

Of Hell

By John Wesley

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Sermon Number Sermon 73

Sermon Title Of Hell

Sermon Footnote (text of the 1872 edition)

Sermon Scripture "Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched." Mark 9:48.

Intro

1. Every truth which is revealed in the oracles of God is undoubtedly of great importance. Yet it may be allowed that some of those which are revealed therein are of greater importance than others, as being more immediately conducive to the grand end of all, the eternal salvation of men. And we may judge of their importance even from this circumstance, -- that they are not mentioned once only in the sacred writings, but are repeated over and over. A remarkable instance of this we have with regard to the awful truth which is now before us. Our blessed Lord, who uses no superfluous words, who makes no "vain repetitions," repeats it over and over in the same chapter, and as it were, in the same breath. So, (Mark 9:43, 44,) "If thy hand offend thee," -- if a thing or person, as useful as a hand, be an occasion of sin, and there is no other way to shun that sin, -- "cut it off: It is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched." So again, (Mark 9:45, 46,) "If thy foot offend thee, cut it off: It is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched." And yet again, (Mark 9:47, 48,) "If thine eye" -- a person or thing as

dear as thine eye -- "offend thee," -- hinder thy running the race which is set before thee, -- "pluck it out : It is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell-fire: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."

2. And let it not be thought, that the consideration of these terrible truths is proper only for enormous sinners. How is this supposition consistent with what our Lord speaks to those who were then, doubtless, the holiest men upon earth? "When innumerable multitudes were gathered together, he said to his disciples" (the Apostles) "first of all, I say unto you, my friends, Fear not them that can kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I say unto you, Fear him, who after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him." (Luke 12:1-5.) Yea, fear him under this very notion, -- of having power to cast into hell: That is, in effect, fear lest he should cast you into the place of torment. And this very fear, even in the children of God, is one excellent means of preserving them from it.

3. It behoves, therefore not only the outcasts of men, but even you, his friends, you that fear and love God, deeply to consider what is revealed in the oracles of God concerning the future state of punishment. How widely distant is this from the most elaborate accounts which are given by the heathen authors! Their accounts are (in many particulars at least) childish, fanciful, and self-inconsistent. So that it is no wonder they did not believe themselves, but only related the tales of the vulgar. So Virgil strongly intimates, when, after the laboured account he had given of the shades beneath, he sends him that had related it out at the ivory gate, through which (as he tells us) only dreams pass; thereby giving us to know that all the preceding account is no more than a dream. This he only insinuates; but his brother poet, Juvenal, speaks out flat and plain, -- *Esse aliquos manes, et subterranea regna, Nec pueri credunt, nisi qui nondum aere lavantur*: "Even our children do not believe a word of the tales concerning another world."

4. Here, on the contrary, all is worthy of God, the Creator, the Governor of mankind. All is awful and solemn; suitable to his wisdom and justice by whom "Tophet was ordained of old;" although originally prepared, not for the children of men, but "for the devil and his angels." The

punishment of those who, in spite of all the warnings of God, resolve to have their portion with the devil and his angels, will, according to the ancient and not improper division, be either *paena damni*, -- "what they lose;" or *paena sensus*, -- "what they feel." After considering these separately, I shall touch on a few additional circumstances, and conclude with two or three inferences.

I

I. 1. And, First, let us consider the *paena damni*, -- "the punishment of loss." This commences in that very moment wherein the soul is separated from the body; in that instant, the soul loses all those pleasures, the enjoyment of which depends on the outward senses. The smell, the taste, the touch, delight no more: The organs that ministered to them are spoiled, and the objects that used to gratify them are removed far away. In the dreary regions of the dead all these things are forgotten; or, if remembered, are only remembered with pain; seeing they are gone for ever. All the pleasures of the imagination are at an end. There is no grandeur in the infernal regions; there is nothing beautiful in those dark abodes; no light but that of livid flames. And nothing new, but one unvaried scene of horror upon horror! There is no music but that of groans and shrieks; of weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth; of curses and blasphemies against God, or cutting reproaches of one another. Nor is there anything to gratify the sense of honour: No; they are the heirs of shame and everlasting contempt.

