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Sin worketh,
 Let me work too;
 Sin undoeth,
 Let me do.
 Busy as sin my work I ply,
 Till I rest in the rest of eternity.

Death worketh,
 Let me work too;
 Death undoeth,
 Let me do.
 Busy as death my work I ply,
 Till I rest in the rest of eternity.

The Witness of the Four Gospels to the Doctrine of a Future State.

BY THE REV. ALFRED PLUMMER, D.D., FORMERLY MASTER OF UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, DURHAM.

At the outset, I wish to express my unshaken conviction that the Fourth Gospel was written by one who had known our Lord intimately during the time of His ministry on earth, and had been His personal disciple, and that this intimate and beloved disciple was probably the Apostle St. John; also that the last chapter of the Fourth Gospel, with the possible exception of one or both of the two last verses, was written by the author of the rest of the Gospel. Consequently, evidence taken from this Gospel is as authoritative as evidence taken from the Synoptic Gospels. In one sense, it is more authoritative, because such a disciple may be expected to have been more intimately acquainted with the mind of Christ; although, in another sense, it may be regarded as less authoritative, because, being written later, there is more possibility that the writer may, in some cases, have unconsciously given us, as Christ's words, what are his own interpretations of Christ's words. This possibility, however, does not outweigh the enormous advantage, possessed by no other Gospel, of being, throughout, the testimony of one who had himself 'heard, and seen, and beheld, and handled, concerning the Word of Life.'

Whether or no we are all agreed as to the authorship of the Fourth Gospel, we shall all of us, I suppose, allow that for the doctrine to be now considered, as well as for any other article of faith, the evidence derived from Christ's words, as reported in the Gospels, is of higher authority than the evidence derived from the rest of the New Testament. When we are sure of what Christ has said, and of what He meant by the words, the question, in any matter of faith or morals, is closed

for Christians. But here it is necessary to point out that, in using the evidence of the Gospels, we are in an inferior position, and therefore have need of greater caution, than in using the Epistles and the Revelation. The Apostles, and others to whom we owe books, have put what they had to say in writing; and, although here and there there are uncertainties of reading, yet, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred,—to take a very low estimate,—we are not in doubt as to what they have written. Christ has left nothing in writing. All that we have is a report of His words; or, indeed, in most cases, a translation of a report of His words; for we may regard it as certain that, as a rule, He spoke in Aramaic, and not in Greek. And, in the case of the Second and Third Gospels, together with a good deal of the First Gospel, what we have got is a report of a translation of a report of His words. Thus, St. Luke gives us his report of a translation of some one's report of what Christ said. We may say that, in St. Mark's case, the translation of St. Peter's report is probably made by Mark himself; but still, even here, it is a report of a translation of a report that we get. There are perhaps few, if any, cases in which we have got an exact report in Greek of what Christ spoke in Greek. There are perhaps not *very* many cases in which we have an *exact* translation in Greek of what our Lord said in Aramaic. On the other hand, there may be cases, and possibly many cases, in which the Evangelists have given us, neither an exact translation, nor even an accurate equivalent, of what was said, but an enlargement of it, or an interpretation of it, or an inference from it, made by a first or

subsequent reporter. That the Evangelists tell us what they believe to have been said, need not be doubted: truthfulness is stamped on every page of their testimony. But the most truthful witnesses unconsciously make mistakes, sometimes by misunderstanding what they have heard, sometimes by using inexact language in reporting what they have heard; and reports of what has been said, and especially reports which have gone through several hands before being committed to writing, must be used with proportionate caution.

It might be thought that considerations of this kind destroy all security as to the substance of Christ's teaching. This, however, is not at all the case. The general substance is secure enough, on account of the general agreement of the witnesses; which result is still further confirmed by the teaching of the Epistles, teaching which could not have originated, unless the testimony of the Gospels was in the main true. Moreover, so many of the utterances attributed to Christ are quite beyond the invention of the reporters. The great doctrines of the Fatherhood of God, of the Divinity of Jesus Christ, of the Incarnation and Atonement, of the sinfulness of man and of the possibility of forgiveness, of the gracious purposes of God towards mankind, of the Resurrection and of a judgment, are given us in so many places, in such different ways, and with such general harmony, that we need not doubt that in these cases we have a revelation of divine truths which Christ came to make known or to confirm. But it is otherwise with regard to the doctrine which we have to consider to-day. In the providence of God, that has been left in much obscurity. Not very much has been told us respecting the conditions of that existence which awaits us after we have passed from this world. It is not always easy to be sure of the meaning of the passages in the Gospels which deal with this mysterious subject. It is not always easy to harmonize what seems to be said in one passage with what seems to be said in another. And when we think that we have got several passages into line, we may find ourselves confronted with another group of passages which appear to point in quite a different direction. Evidently, therefore, there is need of caution in dealing with the evidence; and, in our cautious treatment of it, we must from time to time bear in mind the possibility that in the words attributed to our Lord we have got an amplification

