

THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF HELL

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1890.

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I WOULD not willingly quit this world without having said my say upon the most terrible of all its superstitions, the doctrine of eternal torments—which Archdeacon Farrar describes as the "hideous incubus of atrocious conceptions"—and which, in my own experience, is the cause of appalling apprehensions and even insanity in the minds of the sensitive and weak-minded.

If there is a hell, that is the most important fact in the universe. Compared with an eternity of torment, all that this little life has to offer is but as nothing. If there is no hell, then, it seems to me, the faith in Jesus is vain, for no such salvation as that offered by orthodox Christianity is necessary. Not only is the doctrine of eternal torments clearly taught in Scripture, but it is, as I shall show, historically bound up with the creed of Christendom.

It may be said, why attack a superstition confessedly falling into decay? Satan, that once excellent scapegoat for all misdeeds, is superannuated. Hell is never mentioned to ears polite. Since Freethought came into the world its temperature has considerably decreased. The brimstone business threatens to become obsolete. It is none the less the corner-stone of the whole system, and when it finally collapses it will bring down other doctrines with it. The Salvationist, no less than the Jesuit, knows its power. As the old beadle said, "A kirk without a hell is'na worth a damn."

Upon the healthy-minded the doctrine of eternal torments will soon have no more effect than water upon a duck's back. But mental health and strength are not the inheritance of all. If the dogma was not taught until minds were mature enough to examine it, it might safely be left; but while it is continually taught to infancy, to seek to eradicate it is the duty of those who regard it as a pernicious error. To me it appears that the best way to do this is to show what the doctrine has actually been in the days when Christianity was unquestioned. Christians are becoming ashamed of their hell—which they rarely realise as possibly the fate of themselves or their friends; that way madness lies. They cannot get rid of the definite statements in the New Testament, but they avoid dwelling on them, or attempt to construe them figuratively. Hell was hot enough when religion was powerful. As it declines it is discovered that hell is not so terrible after all.

Modern exegesis, striving to explain hell away, only steps in when conscience and freethought have declared against it. It is taught in the plainest terms. Take but the passage, Matt. xxv. 46, "These shall go away into *everlasting* punishment, but the righteous into life *eternal*." It is said everlasting does not mean lasting for ever, and in some cases this might be granted, but surely it is a different matter when eternal punishment is, without any limitation, directly compared with eternal life, and the same word is applied to both. Again, exactly the same expression which is used to signify the eternity of God, that of his being *for ever and ever*, as in Rev. iv. 9, v. 14, x. 6, and xv. 7, is used of the torments of those in hell in Rev. xiv. 11.

In the explanation of the parable of the tares, Jesus tells his prosaic disciples: "The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world" (Matt. xiii. 39-40). There we see the simile is used to illustrate hell; not hell used as a simile to illustrate something else. The early Christians undoubtedly believed in a literal Devil, angels, and end of the world, and with equal certainty in a literal hell and material fire. Yet we are now asked to believe that when Jesus spoke of hell, "where the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched" (Mark ix. 46), since there is *no* fire it cannot require quenching.

Jesus relates, in the most matter-of-fact way (Luke xvi.), that a certain rich man died, and "in hell," "being in torments," he lifted up his eyes and beheld Lazarus in Abraham's bosom. He cried for a drop of water to cool his tongue, "for I am tormented in this flame." The man had committed no other recorded offence than faring sumptuously, yet he was met with the stern response, "between us and you there is a great gulf fixed." He then asks that his brethren may be warned of his fate, and this, too, is denied. The voice of humanity cried from hell, and heaven answered with inhumanity. If this picture of heaven and hell is true, God and his saints are monsters of infamy. If false, what other "revealed" doctrine can be credited, since this is so devised for the benefit of those who trade in terrorism? If hell is a metaphor, of which there is no indication in the narrative, so also is heaven. Give up material fire and brimstone, you must resign the bodily resurrection, the visible coming of Christ, and the New Jerusalem. Allegorise hell, you make heaven unreal. A figurative Devil suggests a figment God.

