

George Whitefield

Sermon 26

The Eternity of Hell-Torments

Matthew 25:46 "These shall go away into everlasting punishment.

To the INHABITANTS of Savannah in Georgia.

My dear Friends,

Though the following sermon has been preached elsewhere, yet as the occasion of my preaching it among you was particular, as you seemed to give an uncommon attention to it in public, and afterwards expressed your satisfaction in it to me, when I came to visit you in your own houses, I thought proper to offer it to you.

And here I cannot but bless God for the general dislike of heretical principles that I have found among you; as also for your zeal and approbation of my conduct, when the glory of God and your welfare, have obliged me to resent and publicly declare against the antichristian tenets of some lately under my charge.

I need only exhort you to beg of God to give you a true faith, and to add to your faith virtue, that you may adorn the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in all things.

Your constant daily attendance upon public worship, the gladness wherewith you have received me into your houses, the mildness wherewith you have submitted to my reproofs, more especially the great (though unmerited) concern you showed at my departure, induce me to hope this will be your endeavor.

How long God of his good providence will keep me from you, I know not. However, you may assure yourselves I will return according to my promise, as soon as I have received imposition of hands, and completed the other business that called me hither.

In the mean while, accept of this, as a pledge of the undissembled love of

Your affectionate though unworthy pastor,

George Whitefield
London, 1738

Matthew 25:46 "These shall go away into everlasting punishment."

The excellency of the gospel dispensation, is greatly evidenced by those sanctions of rewards and punishments, which it offers to the choice of all its hearers, in order to engage them to be obedient to its precepts. For it promises no less than eternal happiness to the good, and denounces no slighter a punishment than everlasting misery against the wicked: On the one hand, It is a favor of life unto life," on the other, "A favor of death unto death." And though one would imagine, the bare

mentioning of the former would be sufficient to draw men to their duty, yet ministers in all ages have found it necessary, frequently to remind their people of the latter, and to set before them the terrors of the Lord, as so many powerful dissuasives from sin.

But whence is it that men are so disingenuous [insincere, deceitful]? The reason seems to be this: The promise of eternal happiness is so agreeable to the inclinations and wishes of mankind, that all who call themselves christians, universally and willingly subscribe to the belief of it: but then there is something so shocking in the consideration of eternal torments, and seemingly such an infinite disproportion between an endless duration of pain, and short life spent in pleasure, that men (some at least of them) can scarcely be brought to confess it as an article of their faith, that an eternity of misery awaits the wicked in a future state.

I shall therefore at this time, beg leave to insist on the proof of this part of one of the Articles of our Creed; and endeavor to make good what our blessed Lord has here threatened in the words of the text, "These (that is, the wicked) shall go away into everlasting punishment."

Accordingly, without considering the words as they stand in relation to the context; I shall resolve all I have to say, into this one general proposition, "That the torments reserved for the wicked hereafter, are eternal."

But before I proceed to make good this, I must inform you that I take it for granted,

All present do steadfastly believe, They have something within them, which we call a soul, and which is capable of surviving the dissolution of the body, and of being miserable or happy to all eternity.

I take it for granted farther, That you believe a divine revelation; that those books, emphatically called the Scriptures, were written by the inspiration of God, and that the things therein contained, are founded upon eternal truth.

I take it for granted, That you believe, that the Son of God came down to die for sinners; and that there is but one Mediator between God and man, even the man Christ Jesus.

These things being granted, (and they were necessary to be premised) proceed we now to make good the one general proposition asserted in the text, That the torments reserved for the wicked hereafter are eternal. "These shall go away into everlasting punishment." The

First argument I shall advance to prove that the torments reserved for the wicked hereafter, are eternal, is, That the word of God himself assures us, in line upon line, that it will be so.

To quote all the texts that might be produced in proof of this, would be endless. Let it suffice to instance only in a few. In the Old Testament, in the book of Daniel, chap. 12, ver. 2 we are told, that "some shall wake to everlasting life, and others to everlasting contempt." In the book of Isaiah, it is said, that "the worm of those that have transgressed God's law, and die impenitently, shall not die, nor their fire be quenched." And in another place the holy Prophet, struck, no doubt, with astonishment and horror at the prospect of the continuance of the torments of the damned, breaks out into this moving expostulation, "Who can dwell with everlasting burnings?"

