

Pastor and People.

Sermon preached in West Church, Toronto, 4th June, 1876, by Rev. R. Wallace, on Cor. iii. 12-16.

Men's works tried as by fire, to prove them, and the awards of the builders on the foundation according to the character of their work.

(Continued from last week.)

Here, perhaps, I may be told that the doctrine of restoration or of putting a final end to sin and misery, represents God in a more amiable character. To this I reply those who hold such a view arrogate to themselves, it may be unconsciously, to be both wiser and kinder than God. God has plainly declared in those passages I have given, that it cannot be, that it will not be. He tells us plainly, often and urgently, that it is only by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that we can escape that pit wherein is no water! Shall his mere creature man who knows nothing in comparison with God, yet make himself wiser than God? Shall poor, fallen, sinful man make himself kinder and more loving than the Father of our spirits? "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do that which is right?" Doubtless God has good reasons for the permission of sin, and for its eternal punishment.

We have good reason to believe that more glory will redound to God than if sin had not been permitted—yea, more that the final and greater happiness of the universe will be promoted thereby. It will teach the universe the fearful evil of sin, as they could not otherwise have learnt it, and will thus be one of the great sources and supports, or guarantees, of the continued obedience of unfallen angels and redeemed men.

Besides the redeemed themselves will be brought nearer to God, and be greatly exalted by their union with Christ, and their natures being assimilated to His,—in a way that would never have taken place but for the fall of man and the redemption which followed. Thus ultimately we have reason to believe, in accordance with Divine revelation, greater glory will redound to Jehovah and greater happiness to the universe at large. The Scriptures teach us that all things are ordered for the divine glory and the good of God's rational and moral creatures. Yea, God is love, and the restraint and even endless punishment of sin is only love acting for the highest well-being of the universe. And just as human governments find it necessary to separate criminals from the rest of mankind, and to confine and imprison and punish them to prevent the increase of crime, doubtless the Divine government acts on the same principle, in separating the ungodly from those saved by Christ, and confining them forever in the place of woe.

The real riddle of existence, the problem that confounds all philosophy and natural religion too, so far as religion is a thing of man's reason, is the fact that evil exists at all,—not that it exists for a longer or shorter duration.

God is infinitely wise, holy, good and powerful, and yet sin exists alongside that infinite holiness, wisdom, goodness and power. Yea, God is also unchangeable. "He is of one mind, and who can change Him?" Therefore the infinity of His eternal nature does not ebb and flow with every increase and diminution in the sum of human guilt or misery. Against this unmoveable barrier—the existence of evil—the waves of philosophy have dashed themselves unceasingly since the birth of human thought, and have returned broken and powerless, without displacing the minutest fragment of the stubborn rock,—without softening one feature of its dark and rugged surface. This mystery man cannot unravel. We belong to the infinite. There are many problems arising out of man's relation to the infinite which we cannot fathom, and which we must leave to infinite wisdom to solve in its own good time and way. One source of the fatal and dangerous error to which we have referred is that it is assumed that the punishment will be solely with reference to the sins committed in this life, that the guilt will continue finite while the misery will be forever prolonged. Is it then certain that there will be no sin beyond the grave? that an immortal soul can incur God's wrath and condemnation only while united to a mortal body? On the contrary we have reason to believe that sin perpetuates itself, and that prolonged misery is the offspring of prolonged guilt. That most powerful reasoner, Bishop Butler, says that the Divine moral government implies that the consequences of sin shall be misery in some future state by the righteous judgment of God.

Sin unless arrested by Divine love as revealed in the cross of Calvary, naturally and necessarily propagates and perpetuates itself. The sinner will forever continue to indulge and delight in sin. He will forever continue to hate God and holiness, for the carnal mind is enmity against God, and is not and cannot be subject to His law. The sinner will sin yet more and more inveterately throughout the circling ages of eternity. He will continue as John, the revelator, says, to "blaspheme God because of the pain which he there endures;" and this, on the principle of Divine justice and holiness, requires the continued and perpetual endurance of the wages of sin.

