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DOCTRINES OF GRACE.

THE MERCY OF FUTURE PUNISHMENT.

WHEN the average Christian speculates about the future, his eyes turn from the right hand of the Throne where the sun is shining, to the left hand where the shadows are resting, and he is less concerned about the righteous who go into life eternal than about those who go away into everlasting punishment; and in this bias of thought he proves both the charity of his heart towards sinners, and the confidence of his faith about saints. He were surely not worthy to be called after Christ's name who should be willing that any person be condemned to endless misery, and he would be unworthy of the name of man who could think of his fellow-creatures in a hopeless hell without dismay. About the condition of the righteous, however, in this world, and in that which is to come, there can be no doubt. If a man lives godly in this present life, he may suffer loss and pain, but even now he is rewarded by the approval of his conscience and the respect of good men, which both are the voice of God. When he passes from this life into the unseen, it matters not where he lands or in what circumstances he be placed, he must be welcome, and he must be blessed through all the vast regions of the other world. There is no place in the moral universe of God where it shall not be well with the godly man; and if we turn away when he enters through the gates into the City, and withdraw our mind from his life, it is because he is following the Lamb whithersoever He goeth and his joy is beyond imagination. We are not troubled about John, for he is with the Lord whom he loved; but we are very much troubled, and it were a shame if we were not, about Judas Iscariot. It is unfortunate that when we ask what is to become of the ungodly, we have been embarrassed by

what may be called accretions upon the doctrine of punishment which have been very offensive and which are quite without authority.

The Church has taught from her pulpits in past ages that the impenitent sinner would be consumed, body and soul, in physical fire, and eloquent preachers enlarged for the highest ends upon the horrors of his fate; and so the Church by her servants made the salutary doctrine of punishment an offence to the reason, since it is evident that nobody could endure such fire without being destroyed, and that no soul could be touched with such fire at all; and an offence against the conscience, since it implies that God would exercise His miraculous power to secure the torture of His creatures. When our Lord spoke of fire, it can hardly be seriously contended that He meant that literal fire whose filthy smoke polluted the valley of Hinnom, but it is not therefore to be inferred that the reality would be less than the figure. A fire of remorse in the soul will surely be more bitter to bear than the burning of the flesh, for the one touches our feelings at the quick, the other only at their dullest. One would rather thrust his hand into the flame than strike the person whom he loves, and Peter, on the night of the denial, would have welcomed a Roman sword in his heart if his flowing blood could have wiped out the words of his lips. The brief agony of fire, cruel though it might be for the moment, would be to many a man a welcome escape from vain and lasting regrets.

It is also a slander against God to suggest that the punishment of the ungodly is an act of personal revenge on His part in which He takes some kind of satisfaction and delight. As if He were an Almighty and malignant despot, whom some poor creature of His hands had offended and injured by his sinning, and who now exacted a thousandfold from him for all the wrong which he had done to his

Creator! As if God were a greater Moloch, casting men into a furnace as a sacrifice to His honour, instead of being the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, like a father, pitieth His children, and spared not His own Son for our salvation.

This doctrine has also been discredited by the once prevalent idea that a man's future would be decided by his creed, and that a human being might be consigned to unending suffering because he happened to be a Protestant and not a Roman, or a Unitarian and not a Trinitarian. No serious person will allow himself to belittle the value of correct thinking in matters of religion, or will undervalue the connection between thought and action, but it were monstrous to suppose that an error in the process of reasoning on the most difficult and intricate of subjects—the mysteries of religion—should bring such a doom upon any man's head. We have really only one account of the last judgment, but it is sufficient because it came from the lips of Christ, and the distinction which Jesus makes between the sheep and the goats is that which we all make in the judgment of daily life—the distinction, not of creed, but of character. If any man be sent to hell, it is well that every one should understand he will find himself there, not on account of what he believed or did not believe, but on account of what he was.

