



THE END OF THE WICKED

SAMUEL BOURN

1777

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Foreword

I FOUND this extract from Samuel Bourn's sermon, titled *The Gospel-Doctrine of Future Punishment*, reproduced by James White in an early *Advent Review*, May 15, 1855. It had a small introduction (reproduced in the *Preface* following), which indicated that it was copied from George Storrs' periodical, *The Bible Examiner* (which began publication in 1843 and continued until 1879).

George Storrs, as many will know, was a participant in the Millerite phase of the Advent movement, and was the first to introduce the doctrine of the non-immortality of the soul, and the final annihilation of the wicked, into the Advent cause. From there, it was carried into the Seventh-day Adventist church.

I located the original sermon by Samuel Bourn, on Archive.org, in a photocopy of *A Series of Discourses, Vol. 1*, originally published in 1768. From there, I obtained the full text of the sermon, and in this publication, I will include the entire text. Also, there was a letter related to the topic, printed right after the sermon in the *Discourses* volume, so I have included that as well, in the Appendix.

The extract published by George Storrs and reproduced by James White, was missing the first 20 or so pages (which fill about the first 12 pages in this volume). I have restored those, so now, this publication contains the entire sermon. I have also carefully restored the original italics.

This sermon contains a few paragraphs where Bible texts are implied, but not directly quoted. I have footnoted those wherever I identified them. I have retained the modified title used by James White (and perhaps by George Storrs also, I am not sure), "The End of the Wicked," instead of the original title, "The Gospel Doctrine of Future Punishment," as it was shorter, and more clear.

The full significance of the doctrine of non-immortality can only be seen in the light of the true representation of God's character. From the beginning of the fall, Satan represented God as a tyrant, and His laws as oppressive and unjust. These accusations

were promoted by false doctrine that found its way into the early church, during the time that it was falling away from the faith.

From Greek philosophy, Plato's idea of an "immortal soul" was borrowed, and brought into the church by some of the early so-called "church fathers" who thought they could better reach the world by presenting the Bible in modern philosophical dress. But by this mingling, the pure doctrines of the Bible were corrupted.

The reasoning was thus: If the soul is immortal, then it can never die. Therefore, if God is to punish the unrepentant sinner, it must be an eternal, never-ending punishment. Since the conflagration of fire that falls on the unrepentant at the end of time, and purifies the earth, is called a lake of fire and brimstone, it was assumed this must go on forever and ever.

This idea grossly distorted God's character. It made Him seem more unjust even than sinful earthly men. For if a man was to be tortured to eternity, for a few years of sinning, then the punishment was wholly out of proportion to the crime. In this sermon, Bourn points that out clearly:

The *Gospel Doctrine* of a total everlasting destruction is much more adapted to bring sinners to repentance than the doctrine of endless misery and torment; because they may be *convinced* of the reason and *justice* of the *former*; but never can be so of the *latter*. And it is of the greatest importance that men be convinced, not only that they shall suffer for their sins, but also that they shall suffer *justly*, and no more than their guilt deserves.

It is indeed highly requisite, that men should have a profound reverence of the Supreme Being, and a fearful apprehension of the punishment due to wickedness: but it is equally requisite, that this fear be built upon a reasonable foundation, and a persuasion of the *justice* of that punishment: it ought to be the fear of a most righteous and merciful Governor, who punishes in due measure, and to answer a wise and beneficent purpose; not of an unjust and merciless tyrant, "who punishes without measure or end to satisfy an implacable and eternal resentment."

The former is a motive proper to bring sinners to repentance, by convincing them, that if they persist in their wickedness, it will become right and fit in the great Governor of the world, and

requisite to the ends of His *goodness*, to punish and destroy them for ever, in order to put an *end* to their *wickedness*; and for an example to others. But the doctrine of an eternal preservation in the most dreadful torments is not proper to bring men to repentance, or to promote virtue in the world. On the contrary, this *antichristian* doctrine has actually produced much wickedness, and of the worst kind, and has served also to harden men in it.

Since it was the distortion of God's character that started the rebellion against heaven, and continues to fuel it, it is only the proper representation of that character, in teaching and practice, that can end rebellion. Every presentation of truth is a part of that work of setting God's character in its true, just, and merciful light. This treatise, on the nature of the punishment for sin, was an early contribution in this particular doctrinal area, one ray of light from heaven, that contributed to a proper understanding of God.

The work of correcting the distortions of God's character has not ceased, but continues today. Readers are recommended to also obtain the book, *Behold Your God*, which delves into the topic of God's character in a much more comprehensive way, and is an even greater step...

1 Peter 2

⁹ ...out of darkness into His marvelous light.

Frank Zimmerman
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Preface

From James White's reprint in *The Review and Herald*, May 15, 1855

WE HAD heard of Bourn's writings, but never could get sight of them till 1847, when we accidentally came into possession of two volumes of his Sermons. The following is an extract from his discourse, on *The Gospel Doctrine of Future Punishment*, published near a century ago.

George Storrs
Bible Examiner

The End of the Wicked

2 Thessalonians 1

⁹ Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.

THE *redemption* of mankind, or their resurrection to another life, is represented in the *Gospel* as the noblest effect of divine goodness; and the paternal love of the *Father almighty*, in this greatest instance, is recommended with all the force and beauty proper to engage our filial affection and warmest gratitude. At the same time, the *judicial* character of the supreme being, as governor of the world, and *punisher* of wickedness and disobedience, is duly maintained, and the belief of His punishing justice properly enforced, to produce reverence and fear.

Human Misconceptions of God

We may perhaps find some difficulty in forming *consistent* ideas, of the inflexible *justice* of God as united with His paternal goodness and *tender mercies over all His works*.¹ But this difficulty arises from the weakness of our minds. We are apt to imagine that the different acts of punishing and rewarding, or of saving and destroying, proceed from different principles or affections in the divine nature. Whereas every divine act equally springs from the purpose of infinite wisdom, in order to the best ends.

And though in common and popular language frequent mention is made of the divine *wrath* or *indignation*, which is imputing human passions and resentments to the supreme being; yet in reality, as in general, no human language can express His attributes; so in particular, all *passion* is, strictly speaking, *inconsistent* with the immutable happiness of the divine nature and perfection of His government. If it be thought unworthy of an earthly magistrate to judge with passion and punish from resentment, how much more should it be thought incompatible with the all-perfect governor of the universe?

¹ *Psalm* 145:9.

Yet human prejudices are so apt to arise, and intermingle themselves, in our conceptions of the supreme being and His government of the world, that we are continually tempted to ascribe some of our own affections, or indeed infirmities, to Him, and to imagine Him influenced by such emotions as we experience in our own hearts; as if the infinite and self-existent spirit was little better than such a frail composition of materials as our animal nature; when, in truth, the highest faculties of our rational nature in the best exercise of them, exhibit an image or resemblance of His perfection infinitely obscure and imperfect.²

Some men have been so weak, so misled, or so much influenced in their religious opinions by their own evil hearts, that they have not forbore to ascribe to God the very worst corruptions of human nature. As the *Heathens* debased their gods by ascribing to them bodily appetites, and even the lusts of intemperance; so some *Christians* have imputed to the all-perfect Deity the passions of partiality, tyranny and cruelty; and have erected a scheme of notions, in regard to the eternal state of men and the *decrees* of God, contrary to the natural sentiments of humanity, and to the most frequent and express declarations of the *Gospel*.