2. Thus are they totally separated from all the things they were fond of in the present world. At the same instant will commence another loss, -- that of all the persons whom they loved. They are torn away from their nearest and dearest relations; their wives, husbands, parents, children; and (what to some will be worse than all this) the friend which was as their own soul. All the pleasure they ever enjoyed in these is lost, gone, vanished away: For there is no friendship in hell. Even the poet who affirms, (though I know not on what authority,) Devil with devil damn'd Firm concord holds, does not affirm that there is any concord among the human fiends that inhabit the great abyss.

3. But they will then be sensible of a greater loss than that of all they

enjoyed on earth. They have lost their place in Abraham's bosom, in the paradise of God. Hitherto, indeed, it hath not entered into their hearts to conceive what holy souls enjoy in the garden of God, in the society of angels, and of the wisest and best men that have lived from the beginning of the world; (not to mention the immense increase of knowledge which they will then undoubtedly receive;) but they will then fully understand the value of what they have vilely cast away.

4. But as happy as the souls in paradise are, they are preparing for far greater happiness. For paradise is only the porch of heaven; and it is there the spirits of just men are made perfect. It is in heaven only that there is the fulness of joy; the pleasures that are at God's right hand for evermore. The loss of this, by those unhappy spirits, will be the completion of their misery. They will then know and feel, that God alone is the centre of all created spirits; and, consequently, that a spirit made for God can have no rest out of him. It seems that the Apostle had this in his view when he spoke of those "who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord." Banishment from the presence of the Lord is the very essence of destruction to a spirit that was made for God. And if that banishment lasts for ever, it is "everlasting destruction." Such is the loss sustained by those miserable creatures, on whom that awful sentence will be pronounced: "Depart from me, ye cursed!" What an unspeakable curse, if there were no other! But, alas! this is far from being the whole: For, to the punishment of loss, will be added the punishment of sense. What they lose implies unspeakable misery, which yet is inferior to what they feel. This it is which our Lord expresses in those emphatical words: "Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."

II

II. 1. From the time that sentence was pronounced upon man, "Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return," it was the custom of all nations, so far as we can learn, to commit dust to dust: It seemed natural to restore the bodies of the dead to the general mother, earth. But in process of time another method obtained, chiefly among the rich and great, of burning the bodies of their relations, and frequently in a grand magnificent manner; for which purpose they erected huge funeral

piles, with immense labour and expense. By either of these methods the body of man was soon restored to its parent dust. Either the worm or the fire soon consumed the well-wrought frame; after which the worm itself quickly died, and the fire was entirely quenched. But there is, likewise, a worm that belongs to the future state; and that is a worm that never dieth! and there is a fire hotter than that of the funeral pile; and it is a fire that will never be quenched!

2. The First thing intended by the worm that never dieth, seems to be a guilty conscience; including self-condemnation, sorrow, shame, remorse, and a sense of the wrath of God. May not we have some conception of this, by what is sometimes felt even in the present world? Is it not of this, chiefly, that Solomon speaks, when he says, "The spirit of a man may bear his infirmities;" his infirmities, or griefs, of any other kind; "but a wounded spirit who can bear?" Who can bear the anguish of an awakened conscience, penetrated with a sense of guilt, and the arrows of the Almighty sticking in the soul, and drinking up the spirit? How many of the stout-hearted have sunk under it, and chose strangling rather than life! And yet what are these wounds, what is all this anguish of a soul while in this present world, in comparison of those they must suffer when their souls are wholly awakened to feel the wrath of an offended God! Add to these all unholy passions; fear, horror, rage; evil desires; desires that can never be satisfied. Add all unholy tempers; envy, jealousy, malice, and revenge; all of which will incessantly gnaw the soul, as the vulture was supposed to do the liver of Tityus. To these if we add hatred of God, and all his creatures; all these united together may serve to give us some little, imperfect idea of the worm that never dieth.