Perhaps it is even more exasperating when the problem of punishment is mixed up with the problem of the heathen, and it is assumed that the nations which have lain outside the line of Jewish and Christian revelation will suffer doubly at the hands of God; first, because they knew not Christ, and second, because knowing not Christ they could not believe in Him, and therefore must suffer everlasting death. Surely the Judge of all the earth will do right, and will judge every man according to the light which he has had and the works which he has done. As a matter of fact

the possibility of hell is a much more serious thing for a Christian who has lived in the fulness of the dispensation of the Holy Ghost than a man who has never heard the name of Christ, and there are many who have sat in Christian churches and taken the Sacrament of the Lord's Death who might well wish, both here and hereafter, to change places with Socrates and Marcus Aurelius.

The punishment of sin in the world to come, as in this present world, when it is disentangled from external circumstances, is really an ethical question which must be settled so far as it can be settled by our moral reason, and the evidence may be gathered from four quarters. We ought to turn first of all to the principle of punishment and settle in our mind whether it is exhausted in the idea of reformation. Certainly a great and happy change has come over the national mind within the last century as to the best treatment of criminals. At the close of last century the death penalty, the last and most awful act of justice, was inflicted for the theft of a few shillings, or the stealing of a sheep, and public executions were orgies of profanity and brutality; the lash was constantly in use, and prisoners were treated worse than the brutes to whose condition they were being reduced. Amid this coarseness and mercilessness it is significant that people had no difficulty in believing in an endless hell, for indeed law had been making a hell on this side of the grave. With the gradual growth of humanity, as the Georgian period was replaced by the Victorian, criminal punishment came under the influence of nobler ideas, and it was felt that its chief end ought not to be to make a man suffer for his sins, but rather to turn him from his sins, so that when he left prison he might not be more degraded than when he entered, but should rather be established in the habit of well-doing. It will, I think, be found that just as society treats her criminals she believes God will treat His, and

that there has been a certain correspondence between what we consider the right kind of prison here and what we believe God will constitute as a prison hereafter. We may, indeed, assume that punishment can only be perfectly justified when it is arranged not to destroy but to save; and the method is most perfect which either hinders men from sinning, or, if they be overcome by sin, so deals with them that henceforward they desire to live godly and make every effort thereto. And that system of punishment could hardly be counted successful, which succeeded in making a sinner miserable, but had not done anything to deliver him from his sin. We ought, however, to ask ourselves whether we would be satisfied in our reason and conscience were retribution entirely eliminated from the idea of punishment, and whether we do not feel that it has its own just place. Suppose that some ruffians should deliberately and wantonly injure your child, would it be enough in your judgment that he be placed under a course of prison treatment simply that he be lifted in future above such evil deeds? Would not you demand that he be made to suffer, even as he has made that child to suffer; and would you consider yourself revengeful in this demand or inhuman? Would not you consider any system of justice wanting in grit, and less than satisfactory to the conscience, which did not make a wilful sinner smart for the injury which he had done to innocent people, apart altogether from the question whether the smarting was to make him a better man? And the point is, if it be just that a man smart for what he has done in this life, would it be unjust that he smart in the life to come, especially if he escaped punishment in this present world? If there be a proper place for retribution in human justice, is it to be understood that there can be no place in Divine Justice?

Our second field of evidence is derived from the permanence of character. If we have learned to believe that a

man's future is to be determined by character rather than by creed, then the laws of character have a great deal to say with regard to future punishment. And if we have also learned to believe that character creates a man's environment, so that goodness and badness each make its own place, then character may be the builder of hell. A natural recoil from the tyranny of dogma should not carry us the length of denying the facts of life, and a Christian dislike of human suffering should not lead us to ignore the distinction of right and wrong. If we do not know much about life beyond the grave, we know a good deal of life on this side of the grave; and while we may have a sentiment of horror against hell in the next world, we must not shut our eyes to the fact of hell in this world; and if we discover that a man is capable of creating a place of horrible suffering in this life, we may not lay the blame of a place of suffering in the other world to the charge of God. Let us, at least, be real, and face the situation as we see it with our own eyes and without any need of an apocalypse. Here is a man who, through gross evil living and a savage temper, has made his home a veritable Gehenna to his innocent wife and children. He has become an unmitigated curse to them not only in their bodies, but also in their souls. The only relief those miserables had, and the only opportunity of decent living, came when this husband and father was shut up in prison. This is not a singular case, nor is it a case confined to one class in society. When that man dies, it is a fortunate deliverance to his family, so that no one can pretend to regret his death, and many a philanthropic person had wished he had died sooner. What is going to be done with that man where he has gone? It is all very well to say that no person may be tortured, and we do not now believe that God will torture any person; but it is well to remember that that man spent his life torturing helpless people, and it is fair to ask whether he is going to