They have represented the Deity as arbitrarily *electing* particular favorites, and placing a partial affection upon them, and *reprobating* or neglecting the rest of mankind; and have described the execution of divine justice in another world as consisting, not in *destroying*, but *preserving* for ever the souls which are condemned, in order to inflict upon them endless and extreme miseries. Both which doctrines are not only void of all foundation in the *Holy Scriptures*, but are directly contrary to many explicit assertions of our *Saviour* and His *Apostles*.

God's Goodness and Love

For they [the Saviour and His Apostles] represent the whole scheme of a future state, and the divine purpose of raising mankind to another life, as proceeding from the goodness of God

² *Psalms* 50:21.

and His fatherly benevolence and clemency; and *that*, not to a few select favorites, but to the world in general.

John 3

¹⁶ For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son,

—*and sent Him, not to condemn the world, not to execute a purpose of displeasure, but to accomplish a scheme of infinite mercy and eternal salvation.*³ And,

2 Peter 3

⁹ [He is] not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance:

—*and, is no respecter of persons, but accepts all in every nation who fear Him and work righteousness.*⁴ *He is the God of the Heathens, as well as of the Jews and Christians;*⁵ *and mankind are all His offspring.*⁶ *And He will judge the world in righteousness;*⁷ not according to any particular secret decrees, but according to His universal, revealed, known, immutable, everlasting, most wise, just, and merciful decree, of *rewarding all men according to their works;*⁸ and of His infinite goodness will bestow eternal life on all good men; and will in perfect justice punish the wicked,⁹ *not by an eternal preservation in misery and torment, but by an eternal...*

2 Thessalonians 1

⁹ ...destruction from the presence of the Lord, and [from] the glory of His power.

The Punishment of the Wicked

Now as this last is a point of great moment; as it is a justice due to every doctrine of *Christianity* to rescue it from abuse and ambi-

³ *John 3:17.*

⁴ *Acts 10:34.*

⁵ *Romans 3:29.*

⁶ *Acts 17:28.*

⁷ *Psalm 9:8; Acts 17:31.*

⁸ *Matthew 16:27.*

⁹ *Romans 2:6-11.*

guity, and to represent it faithfully and clearly; and as, in this instance, it is taking away a formidable, and indeed unanswerable, objection in the mouth of an infidel against *Christianity* itself; I shall proceed to show, what is the final punishment threatened in the *Gospel* to the wicked and impenitent, adhering closely to the terms of *Holy Scripture*, which are our only authentic ground of belief, and which are, if duly attended to, sufficiently plain and explicit: as indeed it would seem unworthy of a divine revelation to leave so momentous an article dubious and perplexed.

PLAIN AND LITERAL EVIDENCE

With this view, let us first consider the plain and *literal*; and secondly, the *figurative* expressions of our *Saviour* and His *Apostles*, concerning the final punishment of wicked men in another world.

First, we are to consider the most plain and literal expressions on this subject: for in collecting the sense of Holy Scripture, these are to be attended to in the first place and principally, and the more dubious and figurative language is to be compared with and explained by them.

Now there are many passages, in which the end of wicked men, or the ultimate punishment to which they shall be adjudged, is defined in the most precise and intelligible terms, to be, *not* an *everlasting preservation* in pain and torment, but (as it is expressed in the text) *an everlasting destruction* from that *power* of God, which is equally *able* to destroy, as to preserve, to annihilate, as to create the souls of men. So when our Saviour is fortifying the minds of His disciples against the power of men, by an awe of the far greater power of God, and the punishment of His justice; He expresses himself thus:

“Fear not them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do; but I will forewarn you whom you shall fear; fear Him, who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Paraphrase of *Matthew* 10:28.

Here He plainly proposes the *destruction* of the soul (not its endless pain and misery) as the ultimate effect of the divine displeasure, and the greatest object of our fear. And when He describes the great judge of the world, as commanding the criminals to be *brought forth* and *slain* in His presence;¹¹ the expression evidently imports an absolute *destruction*, and not an endless *imprisonment* in a place of torments.

And when He says,

Matthew 25

⁴⁶ These shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal;

—it appears evident, that, by that *eternal punishment*, which is set in opposition to *eternal life*, is not meant any kind of *life* however miserable, but the same which our Apostle expresses by *everlasting destruction from the presence and power*¹² of the almighty Judge of life and death. The very term, *Death*, is the most frequently made use of, to signify the end of wicked men in another world, or the final effect of divine justice in their punishment.

Romans 6

²³ The wages of sin, [says the Apostle,] is death; but eternal life is the gift of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And,

Romans 8

¹³ If you live after the flesh, you shall die: but if through the Spirit, you mortify the deeds of the body, you shall live.

⁶ To be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life.

James 1

¹⁵ Sin when it is finished, [says James,] brings forth death.

And our Saviour says,

¹¹ *Luke 19:27.*

¹² *2 Thessalonians 1:9.*

John 3

¹⁵ Whoever believes in me shall never die, [or shall not die for ever,] but has eternal life.

And *good Christians* are said to be already passed from death unto life; and on the contrary, uncharitable and wicked Christians to be in a state of death.

To imagine, that by the term, *death*, is meant an *eternal life* though in a condition of extreme *misery*, seems to be confounding all propriety and meaning of words. *Death*, when applied to the end of wicked men in a future state, properly denotes their *ceasing to exist*, or a total *extinction of life and being*. It may contribute to fix this meaning, if we observe that the state to which temporal death reduces men is usually termed by our Saviour and His Apostles, *sleep*: because from *this* death the soul shall be raised to life again: but from the *other*, that which is fully and properly *death*, and of which the former is but an image or shadow, there is no recovery; it is an *eternal death*, an...

2 Thessalonians 1

⁹ ...everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and the glory of His power.

We might let the whole argument rest on the passages already quoted, and others of the like kind; which are as precise and determinate in expressing an utter extinction of being, as any words in familiar use of the language in which the Apostles wrote could express it.

DESCRIPTIVE FIGURES

But if we proceed to the *figures* by which the eternal punishment of wicked men is described, we shall find them perfectly *agreeing* to establish the same doctrine. One *figure* or comparison often used, is that of combustible materials thrown into a *fire*, which will consequently be entirely consumed, if the fire be not *quenched*.

Matthew 25

⁴¹ Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.

The meaning is, a total irrevocable destruction. For as the...

Matthew 3

¹⁰ ...tree that brings not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire,

–and is thereby destroyed; as the useless *chaff*, when separated from the good grain, is set on fire and if the fire be not quenched is consumed;¹³ so it appears plainly, that the image of *fire unquenchable or everlasting*, is not intended to signify the degree or duration of *torment*, but the absolute certainty of *destruction* beyond all possibility of a recovery. So the cities of *Sodom* and *Gomorrhah* are said to have...