3. We may observe a remarkable difference in the manner wherein our Lord speaks concerning the two parts of the future punishment. He says, "Where their worm dieth not," of the one; "where the fire is not quenched," of the other. This cannot be by chance. What then is the reason for this variation of the expression? Does it not seem to be this? The fire will be the same, essentially the same, to all that are tormented therein; only perhaps more intense to some than others, according to their degree of guilt; but their worm will not, cannot be the same. It will be infinitely varied, according to the various kinds, as well as degrees, of

wickedness. This variety will arise partly from the just judgment of God, "rewarding every man according to his works:" For we cannot doubt but this rule will take place no less in hell than in heaven. As in heaven "every man will receive his own reward," incommunicably his, according to his own labours, -- that is, the whole tenor of his tempers, thoughts, words, and actions; -- so undoubtedly, every man, in fact, will receive his own bad reward, according to his own bad labour. And this, likewise, will be incommunicably his own, even as his labour was. Variety of punishment will likewise arise from the very nature of the thing. As they that bring most holiness to heaven will find most happiness there; so, on the other hand, it is not only true, that the more wickedness a man brings to hell the more misery he will find there; but that this misery will be infinitely varied according to the various kinds of his wickedness. It was therefore proper to say, the fire, in general; but their worm, in particular.

4. But it has been questioned by some, whether there be any fire in hell; that is, any material fire. Nay, if there be any fire, it is unquestionably material. For what is immaterial fire? The same as immaterial water or earth! Both the one and the other is absolute nonsense, a contradiction in terms. Either, therefore, we must affirm it to be material, or we deny its existence. But if we granted them, there is no fire at all there, what would they gain thereby? seeing this is allowed, on all hands, that it is either fire or something worse. And consider this: Does not our Lord speak as if it were real fire? No one can deny or doubt of this. Is it possible then to suppose that the God of truth would speak in this manner if it were not so? Does he design to fright his poor creatures? What, with scarecrows? with vain shadows of things that have no being? O let not anyone think so! Impute not such folly to the Most High!

5. But others aver, "It is not possible that fire should burn always. For by the immutable law of nature, it consumes whatever is thrown into it. And by the same law, as soon as it has consumed its fuel, it is itself consumed; it goes out." It is most true, that in the present constitution of things, during the present laws of nature, the element of fire does dissolve and consume whatever is thrown into it. But here is the mistake: The present laws of nature are not immutable. When the

heavens and the earth shall flee away, the present scene will be totally changed; and, with the present constitution of things, the present laws of nature will cease. After this great change, nothing will be dissolved, nothing will be consumed any more. Therefore, if it were true that fire consumes all things now, it would not follow that it would do the same after the whole frame of nature has undergone that vast, universal change.

6. I say, If it were true that "fire consumes all things now." But, indeed, it is not true. Has it not pleased God to give us already some proof of what will be hereafter? Is not the *Linum Asbestum*, the incombustible flax, known in most parts of Europe? If you take a towel or handkerchief made of this, (one of which may now be seen in the British Museum,) you may throw it into the hottest fire, and when it is taken out again, it will be observed, upon the nicest experiment, not to have lost one grain of its weight. Here, therefore, is a substance before our eyes, which, even in the present constitution of things, (as if it were an emblem of things to come,) may remain in fire without being consumed.

7. Many writers have spoken of other bodily torments, added to the being cast into the lake of fire. One of these, even pious Kempis, supposes that misers, for instance, have melted gold poured down their throats; and he supposes many other particular torments to be suited to men's particular sins. Nay, our great poet himself supposes the inhabitants of hell to undergo a variety of tortures; not to continue always in the lake of fire, but to be frequently, By harpy-footed furies, haled into regions of ice; and then back again through extremes, by change more fierce: But I find no word, no tittle of this, not the least hint of it in all the Bible. And surely this is too awful a subject to admit of such play of imagination. Let us keep to the written word. It is torment enough to dwell with everlasting burnings.

