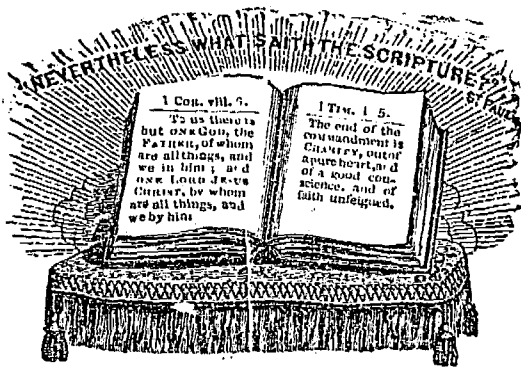


THE BIBLE



CHRISTIAN.

TRUTH, HOLINESS,

LIBERTY, LOVE.

VOL. IV.

MONTREAL, FEBRUARY, 1847.

No. 2

ENDLESS PUNISHMENT.

[The following Letter on the Eternity of Future Punishment, written by the Rev. John Foster, a distinguished English Baptist Clergyman, and addressed to a young Minister, is contained in the "Life and Correspondence" of Mr. Foster, recently published.]

DEAR SIR,—If you could have been apprised how much less research I have made into what has been written on the subject of your letter than you appear to have done, you would have had little expectation of assistance in deciding your judgment. I have perhaps been too content to let an opinion (or impression) admitted in early life disperse with protracted inquiry and various reading. The general, not very far short of universal, judgment of divines in affirmation of the doctrine of eternal punishment must be acknowledged a weighty consideration. It is a very fair question. Is it likely that so many thousands of able, learned, benevolent, and pious men should all have been in error? And the language of Scripture is so strongly in favor of it that it must be an argument of extreme cogency that would authorize a limited interpretation.

Nevertheless, I acknowledge myself not convinced of the orthodox doctrine. If asked why not?—I should have little to say in the way of criticism, of implications found or sought in what may be called incidental expressions of Scripture, or of the passages dubiously cited in favor of final, universal restitution. It is the moral argument, as it may be named, that presses irresistibly on my mind—that which comes in the stupendous idea of eternity.

It appears to me that the teachers and believers of the orthodox doctrine hardly ever make an earnest, strenuous effort to form a conception of eternity; or rather a conception somewhat of the nature of a faint incipient, approximation.—Because it is confessedly beyond the compass of thought, it is suffered to go without an attempt at thinking of it. They utter the term in the easy currency of language; have a vague and transitory idea of something obscurely vast, and do not labor to place and detain the mind in intense protracted contemplation, seeking all expedients for expanding and aggravating the awful import of such a word. Though every mode of illustration is feeble and impotent, one would surely think there would be an insuppressible impulse to send forth the thoughts to the utmost possible reach into the immensity—when it is an immensity into which our own most essential interests are infinitely extended. Truly it is very strange that even religious minds can keep so quietly aloof from the amazing, the overwhelming contemplation of what they have the destiny and the near prospect of entering upon.

Expedients of illustration of what eternity is not, supply the best attainable means of assisting remotely toward a glimmering apprehension of what it is. All that is within human capacity is to imagine the vastest measures of time, and to look to the termination of these as only touching the mere commencement of eternity.

For example, it has been suggested to imagine the number of particles, atoms, contained in this globe, and suppose them one by one annihilated, each in a thousand years, till all were gone; but just as well say a million, or a million of million of years or ages, it is all the same as against infinite duration.

Extend the thought of such process to our whole mundane system, and finally to the whole material universe: it is still the same. Or, imagine a series of numerical figures, in close order extended to a line of such a length that it would encircle the globe, like the equator—or that would run along with the earth's orbit round the sun—or with the outermost planet Uranus—or that it would draw a circle of which the radius should be from the earth or sun to Sirius—or that should encompass the entire material universe, which, as being material, cannot be infinite.

The most stupendous of these measures of time would have an end; and would, when completed, be still nothing to eternity.