Jude

⁷ ...suffered the vengeance of an eternal fire:

–that is, they were so effectually consumed and destroyed, that they could never be rebuilt: the expression of *eternal fire* signifying the *irrecoverable destruction* of those cities, not the degree or duration of misery of the inhabitants who perished. Again, our Saviour says,

Mark 9

⁴³ It is better for you to enter into life blind¹⁴ or maimed, rather than to be cast into hell,...

⁴⁴ Where the worm dies not, and the fire is not quenched.

The meaning is, it is better to undergo any difficulty, or submit to any loss in this world, in order to obtain the *Life to come*, than with all the advantages of *this life* to suffer at last the total irrecoverable loss of Life and Being. For those images, of *the worm that dies not*, and *the fire that is not quenched*, are set in opposition to *entering into life*, and are both intended to denote, not any de-

¹³ *Matthew 3:12; Luke 3:17.*

¹⁴ *Matthew 18:9.*

gree or duration of *misery*, but an absolute *period* of life and existence: for the *worm*, if it continues to live, destroys the patient diseased by it, and the *fire*, if it is not quenched, consumes the fuel that is cast into it.

The Prophet *Isaiah* uses the *same* figures to signify the *entire* defeat and slaughter of those who should oppose the designs of providence in the restoration of the *Jewish* state.

Isaiah 66

²⁴ They shall go forth, and look on the carcasses of them that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, and their fire shall not be quenched; and they shall be an abhorrence of all flesh:

—that is, they shall be so utterly destroyed, that none shall be left to bury the slain, but the carcasses shall be a spectacle of abhorrence on the field of battle. So when the same Prophet says,

Isaiah 33

¹⁴ Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell in everlasting burnings?

—he expresses the great irretrievable calamities and destruction, which he foresaw would come upon the people of *Judea*; without any reference to another world, as we may plainly see by the context of the whole chapter.

In like manner the author of the book of *Revelation* describes, in the *poetic* figures of prophecy, the misery and destruction which shall be inflicted *in this world* upon the Abettors of the Antichristian Apostasy.

Revelation 14

⁹ A third Angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark on his forehead or in his hand,

¹⁰ The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture in to the cup of His indignation, and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb:

¹¹ And the smoke of their torment ascends up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receives the mark of his name.

That this passage has no reference to a future state, and the final punishment of wicked men, will appear evident, if we consider that *the cup of indignation* here mentioned is the same with *the cup of the wine of the fierceness of divine wrath given to great Babylon, when she came in remembrance before God*, mentioned, *Revelation 16:19*. And if we compare this passage with the following passages,

Revelation 18

⁴ And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that you be not partakers of her sins, and that you receive not of her plagues.

⁵ For her sins have reached unto heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.

⁶ Reward her even as she rewarded you, and double unto her double, according to her works: in the cup which she has filled, fill to her double.

⁷ How much she has glorified herself and lived deliciously, so much torment and sorrow give her: for she says in her heart, I sit a Queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow.

⁸ Therefore shall her plagues come in one day, death and mourning and famine, and she shall be utterly burned with fire: for strong is the Lord God who judges her.

⁹ And the kings of the earth, who have committed fornication and lived deliciously with her, shall bewail her and lament for her, when they shall see the smoke of her burning.

And *Revelation 19:3*:

Revelation 19

³ And her smoke rose up for ever and ever.

And again the 20th verse:

²⁰ And the beast was taken, and with them the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshipped his

image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone.

²¹ And the remnant were slain with the sword of Him that sat upon the horse, which sword proceeded out of His mouth: and all the fowls were filled with their flesh.

From comparing these passages it will evidently appear that these poetical descriptions wholly relate to public calamities and temporal punishments in this world: in like manner as all the preceding poetical figures at the opening of the *seals*, the sounding of the *trumpets*, and the pouring out of the *vials*.

In the following chapter the author extends his view to a *future* state and represents the final *punishment and destruction* of wicked men by the *like* expressions and figures, by which he has before described the most terrible judgments of divine providence in *this* world.

Revelation 20

¹² And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books according to their works.

¹³ And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and Death and Hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.

¹⁴ And Death and Hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

¹⁵ And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.

It is evident here, beyond contradiction, that, *being cast into the lake of fire*, means the same with *the second death*; and that it cannot possibly mean a living in torment; for *Death*, and *Hades* (which should have been translated, *the grave*) cannot be tormented; but they may *cease to be*, which is unquestionably the true meaning: and the expression here, of *death and the grave being cast into the lake of fire*, is precisely equivalent to that of the Apostle,

1 Corinthians 15

²⁶ The last enemy which shall be destroyed is death;

—or to that of the Prophet,

Hosea 13

¹⁴ O death I will by your plagues; O grave I will be your destruction.

The Scripture-figure therefore of being *cast into an everlasting* or *unquenchable fire*, means a total destruction, or annihilation, a period of existence, or *for ever ceasing to be*.

Our Saviour's parable of the *rich-man* and *Lazarus* (besides its ultimate view) contains a most lively and affecting description of the momentous change and *reverse* of the condition of men in another world: where the diseased and famished beggar is translated to a state of ease and happiness; and the voluptuous, avaricious and inhuman rich-man is represented as passing at death into a state of misery and torments.

But in regard to the subject we are upon, the conclusion we ought to draw from this representation is, not that those torments shall never end, but that the sentence of eternal death shall be executed with more or less misery and torment preceding or attending the final period, in proportion to the greater or less guilt of the criminal: in like manner as in this world, condemned criminals are put to death, with different degrees of preceding pain and horror, proportionate to the several crimes for which they were condemned. This doctrine our Saviour teaches in the plainest and fullest manner.

The rich man was void of religion and humanity, and suffered *Lazarus* to perish at his gate by disease and famine: he is therefore represented by an elegant and striking contrast, as imploring relief in his extreme misery from the hand of *Lazarus*. But in regard to the duration of his misery, the text is wholly silent. In other passages our Saviour expressly assigns different degrees of future misery, in proportion to men's respective degrees of guilt.

Luke 12

⁴⁷ The servant, [says He,] who knew his master's will and did it not, shall be beaten with many stripes;

⁴⁸ But he that knew it not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes.

But if all wicked men shall suffer torments without end, how can any of them be said to suffer but *few stripes*? Could our *Saviour* style infinite sufferings by the soft name of *a few stripes*? It is probable He here alludes to the usual methods among the *Jews* of executing malefactors, who were first *scourged with rods* and then put to death; and the scourging was more or less severe and terrible, according to the degree of the crime: and therefore our Lord here points out the different degrees of punishment which shall precede or attend the execution of *eternal death*.

In like manner, He describes, under the names and images of present temporal punishment, the degrees of future punishment proportionate to the degrees of guilt there specified.

Matthew 5

²² But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of *the judgment*: and whosoever shall say to his brother, *Raca*, shall be in danger of *the council*: but whosoever shall say, You fool, shall be in danger of *hell fire*.