or an interpretation of His words, rather than the very words themselves. Dogmatism is here very much out of place; and the process, always dangerous, of building a theory upon an isolated passage, or even on a selection of passages, without due consideration of qualifying statements elsewhere, is here peculiarly perilous. It would almost seem as if in this subject, which so excites human curiosity (a curiosity which some religions try to gratify in gross or grotesque ways), God has decreed that curiosity should not be gratified, but that just so much should be revealed as is necessary for our guidance, and nothing more. What has been revealed may perhaps be summed up thus: that there is a future life after death, and that our condition in that future life depends upon our behaviour in this life. As regards anything beyond this, or any details of the future life, glimpses of possibilities are given us here and there, but little or nothing that can be affirmed with certainty. As regards most of these possibilities it is rash to affirm, and it is perhaps still more rash to deny. We have the right to look for them, and to point them out where we can find them; but it is perhaps wisest to leave them in the uncertainty in which they have been left in Scripture.

What is the reason for that uncertainty? Why has not much more been clearly revealed to us respecting the things eternal which await us beyond the veil? I venture, with all reverence, to make one conjecture; and it is put forward as nothing more than conjecture. It is possible that what is hidden from us is God's love and mercy, rather than His wrath and severity. There may be possibilities of salvation open to us of which here we have no conception. You will perhaps say, If that is so, why are we not cheered by the knowledge of them? Why are we kept in the dark as to truths which would add so much to our happiness? I answer, Because of man's incorrigible recklessness. With what fatal folly men, who believe that in this life only is there a chance of winning salvation, will nevertheless act! Even when they also believe that to fail to win salvation in this life is to incur endless suffering, they will still go on in a course of wickedness; preferring to enjoy themselves for the present, and take the chance of repentance some day, to the adoption of a strict rule of life at once. Should we not, most of us, be far more reckless in our lives, if God

had revealed to us that the possibilities of attaining to life eternal are far larger than our Bibles lead us to suppose? Therefore, in mercy, God may have withheld from us the knowledge of things which, to the majority of mankind, would have been more of a snare than a help. Of course the cause of the silence may be that no such additional possibilities exist. There are alternatives, one or other of which must be true, and yet we are left in uncertainty as to which is true. Is there, or is there not, probation beyond the grave? Are the penal sufferings of the lost endless or not? Are there some who will be for ever shut out from the Kingdom, or will all be gathered in at last? In each of these three cases, one of the two alternatives must be true; but the Gospels, and indeed the New Testament as a whole, leave us in doubt as to which is true. There must be some good reasons why we are left in doubt, and the one which has just been suggested may possibly be one of them.

One fact that must be constantly remembered with regard to all that is told us in the Gospels, and in Scripture generally, respecting the unseen world and a future state is, that the language is, in nearly all cases, highly metaphorical. This could not be avoided. Things which lie beyond our experience can only be expressed in terms of what lies within our experience. But no metaphor is ever adequate. Some of it applies, some of it does not apply, to the case which is illustrated by the metaphor. In any given case it may be impossible to determine how much applies, and how much is mere alloy to carry the elements which have real value. In considering the whole of the subject before us, we have constantly to be on our guard against misinterpreting metaphor, especially in the direction of over-interpretation.

It may have been owing to misapprehension of metaphorical language, or simply because 'the wish was father to the thought,' that the Apostles believed, and caused the first Christians to believe, that Christ's return in glory would take place soon, and that most of them might live to see it. Christ had expressly said that He Himself did not know the date of that day, and therefore He cannot have given any intimation of the date, least of all an intimation of a date that was false. We infer, therefore, that there was misunderstanding; and, if Apostles could misapprehend Christ on this point, they may conceivably have misapprehended

Him about other points, and unconsciously have misreported His actual words. I insist on this once more in order to point out the danger of building a wide embracing theory upon a single reported saying of our Lord, or even upon two or three such sayings.

