

The Hypothesis of Conditional Immortality

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Excerpts from “Conditional Immortality: Plain Sermons on a Topic of Interest” - 1878

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I. PETER. IV :17.

. . .What shall the end be of them that obey not the Gospel of God ?

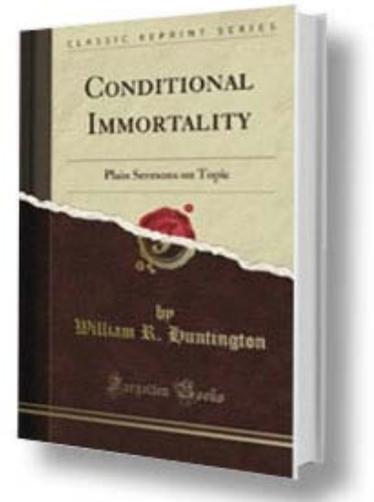
PSALM XCII :7.

. . .That they shall be destroyed forever.

WE are to weigh this morning the doctrine of Conditional Immortality. In the progress of our enquiry we have seen that the belief in the endless suffering of the lost soul, and the belief in the final restoration to God's favor of all souls, are built, both of them, upon the assumed truth of the doctrine that every child of man, be his attitude toward his Maker what it may, is destined to an existence that shall never cease. Thus far, out of a sincere desire to judge each of the several beliefs at its best, we have allowed this assumption to pass without serious challenge, but the time has come to face the plain question, Do the Scriptures teach that all men, without exception, are to retain conscious being everlastingly?

Let us be very careful that we understand just what the point at issue is. That all men are to survive the grave and to be judged according to the deeds done in the body is conceded. This disposes of the common cavil that the doctrine of conditional immortality sentences the larger part of the human race to die the death of the brute. It might indeed be questioned, upon grounds of reason, whether a thoroughly imbruted nature could fairly complain if it found itself left to share the heritage of the creatures with which it had cast in its lot while living, but that is aside from the purpose. We are not looking at the matter now from the view-point of reason; we are treading in the paths of revelation, and asking, “What saith the Scripture?” and that the Scripture does say that all souls shall be summoned to answer for themselves at the bar of judgment is clear. But is it equally clear from Scripture that after the judgment is past an endless existence is to await those who, in the phrase of Paul and Barnabas, have judged themselves “unworthy of everlasting life”?

That is the very thing we are to consider; and assuredly it is well worth considering. No graver question could possibly occupy our thoughts. When we remember that a single word would suffice to settle the point in the affirmative, it is startling, to say the least, to find



that that word has not been spoken. Search the Scriptures through and through, my friends, and point, if you can, to a single sentence in which it is directly asserted that man is a being who will inevitably exist forever. Strong statements to the effect that man is naturally mortal are strewn with melancholy frequency over those pages, but nowhere is he declared to be immortal apart from the quickening power of Him who only hath immortality to give.

In reply to this it is sometimes argued that the immortality of the soul is a truth so generally accepted that any direct statement of it in Holy Scripture was unnecessary; and a parallel to this silence is thought to have been found in the fact that none of the sacred writers have felt obliged explicitly to state the proposition, There is a God.

But notice the wide difference between these two cases. The existence of a God, even if it be not distinctly asserted, is yet on almost every page of Scripture as plainly implied as it possibly can be. Everywhere the Almighty confronts us. Take His name and presence out of the Bible, and the book shrivels into nothingness in a moment. Can any such thing be said of the doctrine of the natural immortality of the soul? Where is it taken for granted? In what single sentence is it necessarily implied? Which stone in the wide arch of revelation is loosened when the doctrine falls? Grant me, for the moment, that eternal life in the sense of endless existence is really the gift of God to those who seek it, and not the inherent right of all men, whether they seek or not—grant it, I say, for the moment, and then ask yourself, is there a single saying of the Scriptures which such a supposition would invalidate or make meaningless? On the other hand, are there not hundreds of sentences which it would fill with sudden light?

