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SERMON

ON THE SUBJECT OF

EVERLASTING PUNISHMENT,

(FROM MATTHEW, CH. XXV, V. 46.)

DELIVERED AT THE

NEW JERUSALEM TEMPLE, TORONTO,

ON

SUNDAY MORNING, MAY 7, 1876.

BY

REV. G. FIELD, PASTOR.

(PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.)

“Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life.”

John, ch. v, v. 39.

“In all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them.”

West. Conf. Faith, ch. i, No. 8.

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REV. JOHN ROBINSON, a pastor of the Puritans, who had emigrated from England to Leyden, Holland, 260 years ago, delivered the following exhortation to those of his flock who left in the "Mayflower," for their new home in the Western world :

"If God reveal anything to you by any other instrument of His, be as ready to receive it as ever you were to receive any truth by my ministry ; for I am verily persuaded, I am very confident, the Lord has more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word. For my part, I cannot sufficiently bewail the condition of the Reformed Churches, who are come to a period in religion, and will go at present no farther than the instruments of their reformation. The Lutherans cannot be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw ; whatever part of His will our God has revealed to Calvin, they will rather die than embrace it ; and the Calvinists, you see, stick fast where they were left by that great man of God, who yet saw not all things. This is a misery much to be lamented ; for, though they were burning and shining lights in their times, yet they penetrated not the whole counsel of God ; but were they now living, would be as willing to embrace farther light as that which they first received. I beseech you remember it—'tis an article of your Church covenant—that you be ready to receive whatever truth shall be made known to you from the written Word of God. Remember that, and every other article of your sacred covenant. But I must herewithal exhort you to take heed what you receive as truth. Examine it, consider it, and compare it with other Scriptures of truth before you receive it ; for 'tis not possible the Christian world should come so lately out of anti-Christian darkness, and that perfection of knowledge should break forth at once."

See HINTON'S "History of United States.," by S. L. KNAPP, vol.1, 1832, page 41, note.

SERMON.

“ *These shall go away into everlasting punishment; but the righteous into life eternal.*”—MATT. xxv. 46.

These are the words which describe the result of the Judgment; when the good, or the blessed (represented by the sheep), are placed on the right hand; and the evil, or the cursed (by the goats), on the left. But what a vague and indefinite, or even perverted and falsified meaning may they present to the mind, unless we have a true idea of the laws or principles on which they are based.

Our opinions and our conclusions will be almost inevitably formed from the nature of our education and surroundings: we shall view the *Words* of God from the same natural stand-point that we do His *Works*; and these, unless we are better instructed, will be from our *sensuous perceptions*, or from *appearances* of truth, rather than from its *realities*. The simple and untaught mind sees in the unclouded sun, and in the smiling face of nature, an ideal picture of a pleased and benignant God; but when the heavens are covered with clouds and darkness—when the storm and the whirlwind rage, the lightnings flash, and the thunder reverberates, it is at once thought that *God is angry*—that the lightnings are the flashes of His vengeful eye, and the loud thunder the utterance of His angry voice.

But a little research into the laws and phenomena of physical science dispels this illusion. We penetrate beyond the clouds which encompass us into the realms above them, and we find that there all is calm and undisturbed repose, and that the turbulence and violence we witnessed upon the earth was due to the state and condition of the earth itself; it was, indeed, but the irruption of its own evils, or the ebullition of its own impurities. And so, in like manner, if we but ascended above those outer coverings, in which the love and wisdom of God are conveyed to man in His *WORD*, we should in like manner see that although, on the mental earth, or from the plane of the earthy or natural mind, we might often see what appeared to be anger and wrath and fiery