What is there, then, that does seem clearly to emerge from the utterances of Christ upon this subject?

He taught that at some time in the future He will return visibly to this world, to put an end to the present dispensation, to inaugurate a different one, and to execute judgment upon the whole human race. Seeing that many of the human race are dead, this universal and individual judgment involves a resurrection from the dead. And seeing that, at Christ's coming, evil will be prevalent on the earth, His return will be a cause of anguish to many, while to the righteous it will bring deliverance and great joy. It is perhaps hardly necessary to quote texts from the Gospels in support of these statements. They are among the characteristic features of the First Gospel (13⁴⁰⁻⁴³ 16²⁷⁻²⁸ 19²⁸ 24²⁷⁻⁴⁴ 25¹³⁻⁴⁶), but they are frequent also in the Second and Third. The subject is less frequent in the Fourth Gospel, but it is quite distinct there also: 'There cometh an hour, in which all that are in the tombs shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done ill, unto the resurrection of judgment' (5^{28, 29}). Again, 'This is the will of him that sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day' (6³⁹; cf. 40, 44). And at the close of the Gospel we have, 'If I will that he tarry till I come' (21²²). The reason why this subject is less prominent in the Fourth Gospel than in the other three can easily be guessed. At the time when St. John wrote, the expectation of a speedy return of Christ was dying or dead, and the growth of the Church was drawing the thoughts of Christians from the possibility of an appearance of Christ in the skies to the urgency of work for Him in the world. The same cause has the same effect on the Epistles of St. Paul. The first group is much more full of this topic than the later groups.

Let us treat the Gospels as ordinary historical documents, quite apart from any theory of inspiration. They supply us with ample evidence that Jesus Christ imparted to His disciples a profound

impression as to the certainty of His return in visible glory, to end this present life and to reward each individual, living or dead, according to his deeds in the flesh. Heaven and earth are to pass away, but not any of His promises or His threats. And it is to be remembered that in this matter the evidence of the Gospels is strongly confirmed by evidence in the rest of the New Testament. It is also worth remembering that modern science gives its confirmation to that part of the conviction with which Christ inspired His followers, which relates to the passing away of the universe, as we know it. There are men of science who predict that in some future age, not only will life on this planet become impossible, but the sun itself, with all its planets welded into its mass, will be wandering, a huge cinder, through immensity.

But what commands our attention much more than the destruction of the material universe is the treatment which each human soul will receive at 'that day.' There are two classes, and (so far as Christ's teaching has been preserved for us) there are only two classes: the lost and the saved. And here at once our perplexities begin. To us in this life it would seem as if the two classes shade off into one another by almost imperceptible gradations, so that if a hard-and-fast line is drawn at any point, the moral difference between the soul that is nearest to the line on one side and the soul that is nearest to it on the other side cannot be very great. And yet this not very great moral difference seems to involve the stupendous retributive difference between eternal life and utter ruin. We may be certain that there will be no injustice; but we are not told how it will be avoided. We are left with the knowledge that there are two classes, with a very sharp line drawn between; so sharp that the differences between the classes are inconceivable, such as 'eye saw not, and ear heard not.' About the gradations we are told nothing. And once more we can reverently conjecture the reason for this silence. It warns us that it is beyond measure perilous to aim at being only just on the right side of the line.

We may pass by, almost without discussion, the condition of those whom the Good Shepherd, when He returns to judgment, will recognize as His sheep. We see at once how it harmonizes with our ideas of the justice and love of God that their reward should be an immensity of bliss that can never end. They enter into the joy of *their Lord*;