In looking to see what the Bible has to tell about the mortal or immortal nature of man, we instinctively turn first to the primitive tradition embodied in the Book of Genesis. The interpretation of that tradition, uncertain as we must always be how far we are dealing with the language of allegory, and how far with a statement of literal fact, is confessedly beset with difficulty. But, letting go all secondary considerations which do not touch the essence of the thing, what are the main points in the narrative of the temptation and the fall? Are they not these? Man, as represented by Adam and Eve, is put upon the trial of his obedience. He is forbidden to eat, not of the tree of life, which evidently is free to him, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Precisely what eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil may have meant we cannot certainly know. Various conjectures are possible. But this much of inference from the story is plain, namely, that before disobedience man had an opportunity of endless life, which after disobedience was taken away. “And now,” the Lord God says, “lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat and live forever”—therefore He drove him out.¹ Thus, at the very outset of our study of Scripture, we find death put forth as the penalty of setting at naught the will of God. But what sort of death? For all that appears to the contrary, total death—the death of the whole man. Nothing is said about any distinction between body and soul. It was not declared “In the day that thou eatest thereof thy body shall become mortal;” but the warning ran, “In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” The first man's only

experience of death being such as was derived from the world of Nature around him, it is hard to conceive how this sentence could have meant to his mind anything else than the utter loss of being. The insect that perished before his eyes went to decay, and evidently was no more; the withered leaf fell at his feet and mouldered away; what other purport, then, than final extinction could have been carried to Adam's mind by the word addressed to him, "Dust" thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return?" If it be urged that because there had been imprinted upon Adam at his creation the image of his Maker therefore he could not die, it is enough to answer that the dewdrop shows the image of the sun only so long as it quivers unconsumed; presently the burning heat scorches the drop into vapor, and the image flies. Indeed, it seems to be of the very nature of images that they should be perishable unless care is taken to keep them in existence. The image on the sensitive plate of the photographer will prove as transient as it is beautiful if it be not presently plunged in the "fixing-bath" which gives it permanence. Man, made to reflect the image of Him that created him, ceased perfectly to do so the moment the cloud of selfishness came between him and the sun. But we must not let ourselves become entangled in figures of speech. Be it our endeavor to cling as closely as possible to the plain letter of the Word of God.

Simultaneously with the death-sentence passed on man, which we are to think of as beginning immediately to take effect just as we say, and say truly, of ourselves that the moment we are born we begin to die, simultaneously with this death-sentence comes a glimpse, only a glimpse, of a gracious purpose on God's part to set in motion a remedial process. The seed of the woman, it is promised, shall bruise the serpent's head. How the hope thus suggested strengthens and deepens, how in each successive stage of the world's progress the prophecy gains in distinctness, it is needless to show; enough to say that at the last comes One who asserts Himself to be the Messiah, for whom all the generations have been waiting. And what is the burden of His message now that He is come? What are the words in which He defines the purpose of His taking flesh? "I am come," He says— "I am come that ye might have life." Thus he establishes Himself a second Adam, bringing back to man that tree of life from access to which his self-will shut the first Adam out: "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." Contenting ourselves with this merest suggestion of a magnificent thought which gives coherence and symmetry to the whole Bible, let us go on to look at the language in which the Scripture writers, when appealing to us in a practical way, put the matter of choice. What are the alternatives of destiny as Christ and His apostles picture them? Sometimes the contrast is imaged to us under the form of a dividing path: there is a road that leads to the right, and a road that leads to the left; there is a narrow way, and a broad. Again, the difference is illustrated from the relations of social life: the better choice is likened to freedom, the worse to slavery. Yet, again, the natural world is laid under contribution, and light and darkness are made the symbols of the wise choice and the foolish. But standing out against this faint background of parable and similitude, as if written in letters of flame, shine the two words, LIFE and DEATH. This is the real contrast. These are the two tremendous alternatives between which, according to the teaching of Jesus Christ, the will of man must decide. Is the narrow way to be sought? It is not because it is narrow, but because it leads to life. Is

the broad way to be shunned? It is not because it is broad, but because it leadeth to destruction. To those whose spirits languish with thirst Christ promises a well of water that shall spring up into everlasting life. To hungry souls He says, "If any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever;" while with those who persist in turning their backs upon his Gospel, the sad expostulation is, "Ye will not come unto me that ye might have life." We are assured that in these sayings, and in sayings with these, our Saviour does not mean life, but blessedness, and that the contrasted thing he has in mind is not death, real death, extinction of being, but a life of anguish. And yet, why should we twist His words after such a fashion?

