

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expository-times\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php)

pdfs are named: [Volume]\_[Issue]\_[1<sup>st</sup> page of article].pdf

## The Preaching of Doom.

BY THE REV. J. M. E. ROSS, M.A., REDHILL.

It can scarcely be denied that in the pulpit of to-day there is a conspiracy of silence upon eschatology in general and upon its darker side in particular. When the present writer was timidly preaching some of his earliest sermons, it fell to his lot to preach upon a certain day in a church in the West Highlands of Scotland. After service he was visited by a retired minister who lived in the place, an old man, with white hair and beard and a countenance somewhat stern and severe, who placed his hand upon the young preacher's shoulder and said, 'My young friend, I should like to hear you preach a sermon on some of the fundamental doctrines: I should like to hear you preach from the text, *He that believeth not shall be damned.*' It would be interesting to know how many sermons have been preached in Christendom during the last decade from that text or from kindred passages. And there is an uneasy feeling beginning to stir among some of us, who, even while we know that we cannot return to the thought and speech of our forefathers on this matter, are beginning to wonder whether we really declare the whole counsel of God. Retribution in this life is often enough touched upon, but we have become agnostic in regard to the things beyond the veil. And the emphasis and proportion we give to the idea are scarcely those of the New Testament.

There are reasons for this silence. One is a healthy reaction against the extremes and exaggerations of the earlier exponents of retribution. From Loyola and Jonathan Edwards to C. H. Spurgeon, at any rate in his earlier years, all schools and sections of the Church seemed to speak in a kind of delirium upon this theme. It would be easy to gather together, as Farrar and others have done, a collection of lurid passages which have now lost their power to convince: they only sicken us and create a mood of revolt. The point now raised is the question whether this revolt has not gone too far, and whether we are not silent about some themes on which we ought to speak. There is another reason for silence. There has grown upon us, with the passing of the years and a fuller understanding of the mind of Christ, the feeling that a man ought to be at his holiest and best when he is handling the

threatenings of the Divine Love and the ultimate possibilities of evil. When a preacher handles the Divine promises and invitations, he can do so in all humility as one who himself clings to them and lives by them: the deeper the sense of his own unworthiness, the more true and tender is his tone. But when he handles the threatenings, it is difficult to avoid the appearance of taking a seat beside the Judge: if a man attempts it at all, it must be under an exceeding sense of responsibility and pressure of conviction; and he requires for it a mood more selfless than any that we can commonly attain. Dr. Dale's son notes that his father's sermons on future punishment were never preached a second time. 'He seems to have felt that utterance upon a theme so terrible must come fresh from the preacher's heart, forced out of it by an overpowering sense of duty.' There are some preachers who have in their desks half-finished sermons upon eschatological subjects: we began them; we shuddered at them; we left them,—until the tides of the Spirit should carry us out of the more frequented waterways and bear us in under the shadow of these precipitous and terrible thoughts. But perhaps the chief reason for silence is just the difficulty of finding a satisfactory doctrine to preach. There is no need to discuss here in detail the three theories that divide the field of possibility: the orthodox doctrine of final loss and endless separation; the restorationist doctrine, whether held absolutely or in vaguer fashion as 'the larger hope'; and the half-way house, the doctrine of relief, known as 'Conditional Immortality.' Each builds on Scripture and claims its own array of proof texts. Each has its own difficulties. The first and last seem to involve in one form or another the final defeat of the Almighty Love; it is difficult for faith to accept that as the issue of the travail of the ages. The second embodies ideas which must be the wish of all, but when we begin to hammer out the wish into a creed, our difficulties begin. There is the tendency of character to set and harden. There is the fact that pain in itself has no remedial power, sometimes the very opposite. There is the urgency of the Divine Love in its insistence upon To-day. And so, finding

difficulties in all the theories, one is tempted to be agnostic, and to veil one's ignorance in silence. The impression left by reading the advocates of rival theories is that, if Scripture does not give an uncertain sound, it gives at most a verdict that hangs upon the niceties of interpretation, *e.g.*, the precise shade of meaning to be read into the word *aiónios*. Such an impression does not tend to produce either prophetic firmness of conviction or prophetic frankness of speech.

