ever and ever.

This had a local application in days of long ago; and undoubtedly it will have a second application in the great conflagration of the last days. But think of its application in the days of Israel. What a picture of absolute destruction—brimstone and burning pitch, burning so fiercely it could not be quenched! The smoke ascended, and the divine record is that it ascended "for ever." But note that this unquenchable fire ended in waste and desolation. Who would contend that the fire is still burning? What we behold here is a picture of absolute, complete destruction. So shall it be in the day of the executive judgment, when the wicked are destroyed. "They shall be destroyed for ever" (Ps. 92:7).

VI. Reasons for Rejecting Eternal Torment

We reject the doctrine of eternal torment for the following major reasons:

1. Because everlasting life is a gift of God (Rom. 6:23). The wicked do not possess this—they "shall not see life" (John 3:36); "no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:15).
2. Because eternal torment would perpetuate and immortalize sin, suffering, and woe, and contradict, we believe, divine revelation, which envisions the time when these things shall be no more (Rev. 21:4).
3. Because it seems to us to provide a plague spot in the universe of God throughout eternity, and would seem to indicate that it is impossible for God Himself ever to abolish it.

4. Because in our thinking, it would detract from the attribute of love as seen in the character of God, and postulates the concept of a wrath which is never appeased.

5. Because the Scriptures teach that the atoning work of Christ is to "put away sin" (Heb. 9:26)—first from the individual, and ultimately from the universe. The full fruition of Christ's sacrificial, atoning work will be seen not only in a redeemed people but in a restored heaven and earth (Eph. 1:14).