The Revelation of St. John expressly speaks of the worshippers of the beast, or enemies of God, being "tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever" (xiv. 10-11). Nice enjoyment, this, for the elect. Fancy parents regarding the eternal anguish of their children! Converted wives looking on while their unbelieving husbands are tormented and "have no rest day nor night" in "the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone"! Picture it, think of it, Christian, and then offer praises to your God for having provided this place of eternal torture for some other than yourself.

Who go to hell? According to the Bible and the creeds the immense majority of mankind. "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matt. vii. 14). Many are called but few chosen; and there is no other name under heaven, save that of Jesus, whereby men can be saved. The proportion of those who lived before Christ must be, even according to Bible chronology, immensely larger than all who have lived since, and of these now, after eighteen centuries of the divine religion, not more than a third of the world's inhabitants are even nominal Christians. When we consider how few Christians are really believers, and how scarcely any of them attempt to carry out the precepts of their Master, it must be allowed that the population of hell is out of all proportion to that of heaven.

The doctrine of the church has been "He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved, and he that believeth not shall be damned." The idea of this text has probably done more harm to humanity than it has benefited from the rest of the gospel, for it has countenanced all the ill-will and persecution that has everywhere followed in the train of Christianity. I know it will be said that this passage, indeed the whole of the sixteenth of Mark from the ninth verse to the end, is wanting in some of the ancient manuscripts; but while the Authorised version is circulated as the word of God, it is properly cited. And indeed if this doctrine is discarded there is much else that must go with it.

Freethought having discredited the doctrine of eternal torments as absurd and dishonoring to God, stress is now laid upon passages indicating a more hopeful doctrine. To one who looks at the general tenor of Scripture, these are of no weight in opposition to the clear and emphatic declarations I have cited. There is no express statement that punishment hereafter will be terminable. On the contrary, the evident teaching is that as the tree falls so it must lie. No hope is extended to the rich man in hell.

That the current belief in the time of Jesus was in the eternity of punishments, we have the testimony of Josephus, who declares this both of the Pharisees and the Essenes.* We have also the testimony of the Fathers. Clement, the apostolic father, said to be the "fellow laborer" of Paul, mentioned in Philip iv. 3, says in his Second Epistle, chap. viii., "Once cast into the furnace of fire there is no longer any help for it. For after we have gone out of the world no further power of confessing or repenting will belong to us." Polycarp, when threatened with martyrdom, is said to have made answer (Ep. to Philippians, xi.), "Thou threatenest me with fire which burneth for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but art ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly." Ignatius too speaks of "the unquenchable fire" (Ep. to Ephesians, 16).

**Antiq. xviii. 1-3; Wars ii, 8, 11-14.*

All the early Fathers considered the fire of hell as a real material fire. Justin Martyr, who wrote before the collection of the Gospels, said in his first Apology, chap. xxi., "We believe that those who live wickedly and do not repent are punished in everlasting fire." In numerous other passages he refers to punishment in eternal fire; and says (First Apol., chap. hi), "then shall they repent, when it profits them not." Athenagoras, too (chap. xxxvi.), declares that "the body which has ministered to the irrational impulses of the soul, and to its desires, will be punished along with it."

St. Irenæus, the first of the Fathers who definitely alludes to the four Gospels, says, in his work against heresies (bk. ii., chap. 28, § 7), "That eternal fire is prepared for sinners, both the Lord has plainly declared, and the rest of the Scriptures demonstrate. And that God foreknew that this would happen, the Scriptures do in like manner demonstrate, since He prepared eternal fire from the beginning for those who were afterwards to transgress His commandments." What a blessed thing is Christianity to reveal such a nice loving Father as this!

So Bishop Hippolytus, in his *Refutation of all Heresies*, bk. x. chap. 30, speaks of "the boiling flood of hell's eternal lake of fire, and the eye ever fixed in menacing glare of [wicked] angels chained in Tartarus as punishment for their sins."