Now think of an infliction of misery protracted through such a period, and at the end of it being only commencing—not one smallest step nearer a conclusion:—the case just the same if that sum of figures were multiplied by itself. And then think of man—his nature, his situation, the circumstances of his brief sojourn and trial on earth. Far be it from us to make light of the demerit of sin, and to remonstrate with the supreme Judge against a severe chastisement, of whatever moral nature we may regard the infliction to be. But still, what is man?—He comes into the world with a nature fatally corrupt, and powerfully tending to actual evil. He comes among a crowd of temptations adapted to his innate evil propensities.—He grows up (incomparably the greater proportion of the race) in great ignorance; his judgment weak, and under numberless beguilements into error; while his passions and appetites are strong; his conscience unequally matched against their power—in the majority of men, but feebly and rudely constituted. The influence of whatever good instructions he may receive is counteracted by a combination of opposite influences almost constantly acting on him. He is essentially and inevitably unapt to be powerfully acted on by what is invisible and future. In addition to all which, there is the intervention and activity of the great tempter and destroyer. In short, his condition is such that there is no hope of him, but from a direct, special operation on him of what we denominate grace. Is it not so? are we not convinced—is it not the plain doctrine of Scripture—is there not irresistible evidence from a view of the actual condition of the human world—that no man can become good, in the Christian sense, can become fit for a holy and happy place hereafter, but by this operation *ab extra*. But this is arbitrary and discriminative on the part of the sovereign Agent, and independent of the will of man. And how awfully evident is it, that this indispensable operation takes place only on a comparatively small proportion of the collective race.

Now this creature, thus constituted and circumstanced, passes a few fleeting years on earth, a short sinful course; in which he does often what, notwithstanding his ignorance and ill-disciplined judgment and conscience, he knows to be wrong, and neglects what he knows to be his duty; and consequently, for a greater or less measure of guilt, widely different in different offenders, deserves punishment. But endless punishment! hopeless misery, through a duration to which the enormous terms above imagined, will be absolutely nothing! I acknowledge my inability (I would say it reverently) to admit this belief, together with a belief in the divine goodness—the belief that "God is love," that his tender mercies are over all his works. Goodness, benevolence, charity, as ascribed in supreme perfection to him, cannot mean a quality foreign to all human conceptions of goodness; it must be something analogous in principle to what himself has defined and required as goodness in his moral creatures, that in adoring the divine goodness, we may not be worshipping an "unknown God." But if so, how would all our ideas be confounded, while contemplating his bringing, of his sovereign will, a race of creatures into existence; in such a condition that they certainly will and must—*must*, by their nature and circumstances, go wrong, and be miserable, unless prevented by especial grace—which is the privilege of only a small proportion of them, and at the same time fixing on their delinquency a doom of which it is infinitely beyond the highest arch-angel's faculty to apprehend a thousandth part of the horror.

It must be in deep humility that we venture to apply to the measures of the divine government, the rules indispensable to the equity of human administration. Yet we may advert to the principle in human legislation, that the man tempted to crime should, as far as is possible without actual experience, be apprised of the nature and measure of the penal consequence. It should be something the main force of which can be placed in intelligible

opposition, so to speak, to the temptation. If it be something totally out of the scope of his faculties to apprehend, to realize to his mind, that threatened something is unknown, has not its appropriate fitness to deter him. There is, or may be, in it what would be of mighty force to deter him if he could have a competent notice of it; but his necessary ignorance precludes from him that salutary force. Is he not thus taken at a fearful disadvantage? As a motive to deter him, the threatened penalty can only be in proportion to his (in the present case) narrow faculty of apprehending it; but as an evil to be suffered it surpasses in magnitude every intellect but the Omniscient. Might we not imagine the reflection of one of the condemned delinquents suffering on, and still intertainably on, through a thousand or a million of ages, to be expressed in some such manner as this:—Oh! if it had been possible for me to conceive but the most diminutive part of the weight and horror of this doom, every temptation to sin would have been enough to strike me dead with terror; I should have shrunk from it with the most violent recoil.

A common argument has been that sin is an infinite evil, that is, of infinite demerit, as an offence against an infinite Being; and that since a finite creature cannot suffer infinitely in measure, he must in duration. But surely, in all reason, the limited, and in the present instance *diminutive nature of the criminal* must be an essential part of the case for judgment. Every act must, for one of its proportions, be measured by the nature and condition of the agent. And it would seem that one principle in that rule of proportion should be, that the offending agent should be capable of being aware of the magnitude (the amount, if we might use such a word) of the offence he commits, by being capable of something like an adequate conception of the being against whom it is committed. A perverse child committing an offence against a great monarch, of whose dignity it had some, but a vastly inadequate, apprehension, would not be punished in the same manner as an offender of high endowments and responsibility, and fully aware of the dignity of the personage offended. The one would be sharply chastised; the other might as justly be condemned to death. In the present case, the offender does or may know that the Being offended against is of awful majesty; and therefore the offence is one of great aggravation, and he will justly be punished with great severity; but, by his extremely contracted and feeble faculties, as the lowest in the scale of strictly rational and accountable creatures in the whole creation, he is infinitely incapable of any adequate conception of the greatness of the Being offended against. He is, then, according to the argument, obnoxious to a punishment not in any proportion to his own nature, but alone to that infinity of the supreme nature, which is to him infinitely unconceivable and unknown.