and no tongue can tell what that will be. It is with regard to those who, at the great assize, are condemned for not having the characteristics of His sheep that there is so much difficulty, out of which the Gospels do not help us, beyond the very important fact that they do not expressly condemn methods of escape from the difficulty which we can think out for ourselves.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty of all is the doctrine, commonly believed in the Church from the third century to the nineteenth, and still believed by many, that the penal sufferings of the wicked are not only acute and terrible, but endless. But let us carefully distinguish between 'sufferings' and 'loss'; and let us remember that 'punishment' may be a synonym for either. Sufferings may be punishment, and loss may be punishment; and we may have punishment which involves both sufferings and loss. Again, in a case in which punishment involves both sufferings and loss, the sufferings may be transitory, while the loss may be permanent. With this distinction in our minds, let us return to the question whether the Gospels require us to believe that the penal sufferings of the wicked are endless. It is, I suppose, true to say that there is no passage in Scripture which explicitly states that they are not endless; otherwise the terrible and disastrous doctrine that they are endless could never have obtained such a firm hold upon Christians throughout so many centuries. On the other hand, although there are passages that have been supposed to imply that the agonies of the impenitent are interminable, there is in truth no passage which expressly states this; and it is marvellous that so many Christian teachers, including leaders of our own Church in our own day, have been willing, and even eager, to preach this appalling doctrine upon anything less than the surest demonstration from the words of our Lord and His Apostles. And anything approaching to demonstration, thank God, there is none.

Among the passages which have been supposed to imply this doctrine are these. 'Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched' (Mk 9⁴⁸). The words are highly metaphorical, and we must not build doctrines on metaphors. Secondly, the verbs are present, not future; they state the normal condition of the worm and the fire. As Swete says, 'The question of the eternity of punishment does not come into sight.' There is continuous torment in the present, but nothing

is said about endless torment in the future. 'Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou have paid the last farthing' (Mt 5²⁶). Here there is no declaration that payment cannot be made after the debtor has been put in prison. No such dangerous hope is held out as that payment *can* be made after the prison doors have closed; but that does not prove that there is no hope. Still less does it prove that the debtor cannot die in prison. All that is said is, that he cannot be set free till payment is made. 'Whosoever shall speak against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this *world*, nor in that which is to come' (Mt. 12³²).^{*} Whether or no this implies that some sins, unforgiven in this world, can be forgiven in the next, it certainly does not imply that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be visited with endless anguish. The parallel in Mk 3²⁹ gives 'hath never forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin' (*ἔνοχος ἐστὶν αἰώνιου ἁμαρτήματος*): *i.e.* a sin, which belongs to the age to come, holds him fast; or, a sin, age-lasting in its consequences, has power over him. Although nothing is said about everlasting *pain*, yet this solemn text does seem to imply irrevocable *loss*, and therefore a *penalty* that has no end. Somewhat similar are the stern words, 'These shall go away into eternal (or age-lasting) punishment' (*εἰς κόλασιν αἰώνιον*); to which is added in contrast, 'but the righteous into eternal life' (Mt 5⁴⁶). Here the punishment and the reward both have the same epithet, *αἰώνιος*, which must have the same meaning in both cases. Let us assume that the epithet is equivalent to 'everlasting.' Will it follow from this that the punishment involves everlasting *suffering*? By no means. Part of the punishment, and perhaps the greater part of it, is exclusion from the endless joys of the Kingdom. If that exclusion is final, then the punishment is endless, whether or no the excluded souls remain for ever aware of their loss. A man imprisoned for felony is in punishment, even when he is asleep; for he might be free and enjoying himself. Let us assume that the excluded souls feel the agony of their exclusion for a period proportionate to their misdeeds, and then either cease to exist, or cease to suffer. If they are never admitted to the kingdom, they may be said to have an everlasting punishment. This explanation is at least as old as the second century; for, in a passage of which we fortunately have the original Greek as well as the Latin translation, Irenæus says: 'The