Tertullian, in his treatise on the Resurrection of the Flesh, chap. xxxv., declares "The fire of hell is eternal—expressly announced as an everlasting penalty," and he asks, "whence shall come the weeping and gnashing of teeth if not from *eyes and teeth*?" In his treatise, *De Anima*, chap. vii., he thus alludes to the story of Dives. "Do you suppose that this end of the blessed poor man and the miserable rich man is only imaginary? Then why the name of Lazarus in this narrative, if the circumstance is not in [the category of] a real occurrence?" This Christian Father absolutely gloats over the prospect of witnessing these torments:—"Which sight gives me Joy? which rouses me to exultation?—as I see so many illustrious monarchs, whose reception into the heavens was publicly announced, groaning now in the lowest darkness with great Jove himself, and those, too, who bore witness of their exaltation; governors of provinces, too, who persecuted the Christian name, in fires more fierce than those which in the days of their pride they raged against the followers of Christ!" He exultingly continues: "I shall have a better opportunity than of hearing the tragedians, louder-voiced in their own calamity; of viewing the play-actors much more 'dissolute' in the dissolving flame; of looking upon the charioteer, all glowing in his chariot of fire; of witnessing the wrestlers, not in their gymnasia, but tossing in the fiery billows."* An echo of this famous passage may be traced in Cardinal Newman's sermon "On Neglect of Divine Calls and Warnings."

St. Cyprian, in his address to Demetrianus, says: "We are rendered patient by our security of a vindication to

come. The innocent give place to the guilty; the guileless acquiesce in their punishments and tortures, certain and assured that anything we suffer will not remain unavenged.... What joy for the believers, what sorrow for the faithless; to have refused to believe here, and now be unable to return in order that they may believe! Hell ever burning will consume the accursed, and a devouring punishment of lively flames; nor will there be that from whence their torments can ever receive either repose or end. Souls with their bodies will be saved unto suffering in tortures infinite. There that man will be seen by us for ever, who made us his spectacle here for a season; what brief enjoyment those cruel eyes received from the persecutions wrought upon us will be balanced against a spectacle eternal." And the savage saint backs up his pleasant prospect with "Holy Scripture."

** De Spectaculis, c. 30. I have quoted the rendering in the orthodox Ante-Nicene Christian Library, vol. xi., pp. 34-35. Gibbon's version is more forcible.*

Lactantius, in his *Divine Institutes*, bk. vi., chap. 3, contrasts the immortality promised to the righteous with "everlasting punishment threatened to the unrighteous." In bk. vii. chap. 21, he says, "because they have committed sins in their bodies, they will again be clothed with flesh that they may make atonement in their bodies; and yet it will not be that flesh with which God clothed man, like this our earthly body, but indestructible and abiding for ever, that it may be able to hold out against tortures and everlasting fire."

St. Chrysostom represents the torments of the damned in a variety of horrid pictures. He says: "But if you are speaking against luxury, and introduce discourse by the way concerning hell, the thing will cheer you and beget much pleasure. Let us not then avoid discourses concerning hell, that we may avoid hell. Let us not banish the remembrance of punishment, that we may escape punishment. If the rich man had reflected upon that fire, he would not have sinned; but because he never was mindful of it, therefore he fell into it."*

** Homily on 2 Thess. i., 1-2.*

In Homily on 2 Thess. i., 9-10, "It is not only not milder, but much more terrible than is threatened." Hear the golden-mouthed Father (Homily on Heb. i., 1-2): "Let us then consider how great a misery it must be to be for ever burning, and to be in darkness, and to utter unnumbered groanings, and to gnash the teeth and not even to be heard.... Think what it is when we are burning with all the murderers of the whole world neither seeing, nor being seen.... Wherefore I entreat you," continues the saint, "to be ever revolving these things with yourselves, and to submit to the pain of the words, that we may not have the things to undergo as our punishment." Again he says (Hom. Heb. xi. 37-38), "Why, what are ten thousand years to ages boundless and without end? Not so much as one drop to the boundless ocean.... Were it not well to be cut [by scourging] times out of number, to be slain, to be burned, to undergo ten thousand deaths, to endure everything whatsoever that is dreadful both in word and deed?!"*

Origen, for considering that the punishment of the wicked consisted in separation from God, was condemned as heretical by the Council of Carthage, A.D. 398, and afterwards by other Councils.