The maintainers of the doctrine of conditional immortality argue and very convincingly, I think, that all this strong language about life and death as being the two final destinies between which men must choose, ought to be taken to mean just what it seems to mean, unless some good and sufficient reason can be given for not so understanding it. What good and sufficient reason is there? They do not deny that the word "death" can be, and sometimes is, figuratively used to describe a sort of existence which, though poor and contemptible, is, nevertheless, in some sense existence still, as when, for instance, St. Paul speaks of the woman who liveth in pleasure as being "dead while she liveth," or, again, when he speaks of people who are still moving and breathing as being "dead in trespasses and sins." This they admit; but they affirm that in all such cases there is something to make it evident that the speaker or writer is using his word figuratively, and not literally. But take such a declaration as this, also from the lips of St. Paul, "If ye live after the flesh, ye shall die." Here the dying is put into the future and made a penalty—ye shall die. If it had been intended to be understood in the figurative sense of being dead in trespasses and sins, it ought, of course, to have read, "If ye live after the flesh, ye are dead, for living after the flesh is death in the figurative sense:" but no; the words run, "If ye live after the flesh, ye *shall* die." It would seem to be hard for an unbiassed mind to see in such language as this anything less than a threatening of death to the whole man as the final punishment for a sensual life. Were I to marshal before you all the passages of the Bible in which this contrast is set forth, it would consume what little time we have at our command. A single sentence, therefore, from the lips of Moses, shall represent all that might be quoted from the Old Testament, and a single sentence from the lips of Paul all that might be quoted from the New. "See," says the patriarch to his people, "I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil." "The wages of sin," says the apostle to his converts, "is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

We pass to another line of argument, that which starts from the language in which our Lord and His apostles describe under the form of symbols the character of future punishment. That this language means something terribly real, whatever that something may be, no one who trusts implicitly the truthfulness of Christ ought to doubt. If He is not to be believed when He speaks to us about the terrors of retribution, why, then let His whole religion go; for if here He is untrustworthy, He must be untrustworthy throughout. To discredit what He says of hell is in the same breath to discredit what He says of heaven, and if into those

regions of the future we refuse 'to follow Him, why should we think Him other than a blind guide when He speaks to us of God and the soul? It is plain, then, that the integrity of the Christian religion is bound up with the truth of what Christ teaches about penalty—not the literalness, of course, but the truth of it. What now does He teach? That is the question at issue. He teaches in plainest words that the wicked are sentenced to unquenchable fire. This, of course, is symbolic language. We must interpret it according to the rules that govern the interpretation of all symbolism. What common fire, such as we know it, does for visible things, such as we know them, that eternal fire must do for souls. But what is the common operation of fire upon the things submitted to its action? It certainly is not preservative, but the opposite. The function of fire is to destroy. “Gather ye together first the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them.” “He shall bum up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” “If any man build upon this foundation . . . wood, hay, stubble . . . the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is.” Is it natural or even possible to think of the tares, the chaff, the wood and hay and stubble of these illustrations, as continuing in existence after they have been submitted to such a process as the words describe? Of course not. No more, then, is it natural to think of the lost soul as forever resisting the flame that never can be quenched. To all eternity our God must be what He is now,” a consuming fire;” but it: is by a fallacious reasoning process that we transfer the eternity from the consumer to the consumed. “Fear Him,” Christ says, “which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” If it be urged that it is contrary to God's method in Nature utterly to destroy any substance, and that the action of fire on matter is simply to change the form of it, not to put out of existence the elements of which it is composed, the answer is ready. Fire does not indeed destroy elementary substance, but it does destroy what we call individuality. A ship at sea, for instance, is struck by lightning and burned. Masts, spars, rigging, deck, and hull are successively overmastered by the flame and disappear. Shall anyone tell us that because the carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, and other elements which composed the material of the ship are still in existence, therefore the ship has not been destroyed? To say so is merely to trifle with words. Plainly the ship, as a ship, is gone forever. Its personality, if I may so speak, is lost.