The New Testament is still fuller as to this point, it being a revelation which brought this and such-like particulars to a clear light. The Apostle Jude tells us of the profane despisers of dignities in his days, that "for them was reserved the blackness of darkness forever." And in the book of the Revelation, it is written, that "the smoke of the torments of the wicked ascendeth for ever and ever." And if we believe the witness of men inspired, the witness of the Son of God, who had the Spirit

given him, as Mediator, without measure, is still far greater: and in St. Mark's gospel, He repeats this solemn declaration three several times, It is better for thee to enter into life maimed;" that is, it is better to forego the gratification of thy lust, or incur the displeasure of a friend, which may be as dear to thee as a hand, or as useful as a foot, "than having two hands and feet, (that is, for indulging the one, or disobeying God to oblige the other) to be cast into hell, where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."

And here again, in the words of the text, "These (the wicked) shall go away into everlasting punishment."

I know it has been objected by some who have denied the eternity of hell-torments, That the words everlasting and ever and ever, are often used in the Holy Scriptures (especially in the Old Testament) when they signify not an endless duration, but a limited term of time.

And this we readily grant: but then we reply, That when the words are used with this limitation, they either manifestly appear to be used so from the context; or are put in opposition to occasional types which God gave his people on some special occasions, as when it is said, "It shall be a perpetual or everlasting statute," or, "a statute for ever;" that is, a standing type, and not merely transient or occasional, as was the pillar of cloud, the manna, and such-like. Or, lastly, they have a relation to that covenant, God made with his spiritual Israel; which, if understood in a spiritual sense, will be everlasting, though the ceremonial dispensation be abolished.

Besides, it ought to be observed, that some of the passages just now referred to, have neither of these words so much as mentioned in them, and cannot possibly be interpreted, so as to denote only a limited term of years.

But let that be as it will, it is evident even to a demonstration, that the words of the text will not admit of such a restrained signification, as appears from their being directly opposed to the words immediately following, "That the righteous shall go into life eternal." From which words, all are ready to grant, that the life promised to the righteous will be eternal. And why the punishment threatened to the wicked should not be understood to be eternal likewise, when the very same word in the original, is used to express the duration of each, no shadow of a reason can be given.

But, Secondly, There cannot be one argument urged, why God should reward his saints with everlasting happiness, which will not equally prove that he ought to punish sinners with eternal misery.

For, since we know nothing (at least for a certainty) how he will deal with either but by a Diving Revelation; and since, as was proved by the foregoing argument, he hath as positively threatened eternally to punish the wicked, as to reward the good; it follows, that his truth will be as much impeached and called in question, did he not inflict his punishments, as it would be, if he did not confer his rewards.

To this also it has been objected, That though God is obliged by promise to give his rewards, yet his veracity could not be called in question, supposing he should not execute his threatenings, as he actually did not in the case of Nineveh; which God expressly declared by his Prophet Jonah, "should be destroyed in forty days:" notwithstanding the sequel of the story informs us, that Nineveh was spared.

But in answer to this objection we affirm, that God's threatenings, as well as promises, are without repentance; and for this reason, because they are both founded on the eternal laws of right reason. Accordingly we always find, that where the conditions were not performed, on the non-performance of which the threatenings were denounced, God always executed the punishment threatened. The

driving Adam out of Eden, the destruction of the old world by a deluge of water, and the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, are, and will be always so many standing monuments of God's executing his threatenings when denounced, though to our weak apprehensions, the punishment may seem far to exceed the crime.

It is true, God did spare Nineveh, and that because the inhabitants did actually repent, and therefore performed the conditions upon which it was supposed, by the Prophet's being sent to warn them, the threatened punishment should be withheld.

And so in respect to gospel threatenings. If men will so far consult their own welfare, as to comply with the gospel, God certainly will not punish them, but on the contrary, confer upon them his rewards. But to affirm that he will not punish, and that eternally to, impenitent, obstinate sinners, according as he hath threatened; what is it, in effect, but to make God like a man, that he should lie, or the son of man, that he should repent?

But the absurdity of such an opinion will appear still more evident from

The Third argument I shall offer to prove, that the torments reserved for the wicked hereafter are eternal, From the nature of the christian covenant.

And here I must again observe, that it was taken for granted at the beginning of this discourse, that you believe the Son of God came down to save sinners; and that there is but one Mediator between God and men, even the Man Christ Jesus.

And here I take it for granted farther, (unless you believe the absurd and unwarrantable doctrine of purgatory) that you are fully persuaded, this life is the only time allotted by Almighty God for working out our salvation, and that after a few years are passed over, there will remain no more sacrifice for sin.

And if this be granted (and who dares deny it?) it follows, that if the wicked man dieth in his wickedness, and under the wrath of God, he must continue in that state to all eternity. For, since there is no possibility of their being delivered out of such a condition, but by and through Christ; and since, at the hour of death, the time of Christ's mediation and intercession for him is irrecoverably gone; the same reason that may be given, why God should punish a sinner that dieth under the guilt of his sins for a single day, will equally hold good, why he should continue to punish him for a year, an age, nay all eternity.

