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NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ON THE
FUTURE PUNISHMENT OF SIN.

VII. (*continued*) MODERN OPINIONS.

MUCH more thorough and satisfactory than any of the works mentioned last month, and well worth careful study, is a small volume on *Future Punishment* by Dr. Clemance. The author enumerates and then discusses four theories; *viz.* (1) Universal Restoration, (2) Annihilation, (3) the Absolute Endlessness of suffering and sin, (4) his own opinion, *viz.* that "in Scripture, the duration of Future Punishment is left indefinite.¹ Of these theories he says:² "We do not accept *the first*, for it seems to us *against* Scripture; nor *the second*, for it *distorts* Scripture; nor *the third*, for it *goes beyond* Scripture." Of these judgments, the first and second are supported by arguments most able and, as I think, most conclusive. Nor can I deny that the third theory has often been stated in language which, in my view, goes far beyond the teaching of the Bible. Dr. Clemance's defence of this third judgment is little more than an exposition of the meaning of the word *eternal*, an attempt to show that it conveys the idea, not of absolute, but only of relative, endlessness; *i.e.* of endlessness from the writer's own mental point of view. With this exposition of the meaning of the word, these papers are in substantial agreement. On page 53, Dr. Clemance strongly condemns "a tremendous assertion of Moses Stuart's, which ought never to have been made; *viz.* 'If the Scriptures have not asserted the endless punishment of the wicked, neither have they asserted the

¹ See p. 62. I understand Dr. Clemance to mean that the Bible is quite definite about the finality of future punishment, but that it leaves open a possibility that the lost may sink into unconsciousness.

² On p. 19.

endless happiness of the righteous, nor the endless glory and existence of the Godhead.'” In this condemnation I heartily agree. For in addition to passages similar in form to those which describe the future punishment of sin, other passages, *e.g.* Luke i. 33, “Of His kingdom there shall be no end,” assert in words open to no doubt the endless existence of Christ and of God, and of those over whom Christ will bear endless sway. Careless over-statement like that quoted above has done much harm, and has put a sharp weapon into the hands of opponents. Whether Dr. Clemance’s own theory goes as far as the Scripture fairly warrants, many will doubt. But his warning to keep well within the limits of our inspired guides is certainly salutary.

To me, Dr. Clemance seems to have himself gone beyond these limits when, on p. 16, he asserts that “no human spirit reaches the crucial point of its probation till it has come into contact with the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ for acceptance or rejection.” This statement involves a probation beyond the grave for those who in this life have not heard the Gospel. But no proof of the statement is given. It rests entirely on the assumption that, apart from the Gospel, there can be no satisfactory test of human character. This I deny. The ordinary circumstances and events of life, taken in connexion with the law written upon the hearts of all men, afford to all who come to years of maturity a most searching and impartial test of character. We have therefore no need to seek a probation beyond the grave. It is right to say that Dr. Clemance mentions a future probation only by way of suggestion. As not taught in the Bible, he refuses to assert it.¹ But it is involved in the fundamental principle quoted above. In proof that probation is not necessarily or probably endless, and that it will not always lead to amendment,

¹ See p. 76.

Dr. Clemance appropriately quotes Luke xiii. 9, "If it bear fruit well; if not, cut it down."

Almost simultaneously with the first paper of this series appeared a most careful and useful volume by James Fyfe, entitled *The Hereafter*. The writer discusses the testimony of many ancient nations, of the Old Testament, of the Apocrypha, and of the New Testament, to a future life and retribution, investigating carefully the meaning of the words used; and discusses also the theories of Conditional Immortality and Universal Restoration; and objections to Eternal Punishment. Taken as a whole, and reserving judgment on many details, Mr. Fyfe's conclusions seem to me just. His mode of dealing with the matter is certainly right. And I heartily recommend his book as by far the best on this supremely difficult subject.

VIII. THE RESULT.

WE come now to sum up the practical result of the research embodied in these papers, in order thus to form an opinion touching the teaching of the New Testament about the Future Punishment of Sin.

The careful student will at once notice how much less is said by the Apostles and by Christ about the doom of sinners than about the present privilege and the future glory of the saved. The great doctrines of the Gospel, such as salvation through faith and through the death of Christ, and the gift, to all who believe, of the Holy Spirit, to be in them the Divine source of a life like that of Christ, are taught again and again, in wonderful diversity of form, revealing nevertheless essential harmony, on almost every page of the New Testament. On the other hand, we read very little about the future punishment of sin except the passages quoted or alluded to in these papers. According to our need, we have received. Upon the promises, not

upon the threatenings, of God rests the Christian's hope. These promises are therefore fully expounded. The threatenings were added to deter us from neglecting so great salvation. The effectiveness of this deterrent is not lessened by the obscurity which surrounds the awful punishment of sin. This scantier information warns us to use the utmost care in interpreting the statements of Holy Scripture about the mysterious doom of the lost.