St. Augustine (*City of God*, bk. xxi. chap. 17) censures Origen for his merciful view, and says "the Church, not without reason, condemned him for this and other errors." In the same book (chap. 23) this great father declares that everlasting is used by Jesus (Matt. xxv. 41) as meaning "for ever" and nothing else than "endless duration." He argues, with ingenious varieties of reasoning, to show how the material bodies of the damned may withstand annihilation in everlasting fire. He held that hell was in the centre of the earth, and that God supplied the central fire with earth by a miracle. Jerome and the other orthodox Fathers no less held to a material hell.

In the middle ages Christian literature was mainly composed of the legendary visions of saints, in which views across the gulf had a large share.

The Devil was represented bound by red-hot chains, on a burning gridiron in the centre of hell. The screams of his never-ending agony made its rafters to resound; but his hands were free, and with these he seized the lost souls, crushed them like grapes against his teeth, and then drew them by his breath down the fiery cavern of his throat. Demons with hooks of red-hot iron plunged souls alternately into fire and sea. Some of the lost were hung up by their tongues, others were sawn asunder, others gnawed by serpents, others beaten together on an anvil and welded into a single mass, others boiled and then strained through a cloth, others twined in the embrace of demons whose limbs were of flame.**

* *Library of the Fathers*, pp. 15-16.

* *Lecky, History of European Morals*, vol. ii., p. 222.

Is it strange that the ages when Christian barbarism overcame Pagan civilisation were known as the Dark Ages? "George Eliot" well says that "where the tremendous alternative of everlasting torments is believed in—believed in so that it becomes a motive determining the life—not only persecution, but every other form of severity and gloom are the legitimate consequences."

Grandly horrible is the reflection in Dante's *Inferno* of the doctrine of hell, held in the palmiest days of Christianity. The gloom of that poem is relieved by a few touches of compunction at the doom of noble heathen and of tenderness for those who sinned through love; proving the poet superior to his creed. Yet consider the punishment of heretics, buried in burning sepulchres while from their furnace tombs rise endless wails. Think of the terrible inscription, *Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate*. Remember that Dante placed in this hell his political opponents, and how he depicts himself as striking the faces and pulling the hair of the tormented; then answer, is not this great poem a lasting monument of Christian barbarity?

St. Thomas Aquinas, the angelic doctor, treats of the punishment of hell under the title *Poena Damnatorum*,* and teaches (1) that the damned will suffer other punishments besides that of fire; (2) that the "undying worm" is remorse of conscience; (3) that the darkness of hell is physical darkness, only so much light being admitted as will allow the lost to see and apprehend the punishments of the place; (4) that as both body and soul are punished, the fire of hell will be a material fire, of the same nature as ordinary fire but with different properties; and the place of punishment, though not certainly known, is probably under the earth.

Hagenbach, in his *History of Doctrines*, 209, note cliv., says of the blessed, "They witness the suffering of the damned without being seen by the latter," and refers to Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas.