But I hasten to the Fourth and last argument, to prove, That the torments reserved for the wicked hereafter are eternal, Because the devil's punishment is to be so.

That there is such a being whom we call the devil; that he was once an angel of light, but for his pride and rebellion against God, was cast down from heaven, and is now permitted, with the rest of the spiritual wickednesses, to walk to and fro, seeking whom they may devour; that there is a place of torment reserved for them, or, to use the Apostle's words, "That they are reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day;" are truths all here present were supposed to be convinced of, at the beginning of the discourse, you believing the Holy Scriptures to be written by the inspiration of God, wherein these truths are delivered.

But then if we allow all this, and think it no injustice in God to punish those once glorious spirits for their rebellion; how can we think it unjust in him, to punish wicked men for their impenitency to all eternity?

You will say, perhaps, that they have sinned against greater light, and therefore deserve a greater punishment. And so we grant that the punishment of the fallen angels may be greater as to degree, than that of wicked men; but then we affirm, it will be equal as to the eternal duration of it: for in that day, as the lively oracles of God inform us, shall the Son of Man say to them on his left hand, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels." Where we find that impenitent sinners are to be cast into the same everlasting fire, with the devil and his angels; and that too very justly. For though they may have sinned against greater light, yet christians sin against greater mercy. Since Christ took not hold of, did not die for, the fallen angels, but for men and for our salvation. So that if God spared not those excellent beings, assure thyself, O obstinate sinner, whoever thou art, he will by no means spare thee.

From what then has been said it plainly appears, that verily the torments reserved for the wicked hereafter, war eternal. And if so, brethren, how ought we to fly to Jesus Christ for refuge; how holy ought we to be in all manner of conversation and godliness, that we may be accounted worthy to escape this wrath to come!

But before I proceed to a practical exhortation, permit me to draw an inference or two from what has been said.

And First, If the torments reserved for the wicked hereafter are eternal, what shall we say to those, who make an open profession in their creed to believe a life everlasting, a life of misery as well as happiness, and yet dare to live in the actual commission of those sins which will unavoidably, without repentance, bring them into that place of torment? Thou believest that the punishments of the impenitently wicked in another life, are eternal: "Thou dost well, the devils also believe and tremble." But know O vain man, unless this belief doth influence thy practice, and makes thee bid adieu to thy sins, every time thou repeatest thy creed, thou doest in effect say, I believe I shall be undone for ever.

But, Secondly, If the torments reserved for the wicked hereafter are eternal, then let this serve as a caution to such persons, (and it is to be feared there are some such) who go about to dissuade others from the belief of such an important truth: There being no surer way, in all probability, to encourage and promote infidelity and profaneness, than the broaching or maintaining so unwarrantable a doctrine. For if the positive threats of God concerning the eternity of hell-torments, are already found insufficient to deter men from sin, what a higher pitch of wickedness may we imagine they will quickly arrive at, when they are taught to entertain any hopes of a future recovery out of them; or, what is still worse, that their souls are hereafter to be annihilated, and become like the beasts that perish? But woe unto such blind leaders of the blind. No wonder if they both fall into that ditch. And let such corrupters of God's word know, that I testify unto every man that heareth me this day, "That if any one shall add unto, or take away from the words that are written in the book of God, God shall take his part out of the book of life, and shall add unto him all the plagues that are in that book."

Thirdly and Lastly, If the torments reserved for the wicked hereafter are eternal, then this may serve as a reproof for those who quarrel with God, and say it is inconsistent with his justice, to punish a person to all eternity, only for enjoying the pleasures of sin for a season. But such persons must be told, that it is not their thinking or calling God unjust, will make him so, no more than a condemned prisoner's saying the law or judge is unjust, will render either duly chargeable with such an imputation. But knowest thou, O worm, what blasphemy thou are guilty of, in charging God with injustice? "Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, why hast thou made me thus?" Wilt thou presume to arraign the Almighty at the bar of thy shallow reasoning? And call him unjust, for punishing thee eternally, only because thou wishest it may not be so? But hath God said it, and shall he not do it? He hath said it: and let God be true, though every man be a liar. "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" Assuredly he will. And if sinners will not own his justice in his threatenings here, they will be compelled ere long to own and feel them, when tormented by him hereafter.

But to come to a more practical application of what has been delivered.

