

THE COMPLETE PREACHER.

VOL. 2.

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY, 1878.

No. 5.

Eternal Punishment.

A SERMON

PREACHED BY **Howard Crosby, D.D., LL.D.**

[Chancellor of the University of New York.]

Fill their faces with shame; that they may seek Thy name, O Lord. Let them be confounded and troubled forever; yea, let them be put to shame, and perish; that men may know that Thou, whose name alone is JEHOVAH, art the Most High over all the earth.—Ps. lxxxiii: 16-18.

Some men would make sin a very light thing, and so count all teaching of everlasting punishment a monstrous error, wholly incongruous with our ideas of a just God. Others would make God the author of everything, sin included, and therefore responsible for all sin's enormity, and hence count the everlasting punishment of man an outrage on justice. God's revealed word strikes away the foundations of both these philosophic theories. It declares sin to be rebellion against the Holy Ruler of the Universe. It describes it as corrupting the whole being of man. It shows it to be abhorrent to a righteous God, putting the sinner out of all connection with the purity of heaven, and bringing necessarily upon him all the woes that separation from God implies. It further teaches that God in no sense whatever is the author of sin, that He never decreed it or encouraged it or connived at it, but that it is the offspring of man's unfettered will, and that on man alone is the responsibility. This world of mankind is not a machine made to go as it does by God's decrees. It is a world of independent wills, made independent in the likeness of God at the creation. God made man upright, but man sought out the many inventions of sin. God brought up and nourished children, but they rebelled against Him. To say that all this was pre-arranged and effected by God Himself is to say that His word is all a sham, and that His expostulations with the wicked are all gross hypocrisy. God declares that He wishes all men to come to repentance. What does this mean, if it does not mean that God both has no hand whatever in their sin, and also has offered His grace to all as far as He consistently could.

We are to take things as we find them, and not philosophize against facts and revelation. There is a war against God. The human heart is engaged in that war, and is an enemy to God.

All questions as to the origin of this war have nothing to do with altering the fact. War against God must be the most awful fact in the universe, and those who war against God must occupy the most fearful position imaginable. Now, all sin must be brought to this standard, and rank in this category, and all sinners must be seen in their true position before we can judge about the righteousness of eternal punishment. Know what the infinite holiness of God is, and know what war against that holiness is in the human heart, and there will be found all possible congruity between eternal sin and eternal punishment. The alienated race of man, as such, must suffer eternal death—that is, eternal banishment from God. The only exception is Christ Jesus, the only sinless man and those who are in Him. The hand on the head of the sacrifice betokened this union from the beginning. He, as sinless, could suffer for all those who would unite themselves to Him and receive His Spirit. There is nothing strange in eternal punishment, but something very strange in salvation. Men talk about eternal punishment as if it were an *ab extra* work of God forever scourging souls for past sins, and so they very naturally conclude from these premises that God might stop scourging if He wished to, and let man up, and then man would be happy. But this is a very erroneous notion of the punishment of hell. The sinners' torture is the operation of their own sin. "Where *their* worm never dies and *their* fire is never quenched"—the worm and the fire are not in God's hand, but in the sinner's heart. The sinner could not be happy because he hates God and holiness. If he could not be attracted to holiness in this world, he certainly cannot be in the next, where every passion must be intenser in the developed powers of the soul. So the next world to the sinner must be just what his conscience here gives forebodings of—a world of sin and agony forever and forever. Some, who see this must be so if the sinner is to survive, jump to the conclusion that he will be annihilated as by a merciful act of God. But this is a mere fancy, and proposed directly against God's revealed word. Eternal *punishment* is not annihilation. If it be punishment at the moment of annihilating, it certainly is not punishment afterward. You cannot punish a being who does not exist. Destruction and death do not mean annihilation, but the ruin of the soul away from God—its misery and torture. The view of Dives in hell shows us what the destruction and death of the wicked are.

