

THE GOSPEL MESSENGER,

OR, UNIVERSALIST ADVOCATE.

"And the Angel said unto them, Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be unto all People."—Luko 11.

PL. 1.

LONDON, CANADA WEST, FEBRUARY, 1840.

NO. 2.

EXAMINATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF ENDLESS PUNISHMENT.

THE DOCTRINE UNREASONABLE.

"I will now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord."—Isaiah 1: 18.

Man alone, of all God's creatures on earth, is endued with the gift of reason.—We see the scriptures all along, consider and address him as a reasonable being, capable of understanding truth, and approving duty; and capable also of distinguishing, in some good degree, between truth and falsehood. Much, very much has been said upon the subject of the office of reason in matters of religion. On the one hand, it has been decried as carnal and unprofitable, and the people have been cautioned not to listen to its suggestions, on pain of the loss of their souls. On the other hand, reason has been exalted, in its own unaided strength, held up as sufficient to guide man into all truth.—Such a guide revelation has been considered unnecessary and useless, and we have been exhorted to leave the scriptures and follow the light of reason alone. Truth, I apprehend, as is frequently the case, lies between these two extremes, and reason is the ennobling gift of God, and it should be employed in matters of religion there can be no doubt. But its office is extremely limited, and in many respects it is weak and imbecile. Hence the office of revelation to unfold things which beyond the reach of man's unaided reason. Revelation, therefore, is above reason, but not opposed to it. It is designed to exhort and guide, not to depress or deprecate reason. It is, as Locke says, to reach what the telescope is to the eye, enlarging the sphere of its vision, and unveiling what would otherwise remain dark and unknown. But for the fact that reason is given to man, no revelation could be given to him, and hence reason must be employed; or we can know nothing of revelation. As a telescope would be of no use to a man without eyes, so revelation would be of no utility to a man without reason. He who would avail himself of the advantages of the telescope must use his eyes; and so he who would profit by revelation must employ his reason. To continue the figure.—As the telescope must be formed in accordance with the principles of light, and the phenomena exhibited to the human eye, so revelation, in order to be useful, must be founded upon, and consonant with, the first principles of truth and known by human reason.

God is the fountain and giver of reason, and I hold it to be the height of absurdity to suppose, that a reasonable God would reveal to reasonable beings an unreasonable doctrine. Hence, if any sentiment can be shown to be clearly opposed to right reason, the presumption is fair that it is not the doctrine of revelation. Truth is a harmonious and uninterrupted chain, which is the whole universe together, and it can be safely laid down as an axiom that no two truths can be contradictory. Now God does see some truths by his own reason, and he knows them to be true. Hence he is authorised to reject any, and every

doctrine, that contradicts these first principles.

I have proposed, in a brief series of essays, to examine the doctrine of endless punishment, and offer my reasons for rejecting it as untrue. In a previous article I attempted to show that the doctrine was anti-Christian in its spirit, and gave that as my first reason for rejecting it.

II. My second is, that it is opposed to reason, and the teachings of nature and experience.

I apprehend that those who believe the doctrine of endless misery, are not sufficiently in the habit of looking upon it in its own proper and native light. A long familiarity has closed their eyes against the deformity of its features, and enabled them to look with composure, if not with complacency upon what, at first view, is revolting in the extreme. Accustomed from infancy to contemplate the sentiment, as an important item in the Christian religion, it comes to be a matter of course, and men cease to examine whether it be reasonable or merciful. It is necessary for me, therefore, to remove this veil, and state the doctrine fully and fairly. What, then, is the doctrine of endless misery? Stripped of all its drapery it is no more or less than this: that a large part of the human family are doomed to suffer the most intense and indescribable torments so long as God shall exist, without the least hope, or possibility, of being benefited by their sufferings.—In some part of this beautiful universe God has prepared an awful, dismal, burning hell, and there countless myriads of human beings shall weep and groan unrelieved and unrelieved, while ceaseless ages shall roll; and when ten thousand times ten thousand years shall have passed, they shall have as long to suffer as if their sufferings had but just begun. And then to think of the number of the lost, to remember that there are upon this earth not less than eight hundred millions of human beings, and that out of these there are not more than fifty million that can be saved upon the broadest system of partialism; and that, by consequence, there must be more than seventy thousand souls going down to hell every day, and then to think of generations that have past, and reflect upon the vast and countless multitudes that must be congregated in that huge reservoir of tears and we, the very thought bears the lie upon its front. The degree of the punishment outrages all ideas of proportion between guilt and punishment, and the number of the victims shocks all feelings of humanity or mercy. It makes the universe a theatre of cursing and blasphemy, rather than a field for the display of the boundless perfections of a merciful and benevolent Creator.