Even the mystic Suso expressed himself as follows:—

'Give us a millstone,' say the damned, 'as large as the whole earth, and so wide in circumference as to touch the sky all around and let a little bird come once in a hundred thousand years and pick off a small particle of the stone, not larger than the tenth part of a grain of millet, and after another hundred thousand years let him come again, so that in ten hundred thousand years he would pick off as much as a grain of millet, we wretched sinners would desire nothing but that the stone might have an end, and thus our pains also; yet even that cannot be.'**

* *Summæ Suppl. qu 97.*

** *Quoted in Hagenbach's History of Doctrines*, 210, vol. ii., p. 152

The work of Father Pinamonti, entitled *Hell Opened to Christians*, has been for over two hundred years one of the most popular among Catholic Christians. It has also circulated among Protestants. An English version, with horrible pictures of the torments of the damned, has gone through many editions. We recommend its purchase to those who complain of the illustrations in the *Freethinker*, or who desire to see how savage the Christian religion is at bottom. The Christian Father of course accepts the literal meaning of hell fire. He says (p. 28): "Every one that is damned will be like a lighted furnace, which has its own flames in itself; all the

filthy blood will boil in the veins, the brains in the skull, the heart in the breast, the bowels within the unfortunate body, surrounded with an abyss of fire out of which it cannot escape."

The Sight of Hell, by the Rev. J. Fumiss, C.S.S.R., is another popular work issued "permissu superiorum" among "Books for Children and Young Persons." A more atrocious composition it is difficult to conceive. The agony is piled on as though the imagination of the writer revelled in the description of torture. One specimen, a mild one, will suffice:—

Perhaps at this moment, seven o'clock in the evening, a child is just going into Hell. To-morrow evening at seven o'clock, go and knock at the gates of Hell and ask what the child is doing. The devils will go and look. Then they will come back again and say, *the child is burning!* Go in a week and ask what the child is doing; you will get the same answer—*it is burning!* Go in a year and ask, the same answer comes—*it is burning!* Go in a million of years and ask the same question; the answer is just the same—*it is burning!* So if you go for ever and ever, you will always get the same answer—*it is burning in the fire!*

I declare I would rather put into the hands of any young child Boccaccio's *Decameron*, or any of the works put on the Roman *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, with which I am acquainted, than this pious work by a Christian Father.

Protestantism did nothing to lighten the realm of outer darkness. Rather, by its repudiation of the priest-serving doctrine of purgatory, it rendered more glaring the contrast between the condition of the saved and that of the non-elect. Calvin asks: "How is it that the fall of Adam involves so many nations, *with their infant children*, to eternal death without remedy, unless that it so seemed meet to God?" The same holy Christian says of the damned: "For ever harassed with a dreadful tempest, they shall feel themselves torn asunder by an angry God, and transfixed and penetrated by mortal stings, terrified by the thunderbolts of God, and broken by the weight of his hand, so that to sink into any gulf would be more tolerable than to stand for a moment in these terrors."

According to the *Westminster Confession*, ch. xxxiii.: "The wicked who know not God and obey not the gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments." And the *Larger Catechism*, A. 29, declares: "The punishments of sin in the world to come are everlasting separation from the comfortable presence of God, and most grievous torments in soul and body, without intermission, in hell fire forever." "They that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil into everlasting *fire*," is the doctrine of the *Book of Common Prayer*.

Bishop Jeremy Taylor, the prose poet of the Church of England, says in his discourse on the Pains of Hell*: "We are amazed at the inhumanity of Phalaris, who roasted men in his brazen bull: this was joy in respect of that fire of hell which penetrates the very entrails without consuming them." "Husbands shall see their wives, parents shall see their children, tormented before their eyes." Picture it, think of it, Christian, and then give praises to your demon God. The good, really good, bishop tells us the bodies of the damned shall be crowded together in hell like grapes in a wine press, which press one another till they burst. "Every distinct sense and organ shall be assailed with its own appropriate and most exquisite sufferings." Surely the creed is accursed which led so worthy a man as Taylor to paint with unction this description of the Pains of Hell.

* *Contemplation of the State of Man*, ch. 68.

Our own Milton, liberal in theology though he was, adheres to the Biblical idea of

*Regions of Sorrow! doleful
Shades! where
Peace And Rest can never dwell;
Hope never comes,
That comes to all: but
Torture without End*

*Still urges, and a fiery
Deluge fed
With ever-burning sulphur unconsum'd.*

Bishop Hall says: "What, oh, what is it to conceive of lying in a *fire more intense than nature can kindle*, for hundreds, thousands, millions, yea millions of millions of years, which, after all, are only a minute of time compared with eternity."