But, passing this point, there remains the question, What are we to make of the very expression itself, “everlasting punishment”? With what propriety can the utter destruction of the condemned be called their “everlasting” punishment? In order to reply intelligently, we must ponder a distinction which is as familiar to jurists as it is to theologians: the distinction between punishments of pain and punishments of loss. The rod and the lash are of the first sort of fines and confiscations of property are of the second. Now, there is one thing that men value more than money or houses or lands, and that one most precious possession is life. When, therefore, a penalty is to be provided for the very worst of crimes it is possible to commit, earthly legislators find that penalty in loss of life. We do not, it is true, call capital punishment “everlasting” punishment; but the reason why we do not call it so is because the life that is taken away by the executioner is one that would only last for a few short years at most, were it to be spared. But suppose the life taken away to be an

endless one: have we not then a punishment of loss, which, without any straining of language, may well be called an everlasting one?

Of Sodom and Gomorrah an apostle says that they suffered “the vengeance of eternal fire.” We do not deny that their punishment is an everlasting punishment, because as cities they have ceased to be. Why then should we doubt that those are punished everlastingly of whom it is said in our text that they are destroyed forever? Thus we see how, even without resorting to the demand that a Greek adjective shall be retranslated, and “eternal” made to mean something different from what it has commonly been supposed to mean, it is perfectly possible for the believer in conditional immortality to accept as literally true the terrible words, “These shall go away into everlasting punishment.”²

That the arguments which have now been briefly and imperfectly presented prove the doctrine of conditional immortality to be, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the teaching of Holy Scripture, I am not prepared to say. That they are strong enough, however, to justify us in regarding such an interpretation as being, upon the whole, likelier to be true than either of the other two we have examined, I most firmly believe. In next Sunday's sermon we may hope to gather up conclusions with reference to the whole subject. It will then be found, perhaps, that over and above the reasons in its favor already alleged, the view to-day advanced has this further and chiefest recommendation, that without any stretching of itself beyond its own proper measure, it does wonderfully allow for much that is wholesome and precious in each of the two doctrines with which it stands contrasted, while yet not open to the formidable objections which they provoke. To those of you who presently are to approach the table of the Lord, let me say a single word. This discussion of a controverted point in theology which has been engaging our minds may scarcely seem the best possible sort of preparation for receiving the Holy Communion. Not in the spirit of debate, not in the polemic temper, would any good Christian ever wish to seek intercourse with Him who is our peace. And yet what we have been considering is only the negative side of a truth of which the Church's Eucharistic service is full to overflowing. We have only to shift our thoughts from the dark face of this subject to the light one, and we not only shall find that we have passed from a region of shadows into a land of sunshine, from the chill air of uncertainty into the warm gladness of clearly revealed truth; but we shall also realize more distinctly, it may be, than we have ever done before, how thoroughly from first to last the Lord's Supper is a sacrament of heavenly nourishment, the symbol and the pledge of a communicated life, a “grace given unto us”—not our own.

Footnotes

¹ From the way “in which many interpreters deal with this passage it would seem as if they were oblivious to the fact that the words “Ye shall not surely die” came from the lips of the Tempter, not from the mouth of the Lord God.

² The meaning of χολασιζ in Hellenistic Greek has been much disputed, but the etymology of the word. is certainly not unfriendly to the interpretation here suggested, which makes an everlasting loss to be a χολασιζ αιωνιοζ.