The various types of New Testament teaching agree to assert that beyond the grave exact retribution for all actions done on earth awaits all men, good and bad. And the whole chorus of Apostles and Evangelists asserts, with one glad voice, again and again, in every variety of phrase, that all who put trust in Christ, sinners though they be, will be saved here from the power of sin and will enter the endless and glorious rest of God. On the other hand, they agree to teach that the punishment of the wicked will be utter and hopeless ruin. St. Paul twice, and St. Peter once, use language implying that this ruin will be final. And this is clearly and very conspicuously implied in an assertion about Judas recorded in the First and Second Gospels as spoken by Christ, and in a metaphor, *viz.* the destruction of vegetable matter by fire, attributed to Him in each of the Four Gospels. But neither in the Epistles of St. Paul nor in the Fourth Gospel have we any definite teaching about the condition of the lost. On the other hand, the Synoptist Gospels speak of them in unmistakable terms as in actual and extreme suffering. Visions of suffering beyond the grave are a conspicuous feature in the Book of Revelation. And these visions reach up to the farthest limit of the prophet's forward gaze.

This plain teaching of Holy Scripture has received during subsequent ages, from various sources, various accretions and modifications.

Some who have grasped the promise of life in Christ

Jesus, and have found it to be not only a light in deepest darkness, but at all times a means of moral elevation, have inferred that all who have not this inward experience will suffer the punishment threatened to those who obey not the Gospel. They have thus doomed to eternal death the mass of mankind. This seems to me, for reasons already stated,¹ to go beyond the legitimate interpretation of the Bible. The fate of our fellows we must leave to Him who has watched the action and read the hearts of all men.

That human consciousness will not cease at death is plainly taught, and everywhere assumed, throughout the New Testament. In this sense, the soul of man may be said to be immortal; it will not be dissipated by the stroke of death. But from this, and from the teaching of the New Testament about the endless blessedness of the saved and about the sufferings of the lost, many have inferred, and have asserted, that the soul of man is by its own nature and constitution indissoluble, that human consciousness is, except in such intervals as sleep, essentially permanent. And this assertion has been used as an argument to prove the endlessness of the sufferings of the lost. But it is worthy of note that such argument is never used in the Bible. Man is said in Genesis to have become, at his creation, "a living soul." But we are never taught, in so many words or in words equivalent, that the life then given is an inalienable possession. The introduction of this argument, foreign as it is to the thought of Holy Scripture, has greatly complicated the subject before us.

Ambiguity in the use of the word "immortality" seems to me a defect in Mr. Fyfe's able work.²

This complication is the more serious, because in the New Testament *life* means much more than conscious existence. Wherever this word refers to existence beyond the grave, it denotes the normal and blessed state of the

¹ See pp. 283, 284.

² See pp. 207-215.

servants of God. The future state of the lost is never spoken of as *life*. Even while living on earth, the wicked are said to be "dead";¹ "he that disobeys the Son will not see life";² the doom of the unsaved is "the second death";³ "immortality" is the reward of well-doing.⁴ Consequently, they who speak of the soul of man as essentially immortal and of the lost as living for ever, give to the words *life* and *immortality* a meaning not found in the Bible, and make assertions in direct conflict with its teaching. Thus have arisen much confusion and error.

Others have gone astray in another direction, and have gone farther astray. They have read with joy of God's infinite and fatherly love to all men, and of His loving purpose to save all men. They know that they would do anything in their power to save their own children from ruin; and that God is armed with infinite power. They therefore infer that by His irresistible might He will accomplish His purpose of mercy in every individual embraced by that purpose, and will rescue ultimately all men from sin and death.

We have already seen that, if this inference be correct, nearly all the writers of the New Testament were in serious error touching the doom of the lost; and that later research has discovered an important truth, colouring the whole dealing of God with man, which had no place in the thought of the illustrious Apostle to the Gentiles, of the writers of the Four Gospels, and in the thought of the Great Teacher as it is revealed in His recorded words. This is most unlikely.

To the argument involved in this alternative, it may perhaps be replied that not the whole purpose of God touching those who reject the salvation offered in the Gospel was revealed to the writers of the New Testament, that behind the threatenings therein contained there lies

¹ 1 Tim. v. 6.

² John iii. 36.

³ Rev. xx. 14.

⁴ Rom. ii. 7.

hidden in the breast of God a secret purpose of mercy even for those about whom no word of mercy was spoken by the Apostles or by Christ. This suggestion I am in no haste dogmatically to pronounce impossible. Far be it from me to limit the mercy of God. But how unsubstantial is the basis on which this hope rests! It has no better foundation than man's conception of what he would do were he in God's position. And the worthlessness of this conception as a basis of expectation touching the future action of God is revealed in the fact, manifest to all, that before our eyes in His government of the world God is ever doing and permitting what no earthly father would do or permit. Especially we notice that in human life on earth the highest interests of manhood are in some measure committed even to childhood, that some children have blinded themselves, thus inflicting on themselves a lifelong injury. This analogy would be, standing by itself, small proof or presumption that the final destiny of each is contingent on his action in the present life. But it is as strong on one side as is the above argument on the other. And it is in harmony with, though falling far below, the teaching of the New Testament about the finality of the future punishment of sin. This intangible hope of a mercy of which we find no trace in the Covenant of Mercy and in the Record of God's infinite love, seems to me to lie beyond the range of practical theology. It has no place in the revealed Truth of God.