But we are not made acquainted with all the ends or reasons why future punishment shall be inflicted, or why God has appointed that such consequent misery should follow vice, yet we may suppose that it will follow in a way analogous to that in which many miseries follow certain courses of action now. Thus poverty, sickness, infamy, untimely death from disease, or at the hands of civil justice, following certain vices here;—or a person rashly trifling on a precipice, falls down and loses his life. Sin and misery ever tend to perpetuate themselves according to a law of our nature. Evil habits gather strength with every fresh indulgence, till it is no longer—humanly speaking—in the power of the sinner to shake off the burden which his own deeds have laid upon him. In that mysterious condition of the depraved will as seen in the case of the drunkard, the sensualist, the voracious—compelled and yet free,—the slave of sinful habits, yet

responsible for every act of sin—and gathering deeper condemnation as the power of amendment grows less. In all this may we not see possible foreshadowings of the yet deeper guilt, and yet more hopeless misery, of the worm that never dies and the fire that is not quenched? The fact of this law of our nature is one to which our every day experience bears witness; and who shall say that the invisible things of God may not in this as in other instances be shadowed forth to us by things that are seen? Unless we deny the existence of sin,—deny that there is a law of sin reigning in man's moral constitution, we must acknowledge that it is in itself a progressive and self-propagating power, and therefore while we deplore its power working in the soul as a fatal malady, we should as wise men accept the only remedy—the grace of God revealed in the Gospel. And even if the import of the term everlasting were doubtful (which it is not)—he surely would be the greatest fool in the universe to risk his eternal happiness upon such a weak foundation. It would even then be the part of wisdom to secure salvation in the only way revealed by God Himself. Let us never forget that where sin has its way in any rational being it must gain the supremacy, and that where it lives unsubdued in any human heart, it reigns unto death. We cannot easily ignore or put away from us the idea of sin, unless it be in some momentary fit of moral inebriation. Man may for a time deaden his moral sensibilities to a perception of this dreadful reality. Yet the hour must come when the soul shall know and feel that it has cherished tastes and passions, habits and aims which jar against the constitution of the moral universe; and then wherever it may be, that universe will become to it a very hell. All the awakened sinner's memories and anticipations become elements of torture, praying upon his expanding capacities, and consuming as an eternal fire.

This principle has been seen and described by the world's poets, and genius has borne testimony to the wrath of the Gospel which provides a remedy for the disease of the soul, and sounds a call to all to give ear to the voice of mercy, which through Christ speaks to us from heaven. We find this idea in the lines of Lord Byron, beginning thus,—

"The mind that broods o'er guilty woe,  
Is like the scorpion stung by fire."

Yet, notwithstanding this, to us, unfaithful and miserable, the existence of evil under the government of an infinitely holy and good being, the love of God is evident from the mission of Jesus to seek and save the lost.

All this implies that man is responsible for his belief, for from that belief his conduct flows as from a fountain. This our Lord plainly declares when He says, "This is the condemnation that light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." Unbelief is described as a sin, a moral evil, which not only leaves a man an unforgiven transgressor with all his guilt crashing him to ruin, but is itself a heinous transgression, involving an indescribable amount of guilt, and therefore followed by certain and eternal condemnation, for "the wrath of God abideth on him."—John iii. 36. Hence the portion allotted unbelievers in Rev. xxi. 8. Belief depends on the discernment of evidence, and the power to discern depends on the state of the heart of the enquirer himself, and hence one source of his accountability. It is his duty to collect, examine and weigh evidence with an unprejudiced mind, as did Nathaniel and others who received Jesus as Messiah; whereas the Jews at large were under the influence of prejudice and passion, and through this influence rejected the Saviour to their own condemnation. So it is still; multitudes reject Christ because He requires them to put away their pride and to receive His teaching, and trust Him in the spirit of little children, as well as to become pure in heart—renouncing all sin whether of heart or life. A man's character and habit greatly bias his intellect. Hence the great cause of unbelief,—as of doubts and surmises which have no scriptural foundation,—is the state of the heart—the pride or vanity, the lust or passion, which reign there,—or the want of entire submission of the understanding, the will and the affections to God's authority. This principle is set forth by our Lord when He says, "If thine eye be single thy whole body shall be full of light, but if thine eye be evil thy whole body shall be full of darkness." And also when He declares that His Father makes the way of life plain to the humble enquirer—even though ignorant as a little child, while He leaves the proud and self-righteous to perish in their folly (Matt. xi. 25-27). The grand difficulty in the way of men believing on Christ as the Saviour, and believing every word that He states as true, is not the lack of evidence, but the state of their own hearts, or their want of will. "Ye will not come to me," or ye do not wish to come, through pride of heart.