The *Judgment* denotes the lowest degree, the *council* a higher, *Gehenna* the highest. The passage is rendered obscure to the *English* reader, by his not being acquainted with the judicial proceedings customary among the *Jews*, and with the proper sense and force of the terms he made use of in reference to those proceedings, and by the mistake of our translators in rendering the word *Gehenna*, *Hell-fire*: whereas it is, *the valley of Hinnom*, that is, a place without the walls of *Jerusalem*, where the carcasses of the criminals deprived of burial were thrown and their bones burnt, or where some particular criminals were burnt alive; both which kinds of punishment were considered by the *Jews* as most severe and dreadful, and as such, were inflicted for the worst of crimes:

hence the word *Gehenna* is used by a Metaphor to signify the greatest and last punishment in another world. These and other passages clearly express, what we may most rationally believe, that the sufferings and pains preceding death eternal shall be different, in like manner as those preceding temporal death, and shall be adequate to the respective degrees of guilt, in those who are condemned at the final judgment: and *how great* those sufferings may be, either in *degree* or *duration*, we cannot possibly determine. But we may justly conclude, if the providence of God permits *good* men to endure sometimes much misery, or to be put to a cruel death, in *this* world; how *much more* dreadful will the *end* of *wicked* men be in *another* world, especially of those cruel persecutors who have so inhumanly treated good men in *this*.

Matthew 13 [also vs. 50]

⁴² They shall be thrown into the furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Nothing can be more just, than that the measure of punishment assigned to every criminal, should be in proportion to the measure of guilt which he has contracted; which the doctrine of the Gospel, as before represented, admits and affirms: whereas all degrees and distinctions of punishment seem swallowed up in the notion of never-ending or infinite misery.

Let it be observed also, that death spiritual and eternal, or annihilation, is *properly* styled in the New Testament an *everlasting* punishment, as it is irrevocable and unalterable for ever, and it is most strictly and literally expressed in the text,

2 Thessalonians 1

⁹ ...an everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the Glory of His Power.

God's Justice and Mercy Lead to Repentance

If any Christians imagine, that the foregoing explication of this doctrine may take off some kind of restraint from the minds of wicked men, or give them any encouragement to harden them-

selves in their wickedness; let such Christians seriously examine and consider, whether it is not the doctrine of our Saviour; and if it be, whether He may not be safely trusted as to the consequences of His own doctrines; whether it is not blaspheming *Him*, to assert that any of *His* doctrines serves to encourage wickedness! and whether it be not *absurd in itself* and a manifest contradiction, to suppose, that declaring *the righteous judgment of God* against *wicked* men, as determined to punish them with proportionate misery and an *everlasting destruction*, is giving countenance to their wicked practices.

It is not credible, that any man ever did, or ever can harden himself in wickedness from the mere expectation that his punishment in another world will terminate in his utter destruction. It is not possible that any man can act in defiance to the justice of God and the terrors of hell and eternal damnation from such a belief. Or if there be such a person existing, he must be *already* the most abandoned and incorrigible of mankind. But certainly, human nature is not capable of so desperate and diabolical a resolution: and we only betray the meanness and folly of our own hearts in suspecting this consequence, and in having a worse opinion of mankind than the worst of men deserve.

The *Gospel Doctrine* of a total everlasting destruction is much more adapted to bring sinners to repentance than the doctrine of endless misery and torment; because they may be *convinced* of the reason and *justice* of the *former*; but never can be so of the *latter*. And it is of the greatest importance that men be convinced, not only that they shall suffer for their sins, but also that they shall suffer *justly*, and no more than their guilt deserves.

It is indeed highly requisite, that men should have a profound reverence of the Supreme Being, and a fearful apprehension of the punishment due to wickedness: but it is equally requisite, that this fear be built upon a reasonable foundation, and a persuasion of the *justice* of that punishment: it ought to be the fear of a most righteous and merciful Governor, who punishes in due measure,

and to answer a wise and beneficent purpose; not of an unjust and merciless tyrant, “who punishes without measure or end to satisfy an implacable and eternal resentment.”

The former is a motive proper to bring sinners to repentance, by convincing them, that if they persist in their wickedness, it will become right and fit in the great Governor of the world, and requisite to the ends of His *goodness*, to punish and destroy them for ever, in order to put an *end* to their *wickedness*; and for an example to others. But the doctrine of an eternal preservation in the most dreadful torments is not proper to bring men to repentance, or to promote virtue in the world. On the contrary, this *antichristian* doctrine has actually produced much wickedness, and of the worst kind, and has served also to harden men in it.

The more we study human nature, and understand what influence different principles have upon the temper and conduct of mankind, and are acquainted with the religious history of the Christian world, the more we shall be convinced of this. When men have been guilty of enormous crimes, or abandoned themselves to some vicious courses, but at length begin to think of another world, and what their own condition will be after death; then, to be persuaded of *the righteous judgment of God*, and that He will punish impenitent sinners in a terrible and exemplary manner, but no more than their iniquities deserve, or than the ends of government and the purposes of wisdom and goodness require: this persuasion will lead them to a true repentance, as it implies a conviction of the mischievous, heinous and criminal nature of their own actions, and tends to inspire them with an abhorrence and dread, not of *God*, but of *their own wickedness* and ill deserts, and with a veneration and esteem of the Almighty Governor of the world for His very *justice*, though it condemns them; because they believe that His intention in punishing is to prevent the progress of wickedness; and put an end to misery; not to make wickedness and misery immortal.

This fear of God is consistent with the love of Him, and with the highest confidence in His paternal goodness and saving mercy; hence they naturally reflect upon their own disingenuity and ingratitude, in transgressing the will of the wisest and best of Governors. And this temper is the true spirit of repentance towards God, and the spring of humility, justice and charity toward men.

Extreme Injustice Leads to Penances and Bigoted Zeal

But on the other hand, if they believe that God will punish beyond all bounds of justice, and will *preserve* condemned sinners *alive* for ever, in order to wreak upon them an insatiable eternal vengeance; and that it is His design not to extirpate and *destroy*, but to *preserve* and increase *wickedness* and *misery* in the creation; this opinion, the more seriously they attend to it and believe it, the more it will *prevent* true repentance: it can only serve to confound the mind, to absorb and destroy the best principles of true religion, and particularly to exclude from the heart all *love* of God and all *confidence* in His justice and goodness.

For let men *pretend* what they will, they *cannot* esteem, love, and confide in a *tyrant*, or a being whose will and pleasure is to make *wickedness and misery endless*. They may be Hypocrites through fear, and profess love with their mouths; but secretly and in their hearts they will have an aversion to Him: they will hate *God* more than *themselves*, and abhor *His government* more than their *own sins* and ill deserts. At best, this opinion will *only* produce a slavish dread and terror which may compel men to worship God *against* their inclination, *and praise Him with their lips*, while *their hearts* are not only *estranged* from Him, but utterly *averse* to Him.¹⁵

It is indeed readily allowed, that this opinion may have driven some men to have used certain means, by which to avoid that relentless and insatiable vengeance, which they impiously ascribed to God. But by what means? Not by repentance and the practice of sobriety, humanity and charity; but by penances, pilgrimages,

¹⁵ *Isaiah 29:13; Matthew 15:8.*

unctions, auricular confessions, priestly absolutions, and all the low tricks of *superstition*; which correspond to the base and unworthy notions they had formed to themselves of the Supreme Being. Or else, where it made a more deep and violent impression, it has driven men to a gloomy bitterness of temper, and inspired them with a dark and fierce *enthusiasm*; and they have sought to compensate for their vices, to appease the deity, and recommend themselves to His favor, by a furious bigoted zeal for a particular church or party, and by hating and persecuting others, whom they vainly and presumptuously styled enemies to God and religion.