Less conspicuously in conflict with the plain words of Holy Scripture is another suggestion. It has been said, sometimes with great confidence, and indeed as plainly taught in Holy Scripture, that the lost will ultimately cease to be; and that thus in the end both sin and sinners will vanish from the universe of God. That, taken by itself, this suggestion has something to commend it, I am willing to admit. It may seem reasonable to expect that,

when existence has become worthless or worse than worthless, God may in mercy permit it to cease, that in compassion towards the obdurate He may permit them to fall into an endless sleep. Indeed, from their own point of view, this would seem to be the least unhappy fate for those who will be excluded from the glories of the Kingdom of God. We turn, therefore, to the writings of the Apostles and to the recorded words of Jesus to see if this apparently merciful suggestion has any place there. The result of our search is embodied in these papers. The expectation that the lost will ultimately cease to be rests, so far as the teaching of the Bible is concerned, simply on the meaning of two Greek words or their synonyms; and, as I have endeavoured to show, on a misinterpretation of them. In other words, this attractive suggestion has no place in Holy Scripture. It is however argued that if punishment be final, as the New Testament plainly teaches, and if the punished ones are not ultimately annihilated, then evil will never cease to mar the work of God.¹ To this argument I have no answer. But to me it seems, in view of the profound mystery of sin and its results, to be a most uncertain ground of expectation touching the future action of God. My duty as an exegete is merely to show that it has no place in the Christian documents. And these documents are, in my opinion, the only reliable source of information about the world to come.

One more suggestion remains. Inasmuch as on earth many have not heard in its fulness and power the Gospel of Jesus, it has been suggested that for such, and perhaps for all men, there may be another offer of salvation beyond the grave, that the love of God which has given to some men on earth great spiritual advantages, will give to all men similar advantages beyond the grave. It may be admitted that we have in the Bible no categorical denial of this

¹ See Dr. Row, as quoted on p. 393.

possibility. But, on the other hand, we have nothing which implies or suggests it. And we have clear indications that even for those who have never heard the Gospel there is, apart from a future probation, a path leading to life eternal. The case of imbeciles and of those who die in infancy lies outside the teaching of the Bible. And the immense difficulties which surround it warn us not to make it a ground of argument. Those who have passed from earth without entering the arena of personal life, we must leave, and we may leave, without a moment's apprehension, in the hands of their loving Creator and Judge.

In other words, the three theories discussed above have no place in Holy Scripture, and are more or less, directly or indirectly, contradicted by it. All scriptural support of them vanishes under grammatical investigation of the Sacred Text. They are mere human attempts to solve that which the Bible leaves unsolved. If we are to accept them in any measure, it must be simply and only on the ground of our conception, based upon our knowledge of the character of God, of what He is likely to do with those who refuse the salvation wrought out for, and announced to, men by Christ. What such ground of expectation is worth, each must judge for himself.

Such is the result of our study of the New Testament in its teaching about the Future Punishment of Sin. To many, or to all, of my readers it will doubtless be profoundly disappointing. We should like to have found some mitigation of the punishment threatened to sinners. But our search has been in vain. And we are left face to face with the fact, now indisputable, that the Writers of the New Testament agree to teach that the doom of those who persist in refusing the salvation offered by Christ is utter and hopeless and final ruin. Before that vision of ruin, even for the worst of men, all human thought quails. We dare not contemplate the doom of one lost soul. From

that awful vision of judgment we have sought refuge in the Book of God. But its iron gates of threatening have mercilessly repelled us. Where shall our baffled anxiety turn? To whom shall our thought fly for refuge?

We will fly for refuge, and we shall find refuge, in the infinite love of our Father in Heaven, the Creator and Father of us and of all men. The lost are in His hands. No doom will be pronounced upon them except by the lips of Him who shed His blood to save from death every child of Adam. No punishment will be inflicted except by His infinite Wisdom and infinite Love. If we have misinterpreted His purposes, the Judge Himself will make no mistake. But His wisdom and our ignorance warn us not hastily to declare what He will do. In speaking of His judgment we must carefully keep our language within the limits of the indisputable teaching of Holy Scripture. And, for the solution of the many difficulties which at present that teaching seems to involve, we must wait till the morning breaks and the shadows flee away. In that Day even the punishment of sin will be seen to be a part of the infinite mercy of God. And, in full view of all the facts of the case, our voice will swell the "great shout of much people in Heaven, saying, Hallelujah; Salvation and glory and power belong to our God: for TRUE AND RIGHTEOUS ARE HIS JUDGMENTS."

JOSEPH AGAR BEET.