For several years in my early course of study I had to struggle with doubts and anxieties as to the very existence of a *heaven being* and a future state. I kept all to myself, and was at length delivered by careful study of the evidences and by earnest prayer. Once when looking into an open grave I asked myself, is it possible that that is the end of us, and that we do not live hereafter? The very thought brought deepest agony to my mind, so that I would rather live in misery than not exist at all. This experience convinced me that there is in man an instinctive desire for, and expectation of, life beyond the present state of existence, and that those who hope for *annihilation* must be wicked and wretched indeed, for such is evidently abhorrent to human nature.

It was while pleading with throbbing heart and streaming eyes that I got entire deliverance from all such doubts and difficulties—the temptations of the evil one. And I believe that every one that truly, humbly, and earnestly lays hold on the mighty hand of the Great Redeemer will be lifted up above all doubts, and set upon the firm rock of divine and infallible truth, as revealed by the great teacher. He says, "Lay hold of my strength and ye shall make peace with me," and "they shall be all taught of God," and "they that do his will shall know of the doctrine whether it

be of God." "If any of you lack wisdom let him ask of God, and it shall be given him." "To the upright light shall arise in the darkness," and "light is given for the righteous," and will be given in abundant measure; but He also says, "the meek will He teach his way." If we would claim the fulfillment of these promises, we must come in the spirit of the humble Mary, who sat meekly at the feet of Jesus, and looked up lovingly and confidently to the Master to solve all mysteries in his own time, and to remove difficulties out of our way. All who do so will be led out of darkness into marvellous light, and be enabled to receive with undoubting faith all that the Lord hath spoken.

2nd. This leads us chiefly to consider the different awards that await the builders—"Every man's work shall be made manifest for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is, &c."

The apostle here warns all under-builders, who seek the honour of being co-workers with God in building up the spiritual temple, to beware what kind of material they build on the foundation already laid by Jehovah, for their work shall be tried by the Great Architect himself, and all that is not right material shall be rejected and destroyed, and the builders suffer loss. In this life a man may have great confidence in the doctrine which he teaches, and he may set himself above the Word of God, but his work hereafter will appear in its true character. By the day which will try every man's work, is evidently meant the great day of final judgment. In 2 Thess. i. 8, it is said "the Lord Jesus shall be revealed in flaming fire," i.e., in the midst of flaming fire. Fire is the constant symbol of trial. The day of judgment shall declare the character of every man's work. In Mal. iv. 1, we are told that "the day cometh that shall burn as an oven, and all the proud and all that do wickedly shall be as stubble, and the day cometh that shall burn them up." The figure is that of a building on which many workmen are employed. Some use proper materials, that accord with the character of the building, others materials not suited to the spiritual character of this holy temple. The building is to be tried by fire. The unsuitable materials, or unsound doctrines, and foolish or useless speculations will be burnt up. These can no more stand the test of the day of judgment than wood, hay, &c., can stand the test of fire. On this passage attempts have been made to found the doctrine of purgatory. The fire here is evidently figurative even as the wood, hay, &c., and it is not a purgative or purifying fire like the purgatory of Rome, but a *probatory* fire; it is not restricted to those dying in venial sins; the supposed intermediate class; between those entering Heaven at once, and those dying in mortal sin who go to hell, but *universal*, testing the godly and the ungodly alike—the work of Paul and Apollas; and none would say that they were in purgatory. This fire is not till the last day, whereas the supposed fire of purgatory begins at death. The fire here referred to is to try *works*; the fire of purgatory is to try *men*. This fire causes loss to the sufferer; purgatory fire is great gain,—that is admission into heaven at last to those who are purged by it—if *only it were true*. It was not this doctrine which gave rise to prayers for the dead, but the practice of praying for the dead—(which crept in from the mistaken solicitude of survivors)—that gave rise to the doctrine. This shows the danger of tampering with error, and the duty of setting our faces like a flint against its introduction. The moral influence of the doctrine of restoration is similar to that of purgatory.