indignation, or the vindictive punishments of a displeased and offended God ; yet, in their spiritual atmospheres, or in those higher and elevated regions of the mind where those Divine truths are seen above (or within) the clouds of the letter, there are no such manifestations, *no anger, no wrath, no vindictive emotions*, nothing that savours of *punishment* or the *infliction of torture* ; but we should then see the WORD OF GOD in a clearer, purer, and truer light ; and the Lord would be revealed to us more nearly as He really is, *i. e.* as our Creator and re-creator, Saviour, restorer, healer, redeemer and benefactor ; as our Father, our heavenly Father ; all merciful and all-benignant, and seeking only to help us—do us good and make us better : as having patience with us ; forbearing and loving ; and instead of inflicting punishment upon us for our misdoings, or even our evil doings, as striving to reform us, and even save us as far as possible from the penalties which our own evils were bringing upon us. Such would be the changed appearance in the aspect of our heavenly Father's face, as also of His revealed WORD, when we behold it above the thick clouds in which its image has been enveloped in passing through the earthy coverings of the human scribe to whom those revelations came. It is only whilst viewing the Lord through those misty veils, those impure and perverted states of mind through which these revelations passed, and in which they were enveloped, that they assumed those outward appearances ; and yet, it is from this tintured and even tainted outward aspect that the Christian world has drawn all its ideas of the character, quality and disposition of the Creator towards His creatures ! knowing no more of His *real* and *true* character than those untutored Indian tribes who

“ See God in clouds, and hear Him in the wind ; ”

only with this difference, that it cannot be said of them that “ professing themselves to be wise, they became fools.”

But although great advances have been made in the reading and understanding of the *Book of Nature*, none have been made in reading and understanding the WORD OF GOD in Revelation. Thus, whilst the *works* of God are now viewed from the *Newtonian* stand-point, His WORDS are still read, as it were, from the *Ptolemaic* ;—the one are seen and read *above* the sensuous cloud ; the other, *under* it ; and, whilst the one presents real truths, the other presents only the *appearances* of truth. How much this must be to the disadvantage of theologic lore ! Indeed there has been progress in everything but the understanding of

the Scriptures. And, lest there *should be* progress there, an iron wall has been built around them, or rather round the interpretation which was put upon their meaning at a time of ignorance and semi-barbarism, which, like the laws of the Medes and Persians, is not allowed to be changed nor relaxed, however much it may be in antagonism to all the recognised laws and principles of science and civilization, or of a true Scriptural exegesis.

At the time when those iron walls were built within the Church, to define and limit the meaning of the language of Scripture, a very low state of civilization prevailed, and they were constructed in accordance with it. The idea of government and law then was sanguinary, vindictive, and punitive; the thought of reforming an offender had never occurred; the only object contemplated was to *punish* him; and that, too, but frequently, without mercy, justice, or reason! A loathsome dungeon,—the rack, the thumbscrews, or other mode of torture; sometimes even the cutting off a hand; or putting out an eye,—would be resorted to, to satisfy their idea of the demands of justice! Or, if moved by some rude impulse to permit escape, how was it done? Not by instruction or reformation;—no: the law was absolute,—*the penalty was stipulated*;—it was blood for blood—a hand for a hand, and a foot for a foot, and life for life! It mattered not *whose life*, so that it was an *equivalent, in their scales of judgment*.

But the law (as they had made it) could only be satisfied by such a victim as should satisfy its demands. Hence it was not unfrequently the case that a guilty murderer would be set at large, by an innocent substitute suffering the punishment in his stead.

Such a scene has been described in one of the leading periodicals of England, by a brutal ruffian being liberated on the occasion of an innocent person volunteering to suffer the penalty in his stead. When informed of it, we are told that “He held down his head stupidly to receive the words, and he drew it back again, incredulous and astounded. Oh, what a secret he had learned for future government and conduct! What a friend and abettor in his fight against mankind had he found in the law of his land! He looked the thing he was—a tiger, caught and fastened in his den! Could it do less than chill the blood, and make the heart grow sick and faint, to see the bolts drawn back, the noose loosed again, and turned unchained, untamed, fiercer than ever, into life again,”* to renew his depredations upon society? This was the rude

* *Blackwood's Magazine* for September, 1843.

barbarism of the Pagan world, and it was as common to Jew as it was to Gentile. Still, it was into these organic forms, or vicious states of mind, that the Word of the Lord, in coming to man, necessarily descended, and in which it became clothed in external expression,—so that its outer crust, or literal covering, could only be formed of such words as were there to clothe it with; hence that external or literal sense so often presents an aspect of vindictiveness, cruelty, and arbitrary and despotic power, utterly irreconcilable with those higher standards and nobler and truer sentiments and principles which are revealed in other places, where the hereditary vessels were less corrupt, or less sternly moulded. Indeed it was necessary that the Divine truth should be clothed in such coverings, to adapt it for reception at all; as, had it been given in its naked integrity, no one would have received it, for it would not have been comprehended by any one; for, if the people were incapable of understanding natural and scientific truths, how much less could they have understood spiritual and heavenly ones, which were so far above their gross comprehensions?