False Image of God Impressed Upon Men

Such have been the real and natural consequences of this *Antichristian* doctrine. For according to men's sentiments of God and of the designs and measures of His government, such has been the influence of religion on their temper and conduct, if they have not framed to themselves a God after their own evil hearts, they have framed their own hearts agreeable to that false and *evil character*, which they were taught to ascribe to God. And when they have believed the Deity to *love* and *hate*, to *elect* and *reprobate* nations, parties, or individuals, without reason or regard to the ends of good government, and to pursue those whom He has thus reprobated, with an endless and insatiable resentment; they themselves have become more arbitrary, bigoted, fierce, unmerciful, and more addicted to hate and persecute their fellow creatures, all who were not of their own church, and whom they supposed to be reprobated of God.

Inhumane Cruelty in the Name of Religion

It is hardly credible, that inhumanity and *cruelty* would ever have been carried to such *excess* in the Christian world, as they actually have been, had they not derived countenance and support from these *Antichristian* and barbarous notions. Tyrants and persecutors, if they have not invented these doctrines, yet have applied them to excuse to their own consciences, and vindicate to

others, the most iniquitous and cruel proceedings; and when they have made the very worst use of their power in persecuting good men, at least men who have deserved no such punishment, they have persuaded themselves and others, that they were acting like the *Deity*, espousing *His* cause and maintaining *His* character and *His* glory.

The Inquisition Patterned After False Justice

The court of *inquisition*, as established in many countries, and so far as it differs from civil courts of judicature, is declared by the authors and maintainers of it to be the nearest *imitation* of the divine tribunal; and it is avowedly founded upon and justified by the doctrines of *reprobation* and of *eternal torments*. Jews, Infidels, and Heretics are judged in that court to be criminals, and are condemned. And how do they vindicate this procedure; but by supposing them to be all reprobated and abhorred of God? And they execute them, not by a quick despatch, but by the most lingering torments. What then do they plead for this cruelty; but that it is an *act of Faith*, that they are doing the *work of God*, and that He will expose those wretches to the like torments *for ever*? Thus they conquer *nature* by *Faith*, as they express it: that is, they extinguish all sense of justice and relentings of mercy in their own nature, and harden themselves in iniquity and barbarity, by the belief of *these very doctrines* we are exposing: and by them they defend themselves in the face of the world, and give a color and sanction of *religion* to the most enormous wickedness.

God's True Character Draws and Uplifts Man

The only way to promote sobriety, justice, humanity, and every virtue in the world, is by representing truly and recommending strongly the characters of the *Deity* and His government, as contained in the *real* doctrines of our *Saviour* and His *Apostles*: that He is the most just and merciful Father and Governor of all mankind; who will by no means clear the guilty, or suffer the impenitent workers of iniquity to escape, but will assuredly *punish* them with an *everlasting destruction* from His own presence and

by His own glorious power; but who in all the measures of His government intends the best ends, and to promote the good of the whole; to *destroy forever*, not to *preserve forever*, the souls of the wicked; to make *virtue* and *happiness*, not *wickedness* and *misery*, everlasting.

This belief of religion will have a most happy effect, in reclaiming men from vice and exciting them to virtue, and is every way proper to engage our reverence of God and our charity to all men, to make us...

Mark 12

³⁰ ...love the Lord our God, [and serve Him¹⁶] with all our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength;

—which is our highest excellence and happiness.

False Doctrine Inspired by the Devil

To sum up the whole in a few words. To increase wickedness and misery in the creation, and to make them *endless*, is the work and design of the devil. To impute the *same* design to the all-perfect, and ever-blessed God, is no better than the greatest *impiety*. And to imagine that such a doctrine can do any good in the world, is great *weakness* and folly. Some men are amazingly forward, even while they *praise* God with their *mouths*, to harbor an *ill-opinion* of Him in their *hearts*, and suspect Him of having unjust or cruel designs. The timidity and melancholy of some, and the artifice and tyranny of others, lay the ground-work of such *diabolical* delusions.

But *Christians* should know better: and if they have not been *taught* otherwise, if they are yet ignorant of *the truth as it is in Jesus*,¹⁷ and have not the *knowledge of God* their most righteous Governor and merciful *Father in heaven*, it is high time they should learn to understand *their own religion*.

¹⁶ *Deuteronomy* 10:12, 11:13; *Joshua* 22:5.

¹⁷ *Ephesians* 4:21.

The True Gospel Upholds Justice and Mercy

The true doctrine of the Gospel is more honorable in the Supreme Governor of the world, maintains the perfect consistency of His justice and mercy, and shows that the measures of His government are calculated to prevent, destroy, and extirpate wickedness and misery, to purge at last the whole creation from every evil, *to collect together*, as our Saviour expresses it,

Matthew 13

⁴¹ ...all things that offend and them which do iniquity,

⁴² And cast them into a furnace of fire,

—where they shall be utterly consumed and never more exist. *John*, the forerunner of *Christ*, describes Him by the sublime character and office of being the minister of divine justice and mercy to mankind,

Matthew 3

¹² ...whose fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge His floor, and gather the wheat into His garner, but burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire,

—that is, utterly destroy it; then wickedness and misery shall cease for ever, *death shall be destroyed*, and *destruction itself* come to an utter end.

The practical language of the New Testament corresponds to the doctrine as before explained: and it remains that we attend to the Gospel admonitions, *to choose the way of life, that our souls may live*,¹⁸ and avoid the fatal *paths* that lead to eternal *destruction*. The gate of the former is *straight and the way narrow*, and it is requisite to *strive* to gain that important pass. But if it was the dearest possession in the world, if it was a *right hand* or *eye*, that is an obstacle preventing our entrance into *life eternal*, it is better to part with it and *cast it from us*, than with it to *perish forever*.

¹⁸ *Deuteronomy* 30:19.

Matthew 16

²⁶ For what is a man profited, if he could gain the whole world, and lose his own soul,

—his own life and being forever? Or what can possibly be given to a man of equal value *in exchange* for his own life and being? It is not a few years in this world, but *life* and *death absolute* and *eternal* which are set before us. This is the very condition of our existence: there is no possibility of avoiding the momentous choice: and there is some difficulty in determining aright; and more in adhering to that determination. But the first thing requisite is to convince ourselves thoroughly of the vast importance of our present conduct, and to have our minds awake and eyes open to look before us, and attend to the final consequences of things.

As it is not easy for children to be persuaded, or bring themselves to apprehend, what is requisite or pernicious to their future health and life in this world; so men are not easily aware of the eternal consequences of their present actions. There are so many things to bribe their judgment, or divert their attention, or benumb their hearts, or alter their resolutions, that...