Such a doctrine ought not to rest on a figurative passage. It was unknown to the Primitive Church, and was borrowed from the heathen philosophy of Greece. Plato divides men into three classes—the good, the bad, and the middling. The good proceed at once to the "islands of the blessed," the bad sink into Tartarus; the middling were purified in Acheron, and punished till their guilt was expiated, and then they were admitted to the participation of felicity. This idea of Plato is taught in Virgil (Aeneid B. 6, L. 780), "Some plunged in water, others purged by fires." This doctrine was not taught by the early church for centuries. Origen, a Christian philosopher after Plato, taught that all will be purified at the final conflagration. But such teaching is plainly contrary to Scripture, where we are distinctly told that there is no work, nor device, nor wisdom in the grave, and that as the tree falls it shall lie. Our Lord gave this doctrine no countenance when He said to the dying thief, "This day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Yet the thief was guilty of more than venial sin.

Nor does Paul give it any countenance when he says of the death of all Christians that when absent from the body, they are at once present with the Lord. Such a doctrine dishonours the perfect sacrifice of Christ, whose blood "cleanseth from all sin."

It encourages men to live in sin in the hope that, though they may have to suffer for a period, longer or shorter, they will at length emerge, having completed their term—as a criminal comes forth from a prison on earth—and will then enjoy the glory and bliss of heaven throughout eternity.

Such a principle assails the foundations of morality, and that alone shows that it is not of God, but a doctrine of the devil. It plainly bears the lineaments of that murderer and liar who said to Eve, "Ye shall not surely die." Yes, he is who suggests it still to the minds of men, in order that he may secure them as his victims, to share with him forever the prison of hell. Whether should we hearken to the God of truth, who solemnly warns us of the fearful doom that awaits the unpardoned sinner, because He loves us, or to Apollyon the destroyer, who hates us, and seeks to deceive and ruin us? The blessed and loving Saviour says that His sentence at the great day upon all the un-saved shall be, "Depart ye cursed into the lake of fire prepared for the devil and

his angels!" It was not prepared for human creatures, but for the leader of revolt in the moral universe; but those who follow him, and believe him, and thus become like him, must forever share his awful doom. This doctrine teaches that salvation, after all, is of *human merit*, and not wholly of grace as God declares, and if it be true, then those who have served out their term of punishment cannot join in the anthem of the redeemed "Unto Him that loved us, and washed us in His own blood;" but unto ourselves who, by our own suffering, have expiated our guilt and merited eternal life, be honour and glory forever and ever. We are told that those who build on the foundation sound doctrines according to Scripture and the mind of God, he shall receive the reward of a faithful servant. So also, converts built on Christ the true foundation, shall be his crown of rejoicing at the great day. On the other hand, if any man's work does not stand the test, it is found by the Great Judge to be contrary to His revealed will, or unauthorized by it, and, therefore, dishonouring to the authority of the Great Lawgiver, and endangering the interests of His kingdom, his work shall be destroyed, and instead of being greatly honoured and highly rewarded, he shall suffer loss, and shall himself be saved with extreme difficulty. The apostle is speaking of those teachers who though they retain the fundamental doctrines, yet combine with them error (v. 12).