8. This is strongly illustrated by a fabulous story, taken from one of the eastern writers, concerning a Turkish King, who, after he had been guilty of all manner of wickedness, once did a good thing: For seeing a poor man falling into a pit, wherein he must have inevitably perished, and kicking him from it, he saved his life. The story adds, that when, for his enormous wickedness, he was cast into hell, that foot wherewith he

had saved the man's life was permitted to lie out of the flames. But allowing this to be a real case, what a poor comfort would it be! What, if both feet were permitted to lie out of the flames, yea, and both hands, how little would it avail! Nay, if all the body were taken out, and placed where no fire touched it, and only one hand or one foot kept in a burning fiery furnace; would the man, meantime, be much at ease? Nay, quite the contrary. Is it not common to say to a child, "Put your finger into that candle: Can you bear it even for one minute? How then will you bear hell-fire?" Surely it would be torment enough to have the flesh burnt off from only one finger. What then will it be, to have the whole body plunged into a lake of fire burning with brimstone!

III

III. It remains now only to consider two or three circumstances attending the never-dying worm and the unquenchable fire.

1. And, First, consider the company wherewith everyone is surrounded in that place of torment. It is not uncommon to hear even condemned criminals, in our public prisons, say, "O I wish I was hanged out of the way, rather than to be plagued with these wretches that are round about me!" But what are the most abandoned wretches upon earth, compared to the inhabitants of hell? None of these are, as yet, perfectly wicked, emptied of every spark of good; certainly not till this life is at an end; probably not till the day of judgment. Nor can any of these exert, without control, their whole wickedness on their fellow-creatures. Sometimes they are restrained by good men; sometimes even by bad. So even the tortures in the Romish Inquisition are restrained by those that employ them, when they suppose the sufferer cannot endure any more. They then order the executioners to forbear; because it is contrary to the rules of the house that a man should die upon the rack. And very frequently, when there is no human help, they are restrained by God, who hath set them their bounds which they cannot pass, and saith, "Hitherto shall ye come, and no farther." Yea, so mercifully hath God ordained, that the very extremity of pain causes a suspension of it. The sufferer faints away; and so, for a time at least, sinks into insensibility. But the inhabitants of hell are perfectly wicked, having no spark of goodness remaining. And they are restrained by none from

exerting to the uttermost their total wickedness. Not by men; none will be restrained from evil by his companions in damnation: And not by God; for He hath forgotten them, hath delivered them over to the tormentors. And the devils need not fear, like their instruments upon earth, lest they should expire under the torture. They can die no more: They are strong to sustain whatever the united malice, skill, and strength of angels can inflict upon them. And their angelic tormentors have time sufficient to vary their torments a thousand ways. How infinitely may they vary one single torment, -- horrible appearances! Whereby, there is no doubt, an evil spirit, if permitted, could terrify the stoutest man upon earth to death.