be allowed to torture some more innocent people on the other side of the grave. He is an ugly fact, and cannot be dissolved in a flood of sentiment. When his wife, after a few years' rest, obtained by his death, passes into the next world, is she to be thrust again into his company, and is he to be allowed to repeat his former performances? Surely the most sickly sentiment will not go that length. She used to have short periods of relief in this poorly governed world, when imperfect human justice kept the ruffian in gaol; is she to be worse off with the perfect justice and supreme moral arrangements of the world to come? If one allow that that man is to be kept apart, so that he does no more mischief, and that no persons suffer hereafter as they have suffered here, then he has granted—more than that, has demanded—the existence of hell. For if that man be separated from well-living people, then he must be placed with evil-living people, and you have arrangement by character—John and Mary and Paul together, Judas and Caiaphas and Nero together. Does any one seriously believe that a confirmed ruffian is going to live in a state, wherever it might be or whatever it might be, which was created to be the home of the Apostle John and the Apostle Paul, to be the home of Francis of Assisi and Thomas à Kempis, to be the home of his little child who had died in innocency, to be the home of all those clean-living people who glorified God in their day and generation, and who, having overcome the last enemy, were now with God? Were they going to launch into that Christian home that ruffian who was a curse to his wife, so that she was congratulated when he died; who was a terror to his children; who was a byword in society for the injury he had done; who had not in him one single ground on which, when they went to bury him, they could respect him? How does that bear on the question of future punishment? That man was somewhere. Was it not most

natural to believe that he was with his friends of the same colour and complexion? Would the wildest sentiment propose to thrust the saint among the sinners, or to intrude the sinners among saints? Would the sinners desire to be in heaven, and would they be happy in heaven? May it not be that one man's heaven is another man's hell? Whether that be so or not, a man's character inevitably settles his place.

It may, of course, be suggested that character will change, and that it does not follow that an evil liver here will be an evil liver there, and that we are entitled to hope that no man's doom is settled by this short period of mortal life. This is not a hope which we desire to cherish about the saint, for we believe that his light will shine more and more to the perfect day, and that as he has begun so he will continue through all the ages; but if we can find any ground for our faith, we are certainly entitled to hope that the character of the sinner will be reversed. We must again, however, not be guided by our friendly wishes, but by our experience of life. There is a time in youth and early manhood when character is still fluid, and can be evidently changed. The power of love, or some high calling, or the influence of a friend, or some startling event, may profoundly affect the attitude of the mind and the trend of the affections and the goal of life. When we are young, we are most open to the appeals of the evangel and the grace of God, to the example of godliness and the lessons of life. Before middle age the character has crystallized and settled into shape, and with every year of temptation unresisted and sins enjoyed the character hardens and becomes impervious. It is possible that a man of fifty may be converted and become as a little child; it is not likely. It is possible that a sinner dying may be so regenerated in the course of an hour that he pass as a saint in thought and character into the heavenly kingdom; it is

a rare case. Our wisdom in estimating life is not to argue from its brilliant exception, but to abide by its rule; and there is no rule of life more patent and more solemn than the fixity of character. Our bodies change in every part, our circumstances dissolve around us, our fellowships are broken and our beliefs depart, but character remains and grows and solidifies and reigns. And when we think of the future in its weal or in its woe, we must reckon with character.