If a teacher of Christianity mingles with God's truth his own speculations, he will find himself a loser at the Great Day. If his teaching does not stand the test of the Divine Word, he shall forfeit the special reward of a co-labourer, not that he shall lose salvation, which is a free gift, not a reward, for he remains and even builds on the foundation. "Yet so as by fire," he shall be saved because he builds on the foundation; but with apparent difficulty and danger, as a man escapes the flames when his house and goods are burned. This mode of speaking is common in Scripture. Thus Daniel says, "We went through fire and water,"—that is, passed through great danger (see Is. xlii. 2). Amos speaks of a fire-brand plucked out of the burning; and Zachariah compares Joshua to a "brand plucked out of the fire," i.e., preserved with difficulty from captivity. And Jude exhorts to "save some with fear, plucking them out of the fire"—that is warning them to flee now from the wrath to come, and to cease from all doubtful ways and ways of sin. As by fire dross is separated from gold, so if a Christian would build errors in doctrine or practice upon the foundation of God's truth, he should be separated from them by some trying dispensation, whilst they should be destroyed and he thus suffer loss.

The Lord is represented as coming suddenly to His temple in flaming fire, and all parts of the building which will not stand that fire will be consumed. The builders will escape with personal salvation—but with the loss of their work. They will thus occupy a lower place in the kingdom than they would have done had they built only with divinely appointed materials. A similar principle is set forth by Peter when he says, "If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear." Christ also declares that those who dishonour His word in their teaching, "shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven," or shall not receive the reward that they might have had if they had honoured His word—the expression of the Divine Mind—in all their teachings, for they that did so shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. v. 19, 20).

"They shall be saved out of the fire" is a proverbial expression for saved with difficulty. Who would not rather have an abundant entrance into the kingdom, and have his works follow him above, bearing fruit forever to the glory of the Great Architect of this spiritual temple, and to his own honour and joy? God says, "them that honour me I will honour." We honour God when we honour His Word or His truth revealed, for He has magnified His word above all His name.

If it become a question whether we are to honour God and be faithful in maintaining the interests of His truth or cause, or honour our fellow men, we should not hesitate for one moment. We should ever bow in lowliest reverence before God, and receive without any hesitation whatever He declares, whether we can understand it fully or not, or make it square with our ideas of the Divine Character, or with what appears to us to be just and right, assumed that God has good reasons for all He says and does, and that by and by He will make it plain. It should be enough for any loyal servant of Christ that God hath spoken. When men speak in opposition to God's Word, we must not give place to them, nor listen to them, no, not for an hour.

But as Paul said, though we or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel than has been preached in the Divine Word, let him be accursed. Let all builders or preachers beware what they build upon the foundation, lest they lose their reward. The reward of those who build on this foundation laid in Zion materials, which accord with the foundation, shall be glorious indeed. "They that turn many to righteousness shall shine as the stars forever and ever, and they can only be thus turned by the truth of God."

Let us then put away all pride and self-seeking, and bringing down all high imaginations into obedience to Christ, exalt Him and His truth, and seek not the honour that cometh from man, and He will honour us with a glorious reward as His faithful servants at the Great Day.

What we need in order to be kept from error, and to be led into all truth, is the spirit of the loving trusting child, that will lead us to believe implicitly every word God utters, and to trust our Master when we cannot trace Him, assured that what we know not now we shall know hereafter, and that He is holy in all His ways, and righteous in all His dealings with His creatures. Yes, that He does all things well, ordering everything at once for His own glory, and the highest happiness of His rational and moral creatures.

The Atheist.

The fool hath said, "There is no God!"  
No God! Who lights the morning sun  
And sends him on his heavenly road,  
A far and brilliant course to run?  
Who, when the radiant day is done,  
Hangs forth the moon's nocturnal lamp,  
And bids the planets one by one,  
Steal o'er the night val's dark and damp?

No God! Who gives the evening dew,  
The fanning breeze, the fostering shower,  
Who warms the spring morn's budding bow,  
And plants the summer's noontide flower,  
Who spreads in the autumnal bowler  
The fruit tree's snow-white stores around,  
And sends the winter's icy power  
To invigorate the exhausted ground?

No God! Who makes the bird to wing  
Its flight like arrow through the sky,  
And gives the deer its power to spring  
From rock to rock triumphantly?  
Who formed the Behemoth, huge and high,  
That at a thought the river drains,  
And great Leviathan to lie,  
Like floating isle, on ocean plains?