Matthew 7

¹³ ...*the gate* is found to be *wide* and *the way broad* that leads to destruction, and many go in thereat;

—and it is not without some difficulty that any are reclaimed and brought back into the *way of life*.

Luke 13

²³ Are there few that be saved?

—is a question to which no answer ought to be expected, but those persuasions to use our best endeavors, and those descriptions of the qualifications requisite to salvation, which are to be found so frequent, so clear, and so cogent, in the writings of the Gospel, that we would...

Matthew 3

⁷ ...flee from the wrath to come,

–and let...

Romans 2

⁴ ...the goodness and patience of God lead us to repentance;

⁵ And not after the hardness and impenitence of our hearts, treasure up for ourselves wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God;

–but on the contrary,

⁷ ...by a patient continuance in well-doing, seek for glory and honor and immortality, [that we may gain] eternal life;

–and that we do not through corrupt prejudices mistake the way of salvation, and...

Luke 10

²⁵ ...what we must do to inherit eternal life;...

Matthew 19

¹⁷ ...[but] if we would enter into life, keep the commandments of God;

–that we would not deceive ourselves with a vain show¹⁹ and empty professions,²⁰ for...

Galatians 6

⁷ God is not mocked, and whatsoever a man sows, that shall he reap:

⁸ He that sows to the flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that sows to the spirit, shall of the spirit reap an incorruptible and immortal life.

1 Corinthians 6

⁹ Do you not know, [says the Apostle,] that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolators, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind,

¹⁰ Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

¹⁹ *Psalm 39:6.*

²⁰ *Hosea 10:1.*

Our blessed Saviour has most plainly and authentically specified the terms of our acceptance with God, and the duties requisite to salvation: and *whosoever hears His sayings and does them* builds his hope of *eternal life* on an immovable foundation:²¹ but hearing and not doing, professing and not practicing, believing and not obeying, or to speak more properly, *pretending* to believe and have *Faith* separate from works of obedience,²² is only heaping up to ourselves the greater confusion and ruin.

The World to Come

The grand event, the sublime mystery of a world to come, and of eternal life and death, is revealed in the Gospel, with such perspicuity of doctrine and force of application, as cannot fail to impress an attentive mind, and have a powerful effect. The favor or displeasure of the Almighty Governor of the universe; glory and immortality, or misery and destruction; *everlasting life*, or *death eternal*, are solemnly propounded to the belief, choice, or pursuit of mankind: and the way to avoid the one and obtain the other clearly described.

Let us wisely attend to these things, which are alone of infinite moment to us, and not let them slip out of our minds, or be choked with the *cares of this world* and the *deceitfulness of riches*; that we may escape the condemnation of the wicked, even...

2 Thessalonians 1

⁹ ...everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord,

—and may inherit that...

Romans 6

²³ ...eternal life, which is the gift of God,

—and which may God of His infinite mercy grant us,

²³ ...through Jesus Christ our Lord.

²¹ *Matthew* 7:24.

²² *James* 2:20, 26.

Appendix: A Letter concerning the Christian Doctrine of Future Punishment

From *A Series of Discourses*, vol. 1, 1768

Written: Norwich, Sept. 24, 1759

Genesis 18

²⁵ Shall not the Judge of the whole Earth do Right?

REVEREND Sir,

Having heard you publicly assert some time ago,

“That the Doctrine of *Annihilation*, or, that the Souls of wicked men shall be totally destroyed in the future state,”

—is utterly inconsistent with the Christian scheme; and as you did not at that time produce any argument of Reason, or authority of Scripture, to prove what you have asserted; it raised in me a curiosity to know by what proof you are able to support your assertion; in hope of receiving such satisfaction, as may be expected from a gentleman of your known abilities, and study of the Christian Revelation.

I am more ready to gratify my own curiosity in making you this public request, as I am persuaded, that there is nothing more conducive to the discovery of truth, than in those who have studied the same subject, yet are of contrary opinions, enter into a mutual disquisition of each others arguments, and, with an amicable spirit of free inquiry, examine the strength of what may be alleged on both sides.

That I am of an opinion directly opposite of yours, you need not to be informed: nor do I see the least reason to avoid either a public declaration, or defense, of my opinion. For, so long as I remain fully convinced, as I am at present, that the doctrine which you asserted, more than once, to be absolutely inconsistent with the Christian scheme, is the *very Doctrine of Christianity*; it will not affect me in the least, whether the opinion which I maintain, be thought old, or new, common, or singular, popular, or unpopular.

That men who apply their minds to the study of Religion and the holy Scriptures, should be of different and even contrary opinions, is certainly no new thing in the Christian world. But that such should conspire, by a joint examination and friendly controversy, to investigate truth for themselves and others, in a subject concerning which they totally differ; is (I am sorry to say) something new and uncommon. But as the author of the *Epistle to the Hebrews* exhorts them...

Hebrews 10

²⁴ ...to provoke one another [as our translators have rendered it] to love and good works;

—so I do not doubt, but you, as well as every other reader of this pamphlet, will approve my conduct, in inviting and urging you in this public manner, to a friendly discussion of so important a subject as this before us.

The importance of it will, I apprehend be readily allowed; especially, by those who have a real concern for the credit of the Christian Religion: at least, it appears of so much consequence to me, That if it should be proved, that the final punishment threatened to wicked men in the New Testament, is not a total destruction, but an endless preservation in a state of misery and torment; this would, in my opinion, fix a greater odium upon Christianity, and raise a stronger objection to it, than all its adversaries have yet been able to produce: and, I will venture to assert, that there are many persons in this nation, of no inconsiderable understanding, who would be strongly disposed to reject the New Testament as a divine revelation, if they were convinced that it contains such a doctrine.

For, that any doctrine should be true, and have the real stamp of divine authority, which ascribes to the supreme Governor of the universe, a conduct unworthy of any prince, or governor on earth, and repugnant to our best conceptions of the measures and ends of good government; cannot easily be admitted by persons of a thoughtful and ingenuous mind. To overcome the antipathy

of a good heart, and the remonstrance of a reasoning mind against it, will require an immense weight of external evidence.

A limitation of punishments is essential to all good government: to extend them beyond the limits of reason, or of law, which is the public reason, is one characteristic of tyranny. Where punishments are extended, or increased, so far as the public safety and welfare require, and no further; *i.e.* where they are always limited and directed by a view to the happiness of the whole; there is good government: but where they are increased, either in degree, or duration, beyond what is requisite to that end; there is tyranny: where they are unlimited, or infinite; there is the greatest tyranny: for to punish a criminal in an excessive degree, and beyond what the ends of good government require, is as real injustice and cruelty, as to inflict a lesser degree of punishment upon an innocent person. For in both cases, it is equally inflicting misery, not to answer any necessary, or useful end, but for the mere sake of increasing misery; which is the *worst end* that can be conceived.

There neither is, nor can be, any other difference, between the best and the worst government possible; than that the former is administered with a view to produce and maintain the greatest virtue and happiness, and to prevent, or extinguish, as much as possible, wickedness and misery; and the latter with a view to prolong and increase wickedness and misery. Now, whether the *endless* preservation of wicked spirits, in order to inflict upon them *infinite* miseries, be mere consistent with the *former*, or the *latter* kind of government; is not difficult to be determined. Their wickedness, or their misery, may be a reason in the mind of a good governor, for destroying them: but the contrary, *viz.* preserving them for ever in a state of wickedness and misery, appears more conducive to the ends of the *worst* government, than of the *best*.