good things of God are eternal and endless (*αἰώνια καὶ ἀτελεύτητα—æterna et sine fine*); and for this reason the deprivation of them (*στέρησις αὐτῶν—amissio eorum*) is also eternal and endless' (v. xxvii. 2). Again, twice in Matt. we have the expression 'the eternal fire' (*τὸ πῦρ τὸ αἰώνιον*) into which sinners may be cast (18⁹ 25⁴¹), for which 'the unquenchable fire' (*τὸ πῦρ τὸ ἄσβεστον*) is used as an equivalent in Mk 9⁴³; cf. Lk 3¹⁷. In none of these passages is anything said about endless *suffering*. An unquenchable fire is one which cannot be put out, not one which will burn for ever; and, even if the fire can be supposed to burn for ever, it does not follow that what is thrown into it will burn for ever, still less that creatures which can feel, when thrown into it, will feel the agony of burning for ever. When sinners are compared to weeds or fruitless branches, which are thrown into the fire, the obvious meaning is that the refuse is consumed and utterly destroyed; and in some cases this is expressed by the compound verb *κατακαίω*, 'burn up' (Mt 3¹² 13^{30, 40}, Lk 3¹⁷). It is remarkable that the epithet *αἰώνιος* is never found with a word which necessarily implies suffering, such as *λύπη*, *βάσανος*, *ὀδύνη*, *κόπος*, *ὠδίνες*, and the like; nor yet with words which imply the expression of suffering, as *κλαυθμός*, *ὀδυρμός*, *θρήνος*, or *δάκρυα*. The expression 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' occurs six times in Matt., and once in Lk., but it is nowhere said to be *αἰώνιος*; and, indeed, nowhere does our Lord say anything about the duration of the pains which impenitent sinners must undergo.

Thus far I have been assuming, for the sake of argument, that *αἰώνιος* is equivalent to 'everlasting' or 'endless.' But we have no right to assume that it always has this meaning. In the LXX it is used of various things which are not everlasting, as of Jewish laws and customs which have come to an end, of landmarks which can be changed, and of Leviathan, which cannot be made into a *δοῦλος αἰώνιος*. Still more important is its use in the N.T. of the fire which consumed Sodom and Gomorrah (Jude 7). So that even if we had found any such expression as *βάσανος αἰώνιος*, we should still lack scriptural proof for saying that the penal torments of the wicked are endless.

But this unscriptural doctrine of unending suffering has not arisen simply through forced interpretations of texts, which neither express it, nor of necessity imply it. It has received immense support from the equally unscriptural doctrine of

the natural immortality of the soul. Westcott rightly calls this 'the *heathen guess* of the immortality of the soul' (*Gospel of Life*, p. 55), and points out that the substitution of it for the fulness of the Christian creed 'destroys the idea of the continuance of our distinct personal existence' (*Gospel of the Resurrection*, p. 6). We owe the prevalence of this doctrine in Greek-speaking races to Plato, and in Latin-speaking races to Cicero. In the Christian Church Athenagoras was perhaps the first to introduce it in the East; but its prevalence in the West is due to the overwhelming influence (in this, as in some other things, most disastrous) of Augustine. At the present day, probably at least nine Christians out of ten are under the impression that the immortality of the soul is taught in Scripture. The expression 'immortal souls' is so common, that nearly every one supposes that this is part of revealed truth. That souls can *become* immortal, can *win* eternal life in Christ, is taught over and over again in Scripture. That souls are in their own nature immortal, and, having once come into existence, can never cease to be, is nowhere taught in Scripture. So far from that, the contrary is implied over and over again. If man is naturally imperishable, what is the meaning of the declaration that the object of Christ's death is 'that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life'? If every one is to abide for ever, either in happiness or misery, why are we assured that 'whosoever doeth the will of God abideth for ever'? If *all* mankind are to live for ever, why tell us that those who eat the Bread of Life shall live for ever? And is it not amazing that Scripture should persistently speak of the wages of sin as death, and the end of impenitent sinners as destruction and perdition, if men are possessed of souls which cannot die, whatever they may do? The language of Scripture is thoroughly consistent, if souls are mortal, but are capable of avoiding death and winning immortality. If souls are naturally deathless, then we have to give to 'death' and 'destruction' the highly unnatural meaning of 'living for ever in unspeakable misery.' Scripture tells us that the death which puts an end to our lives in this world is not final; there is a life beyond the grave, in which people will be rewarded or punished for their conduct in this life. Scripture also tells us that the reward for good conduct here is eternal life, and that the penalty for wicked conduct is eternal punishment, which must mean

eternal loss, and might mean eternal suffering. But not one word is said about eternal suffering; nor are we told that eternal means endless.

If the soul is by nature immortal, then, of two alternatives one must be true. Either the wicked, who are to be punished, must suffer for ever and ever, or all will at last be saved. Tertullian and Augustine take the former most terrible alternative, Origen takes the second, and includes in it even Satan and his angels. If the soul is not by nature immortal, then it is possible that the wicked, after receiving the due punishment for their misdeeds, will, in scriptural language, 'die,' or 'perish,' or 'be destroyed'; in modern language, will be annihilated.