Still the truths were there, however deeply hidden; and they only awaited the time to come when the covering could be removed, that they might be revealed in their spirit and their life. But then, and for many centuries afterwards, they were adapted to the low and sensuous states of those to whom they were given; and it was whilst this state of ignorance and feudal barbarism still continued, that those iron walls were erected around these sensuous appearances, in the forms of *Creeds*, *Confessions*, and *Dogmas of Faith*, which have stereotyped those interpretations of Scripture in the standards of an age which we now regard as benighted, barbarous, sanguinary and vindictive. Had they been able, there is no doubt but that the Church would have bound the astronomical system of Ptolemy in the same iron chains as they had done the language of Scripture; but that they could not do; and the consequence is, that we are living at this day in an *enlightened age of Science*, and in a *benighted age of Theology!* And the one, in discovering and revealing the inconsistencies of the other, is rending and tearing it to pieces! In this way the Church has retained a dogma utterly at variance with the advance and progress of all the civilized and enlightened nations of the earth; for the violated law does not now require the *punishments* or *torments* of those who have offended it, to satisfy its justice, any more than they do a substitute to suffer them instead of the guilty. But though

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they properly desire to protect society from further injury, they clearly see that this is more effectually accomplished by the *reformation of the offender* than by any amount of *punishment* or *torture* they might be able to inflict. Hence, instead of these, those who are confined in prisons now, are not put into gloomy dungeons and manacled in chains, as a means of expiating their offence, or to pay for the injury they have inflicted, but they are guarded and protected and prevented from doing further injury, and so instructed and trained as, if possible, to make them better men; they are taught a trade, and they learn to work at it, so that they may not be again exposed to such temptations to crime as they had been before, from inability to earn a living. They have a chaplain, who attends to their religious and moral improvement, and they have the use of a library of instructive books; thus the end aimed at is their *reclamation* and *reformation*, and not their *punishment* or *torment*.

And how different is this from the idea which the *Church* entertains, that those who have offended against the Divine laws must, in order to satisfy the Divine justice, *be cast by the Lord into hell, to suffer everlasting punishment*; or, as otherwise expressed, "*be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction.*" (Conf. of Faith, ch. 33.) Regarded in this light, simply as a means of satisfying, or appeasing, or atoning for an offence, by *suffering so much pain* as a means of liquidating it, it grates upon the sensitive nerves of every tender feeling, it is repugnant to every noble and elevated sentiment of humanity, and shockingly abhorrent to those purer and truer ideas of God (as our heavenly Father) which are so distinctly revealed in those Scriptures which are less veiled by the sanguinary law of "*lex talionis*," but in which He is made known to us as God the Consoler, God the Comforter, and God the All-merciful, entreating and pleading with man to cease to do evil and learn to do well; to repent and put away his transgressions, so that iniquity might not be his ruin. Thus He says, "I, even I, am He that blotteth out thy transgressions for Mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins."

There is nothing of vindictiveness in the Divine mind. God is Love itself and Wisdom itself, and the idea of a relentless justice that knows neither love nor mercy (as well as being exorbitant in its demands), is not only utterly inconsistent with it, but an impossibility in the Divine character. It is but a remnant of Paganism, which in the dark ages was attempted to be welded into Christianity, together with other super-