If annihilation were the issue, *dying in one's sins* would not be so awful a thing as Christ held it up to the Jews to be. But apart from Scripture, if God is too good (for that is the cant phrase they use) to punish, and therefore will annihilate, why does His goodness allow Him to see men suffer such torments as many do in *this* life? Why does he not annihilate all who

otherwise would be wretched at their birth? You see what folly all our reasoning *à priori* about God's ways will land us in! We go back to His word, and there see that as the righteous go into everlasting life so the wicked go into everlasting punishment. The same word is used for both. It is the word of all others that would be selected for the idea. No human word can express *eternity* as we approximately conceive it in our minds. The very word "eternity," when etymologically analyzed, only means "a very long time." That is owing to the weakness of human speech, as the offspring of a weak and finite mind. Just as we say "*infinite*," that is, "not finite," which is as near a term as we can get for the idea, so we say "*eternal*," that is, "*very long*," for the idea of that which never ends. This very word "*never*," which I have just used in the definition, is open to the same analysis. So exceedingly foolish is it to argue on this subject from the weakness of the word "eternal." There is too much readiness in some quarters to correct God's Word, as if little man, who only sees what is just about him, could legislate for the universe and for eternity, and determine what ought and what ought not to be. The humble heart will search God's Word thoroughly and take what God says, finding there a safe foundation which it cannot find in human speculation. It is the proud heart that recoils from God's Word, as it constantly shows the fearful and deadly character of sin and the responsibility of man. It is because of the frightful doom of the sinner that the Word of God holds up so clearly the future, that man may be warned and fly to the only refuge, even to the arms of the Divine Redeemer. The imprecatory Psalms are a part of such warning. They are the inspired foretokeners of the awful consequences of sin; and not only are they warnings to the wicked, but they are comforts to God's people as showing them the end of the contest against wickedness and the triumph of holiness over the foes of God. They are terrible in their language, because they treat of terrible truths. Scoffing men love to say that they are vindictive and cruel, forgetting that they are the utterances of God through His prophets against the persistent criminals at His bar, and hence all that is cruel is made so by their own guilt. When an earthly judge says of a notorious murderer, "Let him be hanged by the neck till he is dead," is he cruel? Is he not using the language of justice which finds an echo in every conscience? And shall not the Judge of all the earth do *right*? Shall He not pronounce the sentence sin demands? Or shall He confound sin and righteousness together by a mercy which would itself only be weakness and sin, and treat the stout rebel as a tender and contrite child?

When God speaks it is not man with his envies, jealousies, hatreds, anger, selfishness and sin, but it is infinite purity,

holiness, truth, righteousness, goodness and love, and His words are not to be judged by a human standard. *Sin* is the awful fact with us, and we must humbly bow before God as He defines it and declares its doom. Blessed be God that we have a secure shelter in the Lord Jesus, a covert from the tempest, an ark of salvation, where we can hear the threatenings of justice with calm and peaceful minds!

In the text five points of doom are specified. The ungodly are to have their faces filled with shame; they are to be confounded; they are to be troubled; they are to be put to shame; they are to perish. What is meant by these particulars?

(1) *To fill their faces with shame* is to write their wickedness on their persons, so that all can see what their character is. Here on earth men are hypocrites and hide their true character. Under the aspect of gentleness they conceal a heart at war with God. But some even here break through the disguise, and their depravity shows itself already to all. That which is done partially here will be done thoroughly hereafter. The secrets of all hearts shall be made manifest. The enemy of God shall have his name emblazoned on his forehead, and all shall see the fitness of his doom.

(2) *To be confounded* is to be filled with dismay and terror—to lose all their self-confidence—to realize their true situation, which they had hitherto succeeded in concealing from themselves; when engaged so absorbingly in their own schemes against God they hide God's justice and its progress from their own eyes; when their own schemes ultimately fail and they can no longer hide their attention in *them*, their helpless and hopeless condition as aliens from God in affection and character, in a confirmed growth of sinfulness, ever augmenting itself, will strike them with appalling fear—not a fear that leads to repentance, softening the heart and humbling it before God—they have gone too far for that. Moral character hardens into adamant with its practices, whether good or evil; and when a man has persisted in revolt against God he at length becomes unchangeable in his opposition to holiness, so that the terror that then may come upon him at sight of his peril is one that would lead him to cry to the rocks and the mountains, but not to God.

(3) *To be troubled* is to feel the workings of sin in all their fulness, unrestrained by the divine grace, which in this world is generally more or less active in the hearts and lives of the wicked. *Sin is trouble*. It is the action of every faculty of the soul, contrary to the design of the Creator, producing a spiritual friction and pain in each. Now, when this becomes thoroughly developed the soul experiences unutterable agony. Even in this world there have been innumerable instances where hell has begun on earth, and the fierce tortures of the

spirit have turned the man to a demon, or driven him to suicide, as if he could kill the soul when he should kill the body.