This paper is already long enough, and there is not time to discuss these tremendous alternatives. What I chiefly aim at is, to urge reconsideration and abandonment of the frightful dogma of unending agony, which has done, and continues to do, so much mischief to the cause of religion. It is, I believe, steadily dying, less perhaps because people are coming to see that it is not found in Scripture, than because the consciences of men revolt against it. It is felt to be a monstrous libel on the character of the Almighty; for it cannot be reconciled with His attribute of justice, to say nothing of His essential characteristic of love. It attributes to Him conduct, which, if it were reported of a human being, we should condemn as atrocious, but which is justified in His case, either as being an incomprehensible mystery, or by sophistical arguments which debate the reason and the conscience of those who accept them. It is supposed to be useful as a deterrent; but experience shows that it is of little avail for this purpose. It terrifies and perplexes religious people; but it is precisely the most irreligious people who have the word 'hell' most frequently and fearlessly on their lips, although they understand 'hell' to mean endless torment. It may be doubted whether a person, who is not deterred from sin by the belief that he must suffer for his sin, will be deterred by the belief that his suffering will be endless. The one belief may make him circumspect, the other only too possibly will make him desperate. On the other hand, the man's own moral sense allows him, or perhaps compels him, to believe that he must suffer for his sin; but it will possibly tell him that a religion which requires him to believe that finite sin will be visited with infinite pain and misery

cannot be true. Some of us can remember the sensation which was produced by John Stuart Mill's emphatic protest against Mansel's mode of defending this disastrous doctrine; and what he said forty years ago many are thinking now. Why do English clergy still give countenance to a belief that places Christianity at such tremendous disadvantages?

This belief is found in Keble's *Christian Year*¹ (5th Sunday in Lent), and we cannot help that, however much we may lament the fact. It is also found in *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, and we might at least avoid using those hymns which contain it. It is true that in later editions Caswall's 'who love Thee not must *burn eternally*' (106) has been changed into 'are *lost eternally*'; but in the next hymn, by the same writer, we have, 'which from *endless torments* did the world redeem.' And this hymn is frequently sung: I have myself heard it twice in the same church on the same day. Possibly there are other instances of such expressions.

Nothing in this paper is meant to suggest that the punishment of the wicked will be otherwise than terrible; so terrible, that it is well worth our while to strive earnestly and unceasingly to avoid it. Scripture does not allow us to give any encouragement to the easy optimism of the present day, which would intimate that God is an indulgent Father, who is too kind and merciful to be severe even on His most rebellious children. But, on the other hand, Scripture gives us no right to teach, or to encourage, the dreadful belief, that, *if things in the other world can be measured by time*, the sufferings of the wicked are everlasting. Ought we, by dark hints in sermons, to seem to accept and imply the frightful belief, that the infliction of agony is to be prolonged under conditions where there is no need of it as a deterrent, and where there is no possibility of its reforming the recipient of it; and prolonged for ever and ever? Ought we to use hymns which definitely express this doctrine? And how shall we answer the charge of grossly misinterpreting the Bible, and of lading men with burdens too grievous to be borne, if we teach that a consuming fire is one which keeps alive and torments that which it consumes; that destruction by fire means being preserved for ever in the agonies of burning; and that eternal death means living for ever in ceaseless suffering? Moreover,

¹ See also the *Conversion of St. Paul*.

we do a great deal towards encouraging this doctrine, when we allow ourselves to talk too readily of 'immortal souls.' The Bible teaches us that the souls of the righteous are immortal, but it gives us no right to declare that good and bad alike have souls that can never have an end.

I made just now an important reservation: '*if things in the other world can be measured by time.*' But perhaps they cannot. Perhaps there, what we so often say, without being able to know the meaning of our words, will be found to be true—that Time will be no more. It may be that all this perplexity about 'endless' and 'not endless,' about 'everlasting' and 'temporary,' is simply owing to conditions of thought in this world, which may have no existence for those beyond the veil. In that case, to ask how long the sufferings of the wicked will last may be as meaningless as to ask whether they will be square or round. That possibility ought to make us still more wary in the language that we use. For nothing that we know, or can know, justifies us in maintaining a doctrine against which the enlightened conscience of mankind instinctively revolts.