To allege, That human ignorance is so great, and our ideas of what is fittest and best so imperfect, that we can form no Judg-

ment of what the ends of divine government may require; and that therefore, for ought we know, *infinite* punishment, and the *endless* existence of some beings in the *greatest* misery, may be made subservient, by the incomprehensible wisdom of providence, to the greatest virtue and happiness of the universe;—is only arguing from a *supposed possibility* against the greatest *probability*; and endeavoring, under color of human ignorance, to screen a doctrine apparently most injurious to the character of the Supreme Being.

In human governments, extreme and lingering punishments are a certain mark of barbarity, and a criterion by which to distinguish a *tyrant* from a *just and good prince*. In the best constituted governments, punishments are the mildest, in the worst, the severest. For a perfect *tyranny*, is supported solely by *fear*; but a just and, legal government, by *better* principles and affections. Whether then the *best*, or the *worst* governments on earth, are most *like* the *divine*; whether the greatest *tyrants*, or the most beneficent and *merciful princes*, most *resemble* the perfect *Governor of the universe*; no one will hesitate in deciding.

But, indeed, in all human governments, even the worst, *death* (which is *annihilation* in respect to human society) is the ultimate punishment: and all that is added, by those judges who proceed to the extremest rigor, is an augmentation, for a short space of time, of the horrors and agonies preceding, or attending the execution. And it is hardly to be conceived, that any price, though absolute in power, tyrannical in disposition, and both injured and incensed to the highest degree, would not, in length of time, think justice satisfied, if not feel his own resentment satiated, by the extreme and lasting miseries of the criminal: the idea of making these miseries everlasting, was this in his power, would be found too abhorrent to reason and humanity, to be long entertained in a human breast.

How then can we think of imputing a procedure, exceeding the severity of the greatest tyrant, and of the worst of governments on earth, to that Being, whom we style the best; whose...

Psalm 145

⁹ ...tender mercies are over all His works;

–whom we ought to love with all our hearts, and to contemplate with the greatest delight; and in whose designs and measures we ought to place an entire confidence? Why do we style Him *most merciful*? Why address him as THE FATHER OF MANKIND? A *father*, indeed, may punish a wicked and disobedient son: *i.e.* may withdraw his favor from him, may disinherit him, may inflict stripes, or other penalties upon him; nay, acting as a magistrate and judge, may put him to death. But what should we think of that *father*, who acting in the capacity of a judge over his offending offspring, would not be satisfied (be their crimes ever so great) either with their total destruction, or their suffering for any limited duration, or the addition of the former to the latter; but who would rather judge them to *live for ever*, than to *perish for ever in fire unquenchable*? How could such a judgment consist either with the equity of government, or the clemency of a judge? How much less with the disposition of a *parent*? How vain is it to compliment the Almighty with the titles of *most Just* and *most Merciful*; if at the same time we ascribe to Him a conduct, not only inconsistent with the *paternal* character, but irreconcilable to our clearest notions of *justice* as well as *mercy*?

Nothing is of greater importance to religion, than to preserve the character of the Supreme Being inviolate: for without this foundation it cannot be supported; but will be apt to degenerate into slavish superstition, or a blind and savage enthusiasm. Yet, perhaps, no character in the world has been more mistaken, or traduced, and consequently suffered more reproach and injury from the tongues and pens of men: while not understanding the nature and end of government in general; nor having formed any clear and consistent notions of justice and mercy, or of that public

utility, which ought always to be intended and answered, by punishing as well as by rewarding; they have erected, in their own imagination, a scheme of government, according to their own narrow, partial, arbitrary, or enthusiastic conceits; and have fondly imputed this scheme, to the most sublime and excellent Being, whose wisdom and goodness are infinite, whose thoughts and designs excel those of the wisest and best men, *as the heavens are above the earth.*²³

Nothing then can be more becoming those, who are appointed to be ministers of religion, and guardians of its truth and purity, than to vindicate God's government of the world, and to rescue that most sublime and sacred character, which we should always contemplate with the highest veneration and affection, from those unworthy notions, which men are apt to intermix with their belief of a Deity; and especially from those black calumnies, by which He is represented as no better, in effect, than the greatest tyrant, instead of being the most just, beneficent and merciful governor. For the influence which religion has upon the dispositions and morals of mankind, will be useful, or hurtful, in proportion as their sentiments of the divine nature and government are good, or evil. The worst evils of superstition and enthusiasm have their source in an unjust, or partial opinion of the Deity. Nor can the belief of His existence, or almighty power, produce any good effects, separate from a belief of His perfect justice and goodness. A just esteem of the Deity, therefore, is that spring of true religion and virtue, which ought to be preserved as much as possible, pure and untainted in the minds of men.

It is more curious and difficult than necessary, to account for the propensity of mankind, to receive and retain such ill impressions of the Deity, and His government of the world. Whether they may be ascribed to those fears and horrors, which are apt sometimes, especially in some persons, to seize and wholly possess the imagination, and thereby disturb and over-power their

²³ *Isaiah* 55:9.

reason: or, to their violent resentments against those who offend and injure them, which tempt them to avenge themselves in proportion to their own power, rather than to do justice in proportion to the offense; and hence lead them to imagine, that the greater power the person offended is possessed of, the greater punishment he will consequently inflict: or, whether they may be owing in some instances to the strength of any other passions; so much is certain, That human passions and affections, either separate or united, have a great influence upon their understandings, and contribute both to form and confirm their particular sentiments of the character and disposition of the Supreme Being.

It may be equally difficult to trace out with any precision, how such opinions have actually arisen and spread in the world; particularly this barbarous notion of a state of never-ending misery and torment. The heathen poets adopted the vulgar fables, in regard to the different species of the infernal torments. And *Virgil* assigns a perpetual duration of misery to some criminals;

“Sedet aeternumque sedebit infelix Theseus:”²⁴

—though to others he is so favorable as to allow, in process of time, a release: So that his doctrine has a remarkable conformity to the popish hell and purgatory. But it was the business of the poets to affect the imagination: And to this end, they made the like use of the fabulous traditions of their times, as Shakespeare does of his witches and apparitions. These were the *poetarum & pictorum portenta*,²⁵ which *Cicero*, as a philosopher, speaks of with so much contempt, as to say,

“Who can be so senseless as to give any credit to them?”

Mahomet seems to adopt the doctrine of eternal torments in good earnest; and thunders it out, not only against criminals, but against all who do not receive his *Koran*. His language is:

²⁴ Unhappy Theseus sits and will sit forever.

²⁵ Wonders of poets and painters.

“They shall undergo the rigors of an infinite pain. They shall never be eased in their torments. They shall be eternally confined in the fire of hell. They shall dwell there eternally. God will change their burned skin into a new skin, that they may suffer the more. He has prepared hell for them, where they shall remain eternally.