If an evil act of a human being may be of infinite demerit, why may not a good one be of infinite excellence or merit as having also a reference to the infinite Being? Is it not plain that every act of a finite nature must have, in all senses, the finite quality of that nature—cannot, therefore, be of infinite demerit?

Can we—I would say with reverence—can we realize it as possible that a lost soul, after countless millions of ages, and in prospect of an interminable succession of such enormous periods, can be made to have the conviction, absolute and perfect, that all this is a just, an equitable infliction, and from a Power as good as he is just, for a few short sinful years on earth—years and sins presumed to be retained most vividly in memory, and everlastingly growing clearer, vaster and more terrible to retrospective view in their magnitude of infinite evil—every stupendous period of duration, by which they have actually been left at a distance, seeming to bring them, in contrast to all laws of memory, nearer and ever nearer to view, by the continually aggravated experience of their consequences.

Yes, those twenty, forty, seventy years, growing up to infinity of horror in the review in proportion to the distance which the con-

demned spirit recedes from them—all eternity not sufficing to reveal fully what those years contained!—millions on millions of ages for each single evil thought or word!

But it is usually alleged that there will be an endless continuance of sinning, with probably an endless aggravation, and therefore the punishment must be endless. Is not this like an admission of disproportion between the punishment and the original cause of its infliction? But suppose the case to be so,—that is to say, that the punishment is not a retribution simply for the guilt of the momentary existence on earth, but a continued punishment of the continued, ever-aggravated guilt in the eternal state; the allegation is of no avail in vindication of the doctrine; because the first consignment to the dreadful state necessitates a continuance of the criminality; the doctrine teaching that it is of the essence, and is an awful aggravation, of the original consignment, that it dooms the condemned to maintain the criminal spirit unchanged for ever. The doom to sin as well as to suffer, and, according to the argument, to sin in order to suffer, is inflicted as the punishment of the sin committed in the mortal state. Virtually, therefore, the eternal punishment is punishment of the sins of time.

Under the light (or the darkness) of this doctrine, how inconceivably mysterious and awful is the aspect of the whole economy of this human world! The immensely greater number of the race hitherto, through all ages and regions, passing a short life under no illuminating, transforming influence of their Creator; ninety-nine in a hundred of them perhaps have never even received any authenticated message from Heaven; passing off the world in a state unfit for a spiritual, heavenly, and happy kingdom elsewhere; and all destined to everlasting misery. The thoughtful spirit has a question silently suggested to it of far more emphatic import than that of him who exclaimed, "Hast thou made all men in vain?"

Even the dispensation of redemption by the Mediator, the only light that shines through this dark economy—how profoundly mysterious in its slow progress, as yet, in its uncorrupted purity, and saving efficacy. What proportion of the earth's inhabitants are, at this hour, the subjects of its vital agency? It was not the divine volition that the success should be greater—that a greater number should be saved by it—or most certainly, most necessarily, its efficacy would have been greater. But in thus withholding from so large a portion of mankind even the knowledge, and even from so vast a majority in the nominally Christian nations the divine application, indispensable to the efficacy of the Christian dispensation, could it be that the divine purpose was to consign so many of his creatures, existing under such fearful circumstances, to the doomed eternal misery? Does the belief consist with any conception we can form of infinite goodness combined with infinite power?

But, after all this, we have to meet the grave question, *What say the Scriptures?* There is a force in their expression at which we well may tremble. On no allowable interpretation do they signify less than a very protracted duration and formidable severity. But I hope it is not presumptuous to take advantage of the fact, that the terms everlasting, eternal, for ever, original or translated, are often employed in the Bible, as well as other writings, under great and various limitations of import; and are thus withdrawn from the predicament of *necessarily and absolutely* meaning a strictly endless duration. The limitation is often, indeed, plainly marked by the nature of the subject. In other instances the words are used with a figurative indefiniteness, which leaves the limitation to be made by some general rule of reason and proportion. They are designed to magnify, to aggravate, rather than to define. My resource in the present case, then, is simply this: that since the terms do not necessarily and absolutely signify an interminable duration, and since there is in the present instance to be pleaded, for admitting a limited interpretation, a reason in the moral estimate of things, of stupendous, of infinite urgency, involving our conceptions of the divine goodness and equity, and leaving those