These things, then, make for silence. But there are other things that press for speech. To begin with, one learns by experience that our hearers are by no means uninterested. A certain minister had recently a series of monthly conferences with men: the first time the members of the conference were allowed to choose their own subject, they unanimously chose future punishment, and the theme brought the largest gathering of the series. The average man is a much more theological animal than is sometimes imagined. It is true that if we preached to him the old doctrine of hell in the old-fashioned way he would no longer believe it; it has been subjected to a long undermining process from many quarters and has gradually crumbled away. Yet he is still asking for information, if we have any to give, and meantime he is not inclined to dismiss eschatology as a department with which he has no concern. Further, there are the uses of the doctrine,—though one is timid about enlarging on this, lest one should be accused of holding a doctrine for the sake of its uses. Men as far apart as Sir Thomas Browne and Professor James acknowledge the usefulness, and in some cases the necessity, of the appeal to fear. God's threatenings, says the former, are 'the secondary method of His wisdom, which He useth but as the last remedy and upon provocation, a course rather to deter the wicked than incite the virtuous to his worship.' The words are part of a depreciation of the appeal to fear, but it is admitted that wisdom may sometimes use it, even if in a secondary way. 'Of all the criminal human beings,' Professor James says, 'the false, cowardly, sensual, or cruel persons who actually live, there is perhaps not one whose criminal impulse may not be at some moment overpowered by the presence of some other emotion to which his character is also potentially liable, provided that other emotion be only made intense enough. Fear is usually the most available emotion for this result in this particular class of

persons. It stands for conscience. . . . Old-fashioned, hell-fire Christianity well knew how to extract from fear its full equivalent in the way of fruits for repentance and its full conversion value.' Now it is impossible for us to use the appeal to fear as our forefathers used it. But the point remains,—has the sinful and unrepentant soul anything to be afraid of? *If so, what?* And *how can it be presented so as to take its full practical effect?* The deepest reason for speech upon the subject is the need of teaching men to face facts, and to face all the facts. The old doctrine, however crude it was, was an attempt to state one of the great tendencies of life and the issue of that tendency. The statement becomes antiquated, but the tendency remains; and in handling the issues of it, if Christ and the Scriptures are our guides at all, we face realities and appalling realities. It may be useful that men should face these realities; yet the deepest argument for helping them to do so is not usefulness, but honesty: it is Paul's *Be not deceived*. That is why some of us are uneasy lest, in our avoidance of eschatological preaching, we fail to declare the whole counsel of God; and the question that haunts us is this—how can we restate the doctrine of doom in a way that shall be free from superstition and exaggeration, and yet full of real impressiveness and practical fruitfulness?

Some suggestions towards such a restatement are here offered with humility.

i. In future conceptions of this doctrine *experience* will play a larger part than it did in the thoughts of our fathers. For we have discovered that retribution, instead of being a thunderstorm rolling and flashing on some far horizon, is a wolf crouching at the very door, a shadow following men down the street, a pain throbbing and stabbing in the soul,—something, in short, that is not far away but close at hand. Dante felt this when he made Virgil, symbol of human reason, the guide to hell: recompense was a reality that even reason unaided could discover and lay bare. There is great gain to credibility here,—if we can show men that hell in the essence of it is visible to the naked eye. Men have learned now that the universe is one; and it may help them to believe in the working of a law of retribution far away if they can be brought clearly to see it working now and close at hand. If we can see anything at all, we can see that. We can see it in the reality of remorse;

in the coarsening of human nature by persistence in sin; in the gradually increasing impossibility of entrance into higher and purer joys when baser and coarser satisfactions have been chosen and loved; in the swift flight of opportunity and the vast difficulty in the moral world of making up for lost time. These things are realities, and no dream of Catholic or Calvinist ever created anything more terrible than the doctrine which is the shadow of these things projected on the future.

2. The revised doctrine will also draw a good deal from *science*. For science is but experience widened and deepened and made more accurate, experience with a spade, experience with a microscope, experience with a pair of balances, slowly getting at the thoughts of God and thinking them after Him. And science tells men with a grim convincingness, such as perhaps theology never acquired, about the endlessness of consequence; about the survival of the fittest and the going of each type of life to its own place; about the gradual wasting of unused function; about the reality of degeneration, and the possibility that a man who might have evolved into a hero may revert to an earlier type and reel back into the beast. Men are slowly being trained to understand truths like these and to feel the force of them. And if a man wants to know what he has to be afraid of, in God's name, here it is! We can read Jonathan Edwards now and remain unimpressed except by way of revolt; but here are things which are happening, and one cannot face them without an aching heart. They are almost enough to make an atheist kneel: new meanings pour into the old prayer, 'Deliver me from going down to the pit.'

3. And having found the beginnings of our doctrine in science and experience, we shall turn to *Scripture* for confirmation and enlargement. The confirmation of course is abundant. We have all the texts that theologians were wont to hurl at the heads of sinners, though they realized but poorly that they were handling some of the nearest and commonest facts of life. The gain of starting with science and experience is that we thus handle demonstrable realities. But the realities are broken and incomplete. Scripture, with all its lights and shadows of the eternal world, shows us a larger stage on which these tendencies will have room to work themselves out, and a God, who, though He may seem for the present to be