Suppose that, up to this moment, you had never heard of the doctrine of endless misery. You had lived in a world where the blessings of a munificent Father had always surrounded you, and had known nothing of that dismal hell of which you hear so much. Suppose now I should

the first time inform you that God had prepared such a place of suffering, and that that He would torment a part of his creatures without mercy, and without end.—There is not a man, woman, or child, who would not pronounce it the most unreasonable and improbable of all dreams and visions. You would go away and wonder what strange infatuation had seized upon the preacher, that he should indulge such visions. What! men to be tormented through all eternity for the sins of this short life! Man to be punished with infinite woe for his finite crimes! God who maketh the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain upon the just and the unjust, built an endless hell, and He himself to become the endless tormentor of his own creatures! This beautiful world a mere nursery, where souls are made to be transplanted to a place of endless woe! Who on earth could have thought of such an idea? Thus unsophisticated reason would view the subject when seen for the first time. And think you, that doctrine is any more reasonable, or consistent, for having been repeated so long and so often? Nay; but a lie a thousand times told is but a lie after all. But men become so accustomed to hear it, that they cease to detect its falsehood.

So of the doctrine in question. Though of all things on earth, I hold most improbable and unreasonable, and calculated so to strike the mind of the unprejudiced man, yet, it has been sounded in our ears until we receive it as a matter of course, and scarce think of enquiring whether it is reasonable or not.

The truth is, guilty fear and affrighted superstition, not reason, originated this sentiment; and there is truth in the language of the poet, when speaking of the heathen superstitions, he says:

"Fear made her devils, and weak hope her Gods."

"And heaven was built on pride, and hell on spite."

But let us look at the subject in another light. Let us go back in our minds to the time, if time it may be called, when God lived alone, ere yet his spirit had awaked forth upon the dark waters to rouse this universe into existence. There was no being but God in the wide extent of space, and the Almighty was about to put forth his power and create the worlds and their inhabitants, and man at the head of all on earth. Reason, plain and unprejudiced reason declares that the goodness of the Creator would lead him so to create man that his existence should prove a blessing. We can suppose no absolute necessity for creating man at all, and therefore he owes his existence to the free choice of the Creator. The Creator, being good, could have no other but a good object in the creation of any being. The same reason declares that the wisdom of God could devise a plan, which if carried into effect, would secure ultimate blessedness and happiness to all. And yet again, the same reason declares that the power of an Almighty arm could

carry the plan into execution, and that no obstacles could possibly hinder the accomplishment of his purpose. Reason, therefore, most sternly forbids the idea that a God of wisdom, power, and goodness, should create multitudes of beings for ceaseless woe, or that even the possibility of such a calamity should enter into his government.

But I pass on, and remark, that the doctrine in question is opposed to the teachings of nature. Great nature's volume lies ever open before us, and on its ample pages God has written lessons of truth about which there can be no mistake. The sun rises in the morning from the chambers of the east, and in all his journey through the skies he is a silent and powerful preacher of the immortal and impartial goodness of that Being who kindled his mighty fires, and bade him shed down his golden rays upon all that live; and move, and breathe the vital air. He shines upon the saint. He shines also upon the sinner far gone in the paths of iniquity. He shines upon the rich, and he gilds with equal radiance the lowly cot of the humble peasant. Over all the earth his beams are felt, and there are none so high, so low, so rich or so poor, that this great preacher does not proclaim to him the kindness and mercy of the government of heaven. Look again, at the fair face of the moon, and the beauty of the stars that sparkle from their abode on high, and so peacefully shed down their radiance upon a sleeping world, and read there the glory and the goodness of the Lord; and in them a stern denial of the doctrine of endless and merciless wrath.

The lesson thus sounded from the skies is repeated, from the earth with all her thousand tongues. For whom, and for what, does the gentle shower fall, and the dew distil? For whom, and to what end, does the earth bud and bring forth that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater. For whom, and what, do the limpid waters gush from ten thousand fountains? For whom do the broad rivers flow, and the ocean roll her waves, swelling the eternal bass in creation's anthem of praise? Truth answers, they are for all, and intended to minister to the comfort of all the creatures that God has made. True, there are storms and tempests, and frosts and snows, but the same God who raises the stormy wind, and bids the tempest rage, has provided a shelter from its fury. He who scatters the frost, and whitens the earth with sleet and snow in winter, has given the cheerful, blazing fire, to warm our shivering limbs, and has bade the sun return from southern climes, and mount again the northern skies to melt the snow, and cause spring in its beauty to visit the earth. And these blessings are provided for all. The gentle shower falls alike upon the fields of the saint and the sinner. The morning smokes as gaily, and the birds sing as sweetly, around the cot of the poor as the pasture of the rich. Every morning's sun taunts