We are also entitled to seek for light on this awful question from the will of God as it is declared in holy Scripture; and there was a day when pious Christians firmly believed that so many of our race would be consigned to hell by the Divine will. For if any one believes that one man is so predestinated unto life that he must attain thereto whatever he thinks, or does, or wills, then it follows that another man is practically predestinated to everlasting death whatever he thinks, or does, or wills. But there are few Christians to-day who could endure the thought that any one whom God has called into being by His providence, and for whom, as one of the world, He gave His Son, is destined without hope of escape to the place of darkness. This matter of the Divine will is not to be settled by a text here and a text there, but by the whole scope of revelation, from the days of the Patriarchs to the days of the Apostles; and the message of the Bible, when it is separated from local circumstances and imagery, is clear and full, and it comes to this, that it is the will of our Heavenly Father that not one of His creatures should perish. For their salvation He gave His beloved Son, He sent the Holy Spirit, He compasses every man with the mercies of providence and with the invitations of grace; so that, if any one is saved, it is by the grace of God; and if any one is lost, it will be in spite of the grace of God. So far as the will of God is concerned, there would be no

hell, but only heaven, just as there would be no sin and only holiness. The will of God has had as much to do with the creation of hell as with the origin of sin. It is a fact in the human constitution that God has given His creature a certain measure of freewill, allowing him a space for himself wherein to breathe and move; it is a fact of our own experience that we have said yes or no to the appeals of the Divine grace. It does not follow, therefore, that if any one suffer eternally this must be by the will of God, nor does it follow that there will be no punishment because the will of God is our salvation. It is the case, and here again no sentiment can blind us to the fact, that in this present life one can resist the grace of God successfully and go on sinning in the very presence of the Cross. When punishment follows upon the sin in this world, we do not charge God with cruelty, we do not consider that this punishment is giving Him any pleasure; we regard it as inevitable, and we blame only the man. Suppose the man resist the will of God in the life to come as he has resisted it in this life, what then? Will not punishment again dog the steps of sin, and can this be laid any more against the love of God in the future than it could be in the present? It is open to believe, and one desires to believe it, that in the long contest between this foolish human will and the wise and gracious will of God the will of man must in the end be conquered, and the will of God prevail, and the end of all evil, of good. Yet there is a shadow on this hope, and it is far from certain, for what influence can be imagined acting upon the soul in the other world which has not been affecting the soul in this world? What weapon of love can God have in reserve if the invitations of Holy Scripture, and the commandments of the Lord, and the Cross of Calvary, and the pleading of the Holy Spirit have all failed and been despised? If we sin against the Father, behold, the Son maketh intercession for

us ; and if we refuse the Son, the Spirit maketh intercession within our own hearts, if haply we may yield. If we resist and overcome the Spirit so that He be driven in despair from our hearts, and have no more access unto us, then is there any fourth person in the Godhead to be our Saviour ?

There remains the evidence to be gathered from the teaching of our Master and His Apostles, and here again it is surely better to depend not upon single texts, but rather upon the whole trend of thought. Is it not pedantic to spend so much time over the exact meaning of a single Greek word, or over the construction of a sentence ? Nor can the matter be settled by the usages of Jewish theology, and the thought of Jesus' day. Our Master was not dependent upon philology when He wished to declare His mind, nor does He show the slightest trace of rabbinical teaching. He was not likely to hide Himself behind the ambiguity of an adjective, nor did it matter to Him what the Rabbis thought. He taught with authority, because He taught with certainty and with lucidity, and throughout His teaching He leaves the profound impression that He regarded the fate of the sinner with nothing less than horror. He compared the sinner's awful estate to the Valley of Hinnom with its foul, thick, unceasing smoke, and its festering, writhing, unspeakable corruption, and He besought men, with tears in His voice, that they should make any sacrifice, to the cutting off of a right hand or the plucking out of a right eye, rather than enter into that fire. He sees the men of evil character depart from the left hand of the Throne with unspeakable sorrow, because they go by their own choice and their own nature into fire prepared for the devil and his angels. There is nothing, He declares, and no one deserving to be feared in this world ; there is only one to be feared anywhere, and that is He who can cast the soul into Gehenna. Can any one read

the awestruck references of Jesus to the future of the sinner without trembling and without a new sense of the fearful possibilities of the punishment which is entailed on sin? No teacher was ever so charitable as Jesus; no Shepherd of men was ever so merciful, none has had such a heart of pity; none has made such sacrifices for man's help; none has suffered so much that we might not suffer; none has understood the depth of suffering like Jesus; and it must therefore remain a fact of the last solemnity that the most alarming references to the future of a sinner have fallen from the lips of Jesus.