“The Infidels shall be encompassed with flames of hell. They shall have shirts of fire. Boiling water shall flow in upon their heads. The fire shall burn what is in their bellies, and shall roast their skin. They shall be beaten with clubs of iron.

“When they think to go out of this fire, they shall enter further into it. They shall *not die* in those torments, and their torture shall never be assuaged. They shall in vain implore succor of God. They shall demand of the keeper of the fire, “Will your lord never deliver us from these pains?” He shall answer them, “You shall abide there eternally.”

“They shall never get out of this fire, neither be able to repent. Their pains shall be augmented, and pains upon pains.”

It appears then, that this doctrine of eternal torments, is certainly a Mahometan if not a Heathen doctrine. But whether it be a Jewish, or a Christian doctrine, remains a subject of inquiry.

I have not yet been able to discover anything like it, in the writings of the Old Testament: And am fully convinced that those passages in the New, which have been thought to imply it most strongly, do directly, and in the strongest manner imply the contrary. And for proof of this, I beg leave to refer you to a discourse, now going to be published.²⁶

If the expressions of *being thrown into a furnace of fire—cast into a lake of fire—into everlasting fire—into hell, where the worm dies not, and the fire is not quenched;*—do not import a total destruction, or annihilation; I must confess myself to be utterly at a loss; and must beg your kind assistance, in order to find out the meaning of them.

²⁶ PP Editor’s note: Bourn is referring to the previous sermon: “The End of the Wicked.”

If I tell a man whose house is on fire, that the fire is *unquenchable*; the meaning is the same, as if I told him that his house would be entirely destroyed.

If I tell a gardener, whose plants, or the blossoms, are infected by the worm, that he cannot kill that worm, or, that *it will not die*; it is the same thing as if I told him that his fruit will come to nothing, or his plants die.

Or if a patient is afflicted with a distemper, which is supposed to proceed from worms, and he is told that *the worm will not die*; the meaning of the phrase must be, that the disease will end in the death of the patient.

And if such phrases be considered as proverbial among the Jews, and that when any person fell into any distemper, or calamity, that would certainly end in destruction, it was usual for them to say,

“That is a worm that will not die;”

—or,

“That is a fire that will not be quenched;”

—the sense is perfectly intelligible: they meant that it was a lost case; that there was no possibility of preventing the destruction of the person, or thing, to which they applied the proverb.

Besides, there is something absurd and *contradictory* in the image made use of, if we suppose chaff, wood, or other useless materials, thrown into an unquenchable fire, and yet not to be consumed and destroyed in that fire; or, a living creature cast into it, and yet preserved alive for ever in it: For, throwing into the fire is always understood, to be the most effectual way to *destroy* a thing: And the *less extinguishable* the fire is, the *more certainly* will the subject thrown in be *consumed*. The original term, *κατακαίειν*, properly translated, is,

“To *burn up*, or *utterly consume by fire*.”

—which is directly contrary to a being preserved in the fire.

John 3

¹² ...*who shall burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.*

The expression here is probably borrowed from:

Malachi 4

¹ For behold the day comes that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly shall be stubble; and the day that comes shall *burn them up*, says the Lord of Hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.

Similar to this is the expression in the *Epistle to the Hebrews*:

Hebrews 12

²⁹ Our God is a CONSUMING Fire,

—*καταναλίσκου*: which signifies, utterly destroying; the very reverse of preserving. There is, indeed, so direct a contradiction between the idea of preserving any creature alive, and that of throwing it into a fire, a fire that cannot be extinguished; that if duly considered, it is amazing how men came to join so opposite ideas together, or imagine them to be consistent. This inconsistency *Mahomet* ridiculously attempts to reconcile by saying that...

“God will change their burned skin into a new skin, that they may suffer the more.”

Fire is, indeed, an instrument of *torture*, as well as of destruction. But why men should think it more becoming the most just and merciful Governor of the world, to make it an instrument of *everlasting torment* to His offending creatures, rather than of their *everlasting destruction*; or why, they should be disposed to take the words of Scripture in a sense contradictory to reason, justice and humanity, when they will not only admit of, but are *most naturally* understood in a different sense, agreeable to justice and clemency; is to me inconceivable.

The subject is reducible, so far as the Christian revelation is concerned, to this single question: Whether the aforementioned

expressions are intended to convey to us the idea of everlasting torture, or of everlasting destruction, *i.e.* annihilation? Perhaps, some may be inclined to think, that they serve to convey ideas, both of torment, and of total destruction. With such persons (if there are any) I desire to have no controversy. Because on this supposition, the torment or misery cannot be infinite. And it is only that Mahometan, Pagan, and (as I must confess it appears to me at present) most absurd, cruel, Antichristian, and diabolical doctrine of *infinite*, or *never-ending* misery and torment, which I am opposing and endeavoring to eradicate:

“Quam excutere opinionem (to use the words of Cicero) mihi met volui radicitus.”²⁷

That there are passages in the New Testament which imply, that the sentence of eternal death shall be executed upon criminals with circumstances of ignominy, horror and pain, *proportionate* to their guilt, I readily allow and affirm: Yet am not of opinion, that the figures of being *cast into unquenchable fire*, and the like, are intended to convey to us *any* idea of *torment*, but *solely* that of total *destruction*, or annihilation, or a ceasing to exist. And the passage in the book of *Revelation*, where it is said that:

Revelation 20

¹⁴ Death and hell [*i.e.* Hades] were cast into the lake of fire,

—seems to me decisive in this point. For certainly the meaning there is, not that *death and Hades* shall be *tormented* (which is ridiculous) but that they shall be *abolished*.

But it is not my design, either to trouble you with a superfluous repetition of what has been suggested in the discourse referred to, or to *exhaust* the subject: But only to represent to you in few words, the view which I have of it at present; and to entreat your friendly assistance, in further explaining the subject, and either rectifying, or confirming my sentiments.

²⁷ “What an opinion I wanted to shake off from myself, from the roots.”

Give me leave to add, Sir, that it is a subject worthy of your pen: that according as the doctrine of future punishment is differently explained and believed, it will very differently affect men's opinion of the Supreme Being: and that is a cause, in which the honor of God, and the credit of the Christian revelation, are so immediately concerned, you cannot find yourself unconcerned.

For my own part, I am persuaded, that the vulgar notion of eternal torments has been productive, not of virtue and happiness, but of wickedness and misery in the world, where it has been most seriously and steadily believed. However consequences are not the subject of our inquiry, but the truth of the doctrine. The proper question is,

“What is the doctrine of the Saviour?”

When that is determined; if any man, after allowing the doctrine to be *His*, yet shall impute ill effects to it, or assert that it ought not to be preached, or published; he pretends to be wiser than our Saviour, and is guilty of an arrogance inconsistent with his Christian profession.

That you bear a more free and noble mind than to be influenced by vulgar prejudices, or infected with an itch of popularity, or biassed by any mean considerations; I am most willing to believe. And therefore hope, that you will favor myself, and others, with a public explanation of your sentiments; and, if you think proper to take pen in hand, cannot easily doubt of your doing ample justice to so important and interesting a subject.

I am, with sincere esteem, yours, &c.
Samuel Bourn