stitutions. Nor do the words of our text, even on their outward literal surface, convey the idea of the wicked being punished by God (much less tormented by Him) to *satisfy or expiate their offences*. We read indeed that they shall go away *into punishment*, but it is not said that God would inflict the punishment upon them. In the Divine economy, punishments are the *consequences* that grow out of the violation of the Divine laws, whether natural or spiritual, just as pain and suffering are punishments that result from disobedience to the laws of health, and mental pain and anguish of mind are occasioned by acts of wrong-doing; they are not imposed or inflicted as a *punishment* for having done wrong, but *the wrong-doing itself produces them*. In many cases this is clearly seen; but when the cause is not seen or known, then men have attributed it to an arbitrary act of God, as they have but too often witnessed it to be an arbitrary act on the part of man. But in the words of our text, punishment is only very remotely implied; the Greek word translated "*punishment*," is "*Kolasin*," which strictly and literally means *cutting off, removing and separating from*; as a person would *cut off* and *separate* dead limbs or excrescences from his fruit trees. It means a separating and removing, as the tares are separated from the wheat, or the goats from the sheep. The righteous are represented as going to *life*, and the wicked to being *cut off from life*—thus to be dead in sin, and each to receive the recompense it produces. Punishment in such case undoubtedly results, but it is the punishment *the evil itself engenders*.

The idea of arbitrarily imposed or inflicted punishment, torment, or torture is entirely fictitious, and utterly repugnant to the Divine character. Nor is there, or can there be, any ground for sympathy or compassion for those so alienated, separated or removed; or regret that it should be so; for it is not only inevitable, but of mercy, that such a separation should be made. The welfare and the happiness of the good requires it, and the wicked themselves are but removed to the society and companionship of those who are like themselves; and however distressing and miserable their lot may be, it is nevertheless of their own choice, and they can have no cause of complaint. The wild beasts that live in the jungle neither complain nor awaken pity in the breasts of the peaceful and gentle who are separated from them. The slimy reptiles of the deep could not be supposed to awaken a feeling of regret, or disturb the complacency either of those cleaner animals which cleave the waters above them, or of the warbling songsters of the


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upper air. Nor because the wandering Arab, the roaming Indian, or the predatory invaders of our domestic comfort, seek their congenial associates amid their own haunts, or in the filthy purlieus of their own choice, harassed as they may be by those of kindred natures who may prey upon them, need we be troubled with anxiety for their welfare, or disquieted by fears lest their punishment should be unduly protracted or severe. No ; not even though the safety and welfare of the peaceable and the good, should require that they be restrained, or confined, as is often found necessary to be done in civilized society, to protect those who might be exposed to their depredations. It is undoubtedly a benevolent wish to hope that they might not always be so malignant, vindictive, and dangerous ; and it would be just as amiable to hope that the tiger might, at some time in the future, be less sanguinary, fierce, and cruel, or the serpent less venomous ; but it might be as vain and impossible as for the Ethiopian to change his skin, or the leopard his spots. If those now living in the hells could at any time change their habits, character, or disposition—or rather, if they might ever desire to do so—it would have been done where so many and so much more favourable opportunities were afforded them of doing it ; *i. e.*, whilst they yet lived upon the earth, where every opportunity was given them for knowing what was right from what was wrong, and of shunning evil and doing good, if they had desired to do so. But *they did not so desire*, but preferred to prey upon others, *knowing it was wrong to do so* ; and, instead of cultivating those kindly feelings which minister to the happiness of others, they cherished no other sentiment than “ Evil, be thou my good.”

And when, after death, they went to their like in the spiritual world, mingling with those of kindred propensities and dispositions, and surrounded as they must then be with those of the same depraved habits and passions, the only conclusion that could possibly be arrived at must be, that they would only be more and more confirmed in their evil life !

Then it must inevitably be true, that he that was unjust would be unjust still, and he that was filthy would be filthy still ; and they would desire that it should be so ! These, therefore, will be separated, cut off and removed to their like, for ever, into *kolasin æonian*, or *everlasting separation*, and to the punishment it engenders and produces ; whilst the good will, in like manner, be removed from them, and go to their *æon*

æonian, or *life everlasting* ; for then there can be no more change : each will have gone to his own home, the one he chose for himself, and each will receive the recompenses which must inevitably result therefrom. It is the order and the economy of the Divine Providence, and is impossible to be otherwise. Nor does it afford even the shadow of a reason for regret that it should be so ; neither is the mercy of the Lord less ; but it reacheth even to the hells, to, as far as possible, assuage and mitigate the miseries and the punishments which their wretched inhabitants would inflict upon each other.



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