2. Consider, Secondly, that all these torments of body and soul are without intermission. They have no respite from pain; but "the smoke of their torment ascendeth up day and night." Day and night! that is, speaking according to the constitution of the present world; wherein God has wisely and graciously ordained that day and night should succeed each other: So that in every four and twenty hours there comes a Daily sabbath, made to rest Toiling man and weary beast. Hence we seldom undergo much labour, or suffer much pain, before Tired nature's sweet restorer, balmy sleep, steals upon us by insensible degrees, and brings an interval of ease. But although the damned have uninterrupted night, it brings no interruption of their pain. No sleep accompanies that darkness: Whatever either ancient or modern poets, either Homer or Milton, dream, there is no sleep either in hell or heaven. And be their suffering ever so extreme, be their pain ever so intense, there is no possibility of their fainting away; no, not for a moment. Again: The inhabitants of earth are frequently diverted from attending to what is afflictive, by the cheerful light of the sun, the vicissitudes of the seasons, "the busy hum of men," and a thousand objects that roll around them with endless variety. But the inhabitants of hell have nothing to divert them from their torments, even for a moment: Total eclipse: No sun, no moon! No change of seasons, or of companions. There is no business; but one uninterrupted scene of horror, to which they must be all attention. They have no interval of inattention or stupidity: They are all eye, all ear, all sense. Every instant of their duration, it may be said of their whole frame, that they are Tremblingly alive all o'er, And smart and agonize at every pore!

3. And of this duration there is no end! What a thought is this! Nothing but eternity is the term of their torment! And who can count the drops of rain, or the sands of the sea, or the days of eternity? Every suffering is softened, if there is any hope, though distant, of deliverance from it. But here, Hope never comes, that comes to all the inhabitants of the upper world! What! sufferings never to end! NEVER! -- Where sinks the soul at that dread sound? Into a gulf how dark, and how profound! Suppose millions of days, of years, of ages elapsed, still we are only on the threshold of eternity! Neither the pain of body nor of soul is any nearer an end, than it was millions of ages ago. When they are cast into to pyr, to asbeston, (How emphatical! "The fire, the unquenchable,") all is concluded: "Their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched!" Such is the account which the Judge of all gives of the punishment which he has ordained for impenitent sinners. And what a counterbalance may the consideration of this be to the violence of any temptation! in particular, to the fear of man; the very use to which it is applied by our Lord himself: "Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But fear Him, who after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell." (Luke 12:4, 5) What a guard may these considerations be against any temptation from pleasure! Will you lose, for any of these poor, earthly pleasures, which perish in the using, (to say nothing of the present substantial pleasures of religion,) the pleasures of Paradise; such as "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into our hearts to conceive?" yea, the pleasures of heaven, the society of angels, and of the spirits of just men made perfect; the conversing face to face with God your Father, your Saviour, your Sanctifier; and the drinking of those rivers of pleasure that are at God's right hand for evermore? Are you tempted by pain, either of body or mind? O compare present things with future! What is the pain of body which you do or may endure, to that of lying in a lake of fire burning with brimstone? What is any pain of mind; any fear, anguish, sorrow, compared to the "worm that never dieth?" That never dieth! This is the sting of all! As for our pains on earth, blessed be God, they are not eternal. There are some intervals to relieve and there is some period to finish them. When we ask a friend that is sick, how he does; "I am in pain now," says he, "but I hope to be easy soon." This is a sweet mitigation of the present uneasiness. But how dreadful would his case

be if he should answer, "I am all over pain, and I shall never be eased of it. I lie under exquisite torment of body, and horror of soul; and I shall feel it for ever!" Such is the case of the damned sinners in hell. Suffer any pain, then, rather than come into that place of torment! I conclude with one more reflection, taken from Dr. Watts, -- "It demands our highest gratitude, that we who have long ago deserved this misery are not yet plunged into it. While there are thousands who have been adjudged to this place of punishment, before they had continued so long in sin as many of us have done, what an instance is it of divine goodness, that we are not under this fiery vengeance! Have we not seen many sinners, on our right and left, cut off in their sins? And what but the tender mercy of God hath spared us week after week, month after month, and given us space for repentance? What shall we render unto the Lord for all his patience and longsuffering even to this day? How often have we incurred the sentence of condemnation by our repeated rebellion against God! And yet we are still alive in his presence, and are hearing the words of hope and salvation. O let us look back and shudder at the thoughts of that dreadful precipice, on the edge of which we have so long wandered! Let us fly for refuge to the hope that is set before us, and give a thousand thanks to the divine mercy, that we are not plunged into this perdition!"

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