No God! Who warms the heart to heave  
With hoarse and feelings soft and sweet  
And prompts two playing souls to leave  
The earth's tread beneath our feet,  
And soar away on pinions sweet  
Beyond the spheres of mortal strife,  
With fair ethereal forms to meet  
That tell us of the after life?

No God! Who fixed the solid ground  
Of pillars strong, that alter not?  
Who doth the curtains sties around?  
Who doth the ocean bounds allot?  
Who all things to perfection brought  
On earth below, in heaven above?  
Go ask the fool of impious thought  
Who dares to say "There is no God!"

The Preaching of the Cross Foolishness.

1 Cor. i. 18.

It is the believer's privilege to live near to God, and to walk in the way of His commandments; he is God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that he should walk in them;" and he is constrained by love, much more effectually than by any fear of punishment, to yield unto his Heavenly Father a willing obedience of heart and soul, and to strive to "adorn the doctrine of God his Saviour in all things."

Thus we see how the wisdom of God is displayed in every part of the scheme of man's salvation, and how, notwithstanding the freeness and completeness of a sinner's pardon, the performance of good works is still secured in a far more effectual way than man's wisdom could possibly have devised. We must mark the place which good works are intended to hold in the preaching of the cross. Never should they be put forward in the slightest degree as the foundation of a sinner's hope; "for other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Christ Jesus;" neither must works be omitted, as if they were worthless in the sight of God. It is necessary to beware of self-righteousness and licentiousness; and, while the doctrine of grace is preached without reserve, holiness and obedience to the law of God must be impressed upon the people. This is the meaning of "preaching the cross," and this is the scheme which God has, in His mercy, revealed for making man holy and happy. How plainly can we trace the hand of its Divine Author in every part, and how different is it from any devised by human skill!

In the gospel, man is proved to be a sinner, helpless and condemned, and yet a free forgiveness is proclaimed for him. He is told he is a debtor, who has nothing wherewith he can pay what he owes; and no sooner does he acknowledge this truth than the debt, however great, is remitted. He is told that he can do nothing to merit eternal life, or to secure his admission into heaven. Jesus Christ has done all. The preaching of the cross is no longer foolishness to an awakened sinner, but the power of God, and the wisdom of God, exactly suited to his necessities. He sees in it all the perfections of the deity united and glorified; God's justice displayed in the punishment of sin, and yet His mercy exercised in the pardon of the sinner; His truth, and love, and perfect holiness, all shown forth in harmony with each other; and he rejoices to know that God can be just and yet the Justifier of him who believes in Jesus. Such is the change produced in the sinner's view of divine truth; and equally wonderful is the change produced in his practice. He is now actuated by a new principle, which constrains him to deny himself cheerfully for his Master's sake. He feels that, as a Christian, "he is not his own," but "bought with a price," and therefore, it is his anxious desire to "glorify God in his body and his spirit, which are God's."

Here, then, we see how truly the preaching of the cross is the power of God to those who are saved. We see that, not only in the sublime nature of its doctrines, and in the purity of its moral precepts, but chiefly in the practical effect which it produces upon a sinner's life. The Gospel contains within itself a quickening and life-giving principle, and it is this which eminently distinguishes it from every other system of morality. We find in the writings of some of the best heathen moralists, excellent exhortations on the subject of virtue and vice, but where is there an instance of their influencing one single sinner so as to induce him to forsake his sins and to devote himself to the service of God? They contained no motive or principle which could influence the heart of man. The heathen systems of morality were like a piece of machinery from which the main-spring was wanting; they had nothing to set them in motion; and, therefore, for all practical purposes, they were wholly inefficient. But in the Gospel of Christ we have a most perfect system of morality, infinitely superior to everything else of the kind, enforced by the most powerful motives, and containing within itself the seeds of life, capable of imparting vigor to, and entirely renovating the character of man. No moral teaching could ever convince a man of sin.

Have the courage to speak to a friend in a "seedy" coat, even though you are in company with a rich one and richly attired.