You have heard, brethren, the eternity of hell-torments plainly proved, from the express declarations of holy scriptures, and consequences naturally drawn from them. And now there seems to need no great art of rhetoric to persuade any understanding person to avoid and abhor those sins, which without repentance will certainly plunge him into this eternal gulf. The disproportion between the pleasure and the pain (if there be any pleasure in sin) is so infinitely great, that supposing it was only possible, though not certain, that the wicked would be everlastingly punished, no one that has the reason of a man, for the enjoying a little momentary pleasure, would, one might imagine, run the hazard of enduring eternal pain. But since the torments of the damned are not only possible, but certain (since God himself, who cannot lie, has told us so) for men, notwithstanding, to persist in their disobedience, and then flatter themselves, that God will not make good his threatenings, is a most egregious [gross, excessive] instance of folly and presumption.

Dives himself supposed, that if one rose from the dead, his brethren would amend their lives, but Christians, it seems, will not repent, though the Son of God died and rose again, and told them what they must expect, if they continue obstinate in evil-doing.

Would we now and then draw off our thoughts from sensible objects, and by faith meditate a while on the miseries of the damned, I doubt not but we should, as it were, hear many an unhappy soul venting his fruitless sorrows, in some such piteous moans as these.

"O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this body of death!" O foolish mortal that I was, thus to bring myself into these never-ceasing tortures, for the transitory enjoyment of a few short-lived pleasures, which scarcely afforded me any satisfaction, even when I most indulged myself in them. Alas! Are these the wages, these the effects of sin? O damned apostate! First to delude me with pretended promises of happiness, and after several years drudgery in his service, thus to involve me in eternal woe. O that I had never hearkened to his beguiling insinuations! O that I had rejected his very first suggestions with the utmost detestation and abhorrence! O that I had taken up my cross and followed Christ! O that I had never ridiculed serious godliness; and out of a false politeness, condemned the truly pious as too severe, enthusiastic, or superstitious! For I then had been happy indeed, happy beyond expression, happy to all eternity, yonder in those blessed regions where they fit, clothed with unspeakable glory, and chanting forth their seraphic hallelujahs to the Lamb that sitteth upon the throne for ever. But, alas! These reflections come now too late; these wishes now are vain and fruitless. I have not suffered, and therefore must not reign with them. I have in effect denied the Lord that bought me, and therefore justly am I now denied by him. But must I live for ever tormented in these flames? Must this body of mine, which not long since lay in state, was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day, must it be here eternally confined, and made the mockery of insulting devils? O eternity! That thought fills me with despair: I must be miserable for ever."

Come then, all ye self-deluding, self-deluded sinners, and imagine yourselves for once in the place of that truly wretched man I have been here describing. Think, I beseech you by the mercies of God in Christ Jesus, think with yourselves, how racking, how unsupportable the never-dying worm of a self-condemning conscience will hereafter be to you. Think how impossible it will be for you to dwell with everlasting burnings.

Come, all ye christians of a lukewarm, Laodicean spirit, ye Gallie's in religion, who care a little, but not enough for the things of God; O think, think with yourselves, how deplorable it will be to lose the enjoyment of heaven, and run into endless torments, merely because you will be content to be almost, and will not strive to be altogether christians. Consider, I beseech you consider, how you will rave and curse that fatal stupidity which made you believe any thing less than true faith in Jesus,

productive of a life of strict piety, self-denial, and mortification, can keep you from those torments, the eternity of which I have been endeavoring to prove.

But I can no more. These thoughts are too melancholy for me to dwell on, as well as for you to hear; and God knows, as punishing is his strange work, so denouncing his threatenings is mine. But if the bare mentioning the torments of the damned is so shocking, how terrible must the enduring of them be!

And now, are not some of you ready to cry out, "These are hard sayings, who can bear them?"

But let not sincere christians be in the least terrified at what has been delivered: No, for you is reserved a crown, a kingdom, an eternal and exceeding weight of glory. Christ never said that the righteous, the believing, the upright, the sincere, but the wicked, merciless, negatively good professors before described, shall go into everlasting punishment. For you, who love him in sincerity, a new and living way is laid open into the Holy of Holies by the blood of Jesus Christ: and an abundant entrance will be administered unto you, at the great day of account, into eternal life. Take heed, therefore, and beware that there be not in any of you a root of bitterness springing up of unbelief: but on the contrary, steadfastly and heartily rely on the many precious promises reached out to you in the gospel, knowing that he who hath promised is faithful, and therefore will perform.

But let no obstinately wicked professors dare to apply any of the divine promises to themselves: "For it is not meet to take the children's meat and give it unto dogs:" No, to such the terrors of the Lord only belong. And as certainly as Christ will say to his true followers, "Come, ye blessed children of my Father, receive the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world;" so he will unalterably pronounce this dreadful sentence against all that die in their sins, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels."

From which unhappy state, may God of his infinite mercy deliver us all through Jesus Christ; to whom, with thee O Father, and thee O Holy Ghost, three Persons and one eternal God, be ascribed, as is most due, all honor, power, might, majesty, and dominion, now and for ever more.