It is almost a paradox that St. Paul, on whom the Rabbis left their trace, should have a more hopeful outlook than his Master; but there is no question that in various passages St. Paul seems to point to the hope "that in the dispensation of the fulness of time, God might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth," and "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord unto the glory of God the Father," and that "As in Adam all die even so in Christ shall all be made alive." No doubt an exact exegesis may qualify and reduce the wider scope of such passages, but they allow us to believe that from time to time the great Apostle imagined a victory of Christ which would leave no rebel against his power in the whole universe of God, and no creature of God, reasoning or unreasoning, which would not do Him service. It is the hope we all would cherish, and which would make glad our hearts; it is the consummation we believe God desires and which would be the crown of Christ's passion, the

One far-off Divine event
To which the whole creation moves.

No one, however, can believe that St. Paul expected that

such a restoration would ever be accomplished except through the repentance of the sinner and through the grace of God, for none has insisted more strongly on the inseparable connection between sin, and guilt, and punishment, none has explained more clearly that the sinner can only be justified and sanctified in Christ Jesus. If there is to be a complete restoration, it must be in Christ Jesus, and so the old question rises like a ghost from its grave: What of those who of their own accord, and with deliberation, have refused Christ? What of those who by their own choice and will are cast away?

Ought we not to remember that the question of punishment depends upon the question of sin? and are we not entitled to reason from the arrangements of this life to those of the life to come? Does not punishment follow sin as effect follows cause in this world, and is not this punishment a sanction of righteousness and a safeguard for righteous men? Would this world be worth living in, or could human society stand for an hour, if wrongdoing had no penalties, and the man who did ill was treated the same as the man who did well? Is it not our complaint that the judicial machinery of human society is so imperfect that the righteous man does not receive his due recompense, and that the unrighteous man escapes his just punishment? Have we not imagined that state of things where the evil-doer would be sharply dealt with for the good of himself and every other person, and the innocent would be protected and blessed? Were we not very indignant a few years ago when the monsters who perpetrated the Armenian atrocities were rewarded instead of being hanged, and when the victims had no escape except the grave? and would it not have more firmly established our faith in Divine providence if by some means the guilty had been punished and the miserable have been delivered? Had it been in one's power to have cast the miscreants who com-

mitted unspeakable outrages into some place of suffering, we had done so with a profound sense of righteousness; and had we been able to remove the unhappy people to a safe and pleasant land, where they would know terror no more, this we had also done with a profound sense of relief. Are we then to suppose that the future life will be no improvement upon the present, but that for ever our moral sense will be insulted with the sight of unpunished wickedness and of wronged innocence? Are we not bound to believe that where there is sin there must and ought to be suffering, and that among the mercies of God by which we are weaned from unrighteousness and held in the way of life everlasting, not the least is the punishment of sin both in this world and in that which is to come?

JOHN WATSON.

CHRIST'S THREE JUDGES.

III.

HEROD.

(LUKE XXIII. 7-11.)

THE appearance of our Lord before Herod was a kind of interlude in the tragic farce of His trial. In all courts the first interest must be the adjusting of the issues, the defining of what exactly is to be tried in order that both witness and pleader may be kept to the point, and that judgment may not in the end be given on anything but the real question in dispute. Now, when Jesus stood before Pilate, the issue was clear. The Romans had no concern with questions of doctrine or worship in Palestine, and their courts, therefore, could try Jesus only on the charge of being disloyal, an enemy to Roman order in the land. This man claims to be a king, and gathers a party—that was the charge; and Pilate had to judge if it were seriously