(4) *To be put to shame* is to feel no longer the lofty defiance which for a time made headway against rebuke, entreaty and correction, but to feel the contempt of one's own soul so as to endeavor (all in vain) to hide from one's self. A Christian, when abhorring himself, can fly to God, but the wicked soul abhorring itself has no whither to fly. It is doomed to stay in its own dreary company and bear the distressing weight of its own shame. An eternal conviction with no conversion—what can be more terrible than that? It is being chained fast to everything we loathe, held in the embrace of all that excites our disgust.

(5) *To perish* is to continue forever in the conditions just described. The word in the second clause is the echo of the word "forever" in the first clause. The two parts answer to one another. "Let them be confounded and troubled forever; yea, let them be put to shame and perish." The "being confounded" and "being put to shame" (as we have seen) are analogous, dismay and disgust being the two sides of the same wretched, godless experience; and so the "being troubled forever" and the "perishing" are analogous, representing the internal workings of depravity, with a pang in every stroke. In vain do some strive to explain such words as *perishing* and *destruction by annihilation*. The Scripture explains itself. It speaks of a *torment day and night forever and ever* (Rev. xx: 10), and tells us of those who shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb, the smoke of whose torment ascendeth up forever and ever. That this is a figure is very evident, but it is equally clear that it figuratively pictures to us a punishment that never has an end.

But, say some, why dwell on such horrid topics? Why not preach the love of Christ? We must do what God's Word does. We must preach the love of Christ, and also show the frightful truth of eternal misery. The gospel is a savor of life, and also a savor of death. It saves and it hardens. It takes to heaven and sends to hell. Before the great and awful fact of sin it can deal in no compliments and pretty things. It is a question of eternal life or eternal death—of everlasting joy through Christ or everlasting wretchedness through sin. The gospel, moreover, warns *in order to save*. "That man may know that Thou, whose name alone is JEHOVAH, art most high over all the earth." These are the words of the text. The word of God would have men see the wicked go down to doom in order that God's grace may be accepted and the wretched procession cease. Even here on earth the spectacle of men given over by their sins to stolid indifference or persistent atheism is an enacted warning to others lest they too sin away their

days of grace. The phrase in the 16th verse has the same bearing, "Fill their faces with shame that they may seek Thy name, O Lord." The last verb is impersonal. The phrase is, "Fill the faces of the rebellious with shame, that men may seek Thy face, O Lord." Let the sin and wretchedness of their hearts be so inscribed on their lives that men may take warning and avoid their doom by yielding to the mercy of God, which is in Jesus Christ, who is the *name* of God as He is the *word* of God. There is a written gospel to which we are to give heed, but there is also the illustration of that gospel in the Church of Christ, on one hand, finding peace and joy, and in the wicked, on the other, who have no peace, but are ever restless and unsatisfied, anticipating their doom in the disquiet of their souls. He is the wise man who opens his eyes to these illustrative facts, and casts his lot with those who accept the gospel and its redeeming grace.

There is one other aspect of these imprecatory Psalms to which we must allude before closing. *The imprecations are in man's mouth.* How can that be, without making man a mere curser of his brethren? The answer is this: That as men draw near to God they see things as God sees them. The holier the heart is, the more it is struck with abhorrence at all persistent enmity to God's holiness. It ranges itself on God's side, and sympathizes with Him in His justice, and so invokes in His name the curse that holiness must bring upon sin. It looks forward to the final triumph of truth over falsehood, of righteousness over wickedness, and in the spirit of prophecy it calls down the final doom upon the ungodly. There is no personal revenge or low human delight in misery in such an attitude, but an identification of the soul with all that is pure and true. It is a false religion that paints everything rose color, and salves over sin with sentimentality. It is a false religion that does not see the storm as well as the sunshine, the lightning bolt as well as the serene sky. Men are ever trying with their conceited philosophies to do away with everything that is hard and repulsive. *They forget sin.* While sin lasts there must be the harsh and the repulsive. There must be judgment and wrath, there must be misery and anguish. And if they can show us how sin will end, we may be ready to hear of some limit to the misery and anguish. But that they cannot do while God's Word is clear and distinct in its terrible utterances of eternal banishment from the presence of God into the outer darkness, where is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. If there is a soul here to-day who has not fled for safety to the only Saviour, I call upon him now, while this dreadful subject is before him, and while God is waiting to be gracious, to yield at once to the call of the Most High. Delay to-day may harden your heart and seal your doom. Come unto me, says our dear Lord, and I will give you rest.