Dr. Barrow asserts that "our bodies will be afflicted continually by a sulphurous flame piercing the inmost smews." Wesley says:

*Eternity and deep despair
On every flame is written there.*

Again he says: "From the moment wherein they are plunged into the lake of fire, *burning with brimstone*, their torments are not only without intermission, but likewise without end."

The sight of the torments of the damned in hell will increase the ecstasy of the saints in heaven. This is the doctrine of St. John, and it has been repeated by orthodox Christian preachers times without number. And though orthodox Christian preachers dare not preach it now, it is the legitimate outcome of their belief. In heaven the angels see all, and must therefore witness the torments of the damned; and these do not diminish their happiness, though the damned be their own parents or their own children.

Jonathan Edwards, one of the most consistent Christians that ever breathed, devoted a work to the subject. The Thirteenth Sermon of his *Works* is entitled "The End of the Wicked contemplated by the Righteous," and is particularly devoted to the illustration of the doctrine that "the sight of hell torments will exalt the happiness of the saints forever." "It will," he continues, "not only make them more sensible of the greatness and freeness of the grace of God in their happiness, but it really makes 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, it will make them the more sensible how happy they are."* In his direful poem on the Last Day, the once popular Dr. Young makes one of God's victims vainly ask:

*This one, this slender, almost no request:
When I have wept a thousand lives away,
When torment is grown weary of its prey,
When I have ran of anguish'd years in fire
Ten thousand thousands, let me then expire.*

The pious Dr. Samuel Hopkins thus displays the Divine character and illustrates the loving kindness of the blessed Scripture promises: "The smoke of their torment shall ascend up in the sight of the blessed for ever and ever, and serve, as a most clear glass before their eyes, to give them a bright and most effective view. This display of the Divine character will be most entertaining to all who love God, will give them the highest and most ineffable pleasure. Should the fire of this eternal punishment cease, it would in a great measure obscure the light of heaven and put an end to a great part of the happiness and glory of the blessed."

Contrast with this holy utterance of the pious Christian, the burning words of the Atheist poet, James Thomson:

*If any human soul at all
Must die the second death, must fall
Into that gulph of quenchless flame
Which keeps its victims still the same,
Unpurified as unconsumed,*

*To everlasting torments doomed;
Then I give God my scorn and hate,
And turning back from Heaven's gate
(Suppose me got there!) bow, Adieu!
Almighty Devil, damn me too.***

Baxter, in his *Saint's Everlasting Best*, declares: "The principal author of hell torments is God himself. As it was no less than God whom the sinner had offended, so it is no less than God who will punish them for their offences. He has prepared those torments for his enemies.... The everlasting flames of hell will not be thought too hot for the rebellious; and when they have burnt there for millions of ages, he will not repent him of the evil which is befallen them."

* *The Eternity of Hell Torments*, p. 25 (London. 1789).

** *Vane's Story*.

Was not Shelley right when he described the Christian God:—

*A vengeful, pitiless and almighty fiend,
Whose mercy is a nick-name for the rage
Of tameless tigers hungering for blood.*

It would be easy to multiply citations. Spurgeon, among living divines, has preached hell as hot as anybody. But the doctrine is decaying together with real faith in Christianity.

Walter Savage Landor well says: "The priesthood in all religions sings the same anthem. First, the abuses are stoutly defended, but when the ground is no longer tenable, then these abuses are to be distinguished and separated from the true faith." But what are we to think of the sudden conversion of a church that has taught falsity so long? If it did not know the truth on this important point, how can it be credited with knowing it upon any other matter? The rejection of hell cuts the ground from under the gospel. Salvation supposes a prior damnation. If there is no hell no Savior is needed. Christianity is all of a piece, and, its main prop gone it must fall like a house of cards.