'a magnificent Laodicean,' careless about many things, has nevertheless His day of reckoning and the will and power to enforce His laws. In three respects, however, our handling of Scripture will differ from that of most who proclaimed the older doctrine. (a) Greater justice will be done to *the character of God*. Whatever may be the meaning of the darker and more terrible words of Christ and His Apostles, it must all be seen in the light of His revelation of the Father, the perfect holiness and the perfect Love. We may admit that the Father-God may have ways of working which we cannot comprehend; but we cannot proclaim anything as of the essence of the faith which seems to us out of harmony with that master-thought of all our thinking. (b) We shall have,—thanks to F. D. Maurice and other teachers, or, shall we rather say, thanks to a more careful reading of the New Testament itself?—a much less quantitative and a much more qualitative interpretation of the word *eternal*. We shall not so demean that magnificent word as to imagine that it only implies endless length of days: we shall take as our standard of interpretation such a saying as this, '*This is life eternal, to know thee.*' If that be life eternal, then the missing of that knowledge is death eternal; and the more loving and gracious we know our God to be, the more ethically terrible does the thought of such a doom appear. (c) And we shall have a keener sense of the limitations of *metaphor*: we shall not find a literal fire and a figurative worm in one and the same clause; we shall realize that sombre figures of speech cover realities still more dreadful because they were dreadful to the heart of Christ. We ask ourselves what order of experience was most terrible to Him. It was not physical suffering: it was the loss of the Divine fellowship: it was what we have just seen to be the opposite of eternal life. Whatever else is involved of environment or consequence, God knows: we do not know. But it was this that was terrible to the heart of Christ, and it is this that ought to be most terrible to the minds of reasonable men.

These things, then, converge. Science and experience bear witness to the reality of degeneration and the endlessness of consequence. Revelation shows the vastness of the scale on which consequence works out, and the separation from God in which it essentially consists. The two confirm and support each other. The strange thing is that

when the two are set side by side it is from the Scripture side that any alleviation comes, any lightening of the gloom; for there the character of God is central, and all things are conditioned by that. He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Can there be place in His universe either for an endless exile or an endless pain? Shall He teach His human children to make their punishments remedial, and fail Himself to learn the secret of that wise device? May the darkest hour of the eternal night not turn to daybreak in this that, when souls have tasted to the uttermost what separation from God means, they will begin again to hunger for Him, even as He, the Changeless, is hungering for them? But these are questions only, wishes and hopes. We have to try to preach the certainties, and some things are certain enough.

If we miss one life we shall not find  
Its lesson in another; rather, go  
So much the less complete for evermore.

The things which are somewhat less than certainties we do well to leave quietly under the shadow of the Throne,—all the more because it

is the vision of that Throne which creates our questions and our hopes. It is the Throne of a Law which in time and eternity works itself out to the uttermost and certainly cannot halt while sin endures; it is also the Throne of a Mercy which is infinite and everlasting. Who is sufficient to fuse these two thoughts into one?

There arises the question of the effectiveness of the restated doctrine. Will it be of use? Will it keep men in awe and in order? Will it appeal to the imagination and to the conscience? Undoubtedly there are risks in restatement. But perhaps they are not as great as the risks of silence, or the risks of adhering to old ways of statement. And our business is with the truth, whatever the risks of it be: Luther took the risks when he said, 'The just shall live by faith.' The restated doctrine can scarcely be more futile or more fruitless than the old doctrine has often been; and one hopes that it may be more powerful, because it is closer to life and points out in time the laws that complete themselves in eternity. Any loss in the mere sensationalism of preaching will be made up for by the gain in personal conviction, and in the closeness of the message to the realities of experience.

## The Great Text Commentary.

### THE GREAT TEXTS OF REVELATION.

#### REVELATION II. 17.

'To him that overcometh, to him will I give of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and upon the stone a new name written, which no one knoweth but he that receiveth it.'—R.V.

#### THE CIRCUMSTANCES.

The Book of Revelation needs study, and repays it. In the Letters to the Seven Churches the two most obvious difficulties are (1) the frequent reference to *local circumstances*, and (2) the constant use of *symbols* for the expression of moral and spiritual truth. In this promise to the Church in Pergamum we have both of these classes of difficulties to deal with. The trials of the early Christians had mostly to do with food or with pleasure, and some knowledge of the customs connected with

these two elements of life is necessary, if we are to understand the promise contained in the text. The symbols employed refer to these customs, although they are themselves taken from the familiar language of the Old Testament. They are (1) the *manna*, in reference to food; and (2) the *new name* on the white stone, in reference to the games.

I. *Food*. When an animal was sacrificed it was customary to burn only a small portion of it; the remainder was given back to the worshipper, who then either sold it or invited his family and friends to feast on it. Much of the food publicly sold in the shambles had been offered in sacrifice to some god, while most banquets and even social meals were probably sacrificial feasts. What were the Christians to do about this? St. Paul deals with the difficulty in 1 Cor 8<sup>1</sup>-11<sup>1</sup>. His decision is