Before concluding, let us return once more to the fact which has always to be remembered in considering what has been revealed in Scripture, and especially what has been revealed respecting the unseen world and the life that is to come; namely, that this revelation has been made, and of necessity made, in language that is metaphorical, symbolical, apocalyptic. And there is perhaps no more fruitful source of error than that of taking metaphors literally and then drawing inferences from them. Interpretations of Scripture which are based on any such method may be vitiated from the outset owing to the false start; and the more cogent the subsequent reasoning, the more potent for mischief the ultimate conclusion will be. Let us take a simple instance, in which the taking of language which is probably symbolical as if it were literal does not lead to any more serious result than ideas about the attendant circumstances of the Last Day which are quite untrue.

In our Lord's words respecting that crisis, the First Gospel adds to what is recorded by Mark and Luke the remarkable statement: 'And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven' (Mt 24³⁰). Cyril of Jerusalem says on this: 'Now a sign truly characteristic of Christ is the cross: a luminous sign of a cross goes before the king'

(*Cat.* xv. 22). Chrysostom has the same idea. But the Gospels give no support to it; and it is strange to find it in writers who are quite ready to interpret the preceding words about signs in the sun, moon, and stars as symbolical. Thus, the moon is the Church, which will then receive no light from Christ who is the Sun, and the stars are the saints who will then lose their influence. So that while heavenly bodies which really exist are treated as symbols, language which is probably symbolical is interpreted very realistically of a luminous cross, visible to the physical eye, and darkening by its brilliancy sun, moon, and stars. This highly questionable interpretation has been preached in our own day as if it were a certainty, and perhaps still is preached by some.

Dr. Sanday, in his very valuable volume on *The Life of Christ in Recent Research*, has done excellent service in calling attention to the very large part which symbolism has to play in the Bible. Truth could not be conveyed, or could not so naturally and easily be conveyed, in any other way. And at the time of Christ apocalyptic language had

become current among the Jews to an extent which even now only scholars are beginning to realize. The only Jewish apocalypse with which ordinary Christian readers are familiar is the Book of Daniel. Very few read the Second Book of Esdras in the Apocrypha. But now, thanks to the labours of Dr. Charles and others, we have seven or eight other writings of a similar character translated into English, and they throw much light upon the language used by our Lord and His disciples. As Dr. Sanday points out, when our Lord said, 'I beheld Satan fall as lightning from heaven' (Lk 10¹⁸), He was using apocalyptic language, which 'belongs to the same category as the description of Satan being cast into the lake of fire in the Revelation of St. John. That, it might be said, is Jewish and fantastic; but the *meaning* of our Lord was not at all fantastic. What He meant was that the victory over the Power of Evil was virtually won.'

In investigating this subject for ourselves, and still more in imparting the results of our investigations to others, let us be mindful of the peril of taking symbolical language literally.

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF THE PSALMS.

PSALM VIII. 4.

'What is man, that thou art mindful of him?
And the son of man, that thou visitest him?'

The eighth Psalm is a very striking one. It lifts the mind of the reader to a lofty height where he seems to have soared above sin and sorrow. It exults in man's greatness and Nature's grandeur. It is not Hebrew and theocratic, but human and universal. What it says is said of man as man; of man as he ought to be, was meant to be, may be. The subject is Humanity.

This is the Psalm of the Twilight, just as the nineteenth Psalm is the Psalm of Sunrise or of Morning. The theme of both is the heavens; but in this Psalm we have the heavens spoken of amid the gathering darkness of the evening, whereas in the nineteenth we have the heavens spoken of in the increasing light of morn.

Who is the speaker? Are we reading the experiences of the stripling still watching over

his father's flocks by night in the upland pastures of Bethlehem? Or of the lonely fugitive contemplating the starry skies from the broad plains of Philistia? Or of the powerful sovereign gazing upward to the overhanging vault from the palace roofs of Zion? Whether David the shepherd lad, or David the outlaw, or David the king, it matters not. The central idea of this magnificent Psalm is plainly expressed, and makes no demands on historical criticism for its elucidation. Surveying the outspread canopy of heaven the Psalmist is overwhelmed with awe at the scene. Its vast expanse, its fathomless blue, its starry glories, its beauty, its purity, its repose, all appal him with the sense of their grandeur; and, crushed with the contrast between the greatness of universal creation and the littleness of the individual man, he exclaims bewildered and amazed, 'When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that