

Punishment of the Impenitent Inevitable and Justifiable.

by Edward Payson

God will sooner give up all that is dear to Him than suffer sin to go unpunished.

Scripture: Jeremiah 22:24, John 3:16, Romans 2:9, Romans 6:23, 2 Peter 3:9, Jude 1:6

Topics: "Divine Justice", "Repentance"

Description

Edward Payson preaches a sermon based on Jeremiah 22:24, emphasizing God's unwavering commitment to punish sin and the dire consequences of sin on individuals and the universe. He provides examples from the Bible, such as the fall of the apostate angels, the fate of Adam and Eve, the destruction of mankind by the flood, and the history of God's ancient people, to illustrate God's justice and the necessity of punishment for sin. Payson highlights that God's punishment of sin is driven by His love for the universe and the preservation of happiness and order. He urges listeners to repent, believe in the gospel, and embrace God's mercy through Jesus Christ.

Transcript

"As I live, saith the Lord, though Coniah the son of Jehoiakim king of Judah were the signet upon my right hand, yet would I pluck thee thence"

Jeremiah 22:24

chapter contains a message from God to the king of Judah. The first part of this message is composed of exhortations to repentance, and promises of pardon, if the fruits of repentance should appear. Then follow most awful threatenings: But if ye will not hear these words, I swear by myself, saith the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation. For thus saith the Lord unto the king's house of Judah, thou art Gilead unto me, and the head of Lebanon. Yet I will make thee a wilderness and cities not inhabited.

Gilead, you will recollect, was the most pleasant and fertile part of Canaan, and Lebanon was its highest mountain. So the Jews were God's chosen people, his portion and, as we are elsewhere told, his heritage in the earth, in whom he delighted; and the kings of Judah were the head of this chosen people, and on many accounts peculiarly dear to God. They were the descendants of his servant David with whom he had made a covenant, and Jeconiah the present king was the grandson of Josiah who, in zeal for God, nearly resembled his pious ancestor.

Yet God here declares that, notwithstanding this, he would destroy Jeconiah and his kingdom, unless his judgments were averted by speedy repentance. In our text the same declaration is repeated in still more forcible language: As I live, saith the Lord, though Coniah king of Judah were the Signet upon my right hand, yet would I pluck thee thence. The signet was a seal very anciently worn by nobles and monarchs upon the right hand, with which they were accustomed to seal their grants, legislative acts, and judicial sentences.

Thus we read in Daniel that the king sealed the stone on the lion's den with his own seal. For this reason, as well as on account of its beauty and value, it was highly prized by the wearer; and, in consequence of its use in sealing royal grants and edicts, it was considered as a symbol of authority. Hence it appears that the declaration in our text is exceedingly strong. It is as if Jehovah said, Were the king of Judah dear to me, as the signet upon my right hand; dear to me as my Sovereign power and authority over the universe, I would cast him from me for his sins, unless he repents.

That which immediately follows renders this passage still more interesting. After denouncing upon the sinful king the most awful judgments, God adds, O, earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the Lord. As if he had said, Let no one suppose that this declaration, confirmed by my oath, concerns Jeconiah only; but let all the inhabitants of the earth hear and know, that sooner than suffer impenitent sinners to go unpunished, I will give up all that I most prize, give up my sovereign power and authority.

Let them hear and know that, however dear any of my creatures may be to me, I will cast them from me, if they sin and do not repent. I propose, in the present discourse, I. To mention some awful instances in which God has verified this declaration; II. To state so far as we can learn them from the Bible, the reasons which induce him to act in this manner. I. The first instance which I shall mention, in which God has verified this declaration, is that of the apostate angels. These now fallen spirits were originally the most exalted of God's creatures, the noblest image of their Creator which his power ever stamped on the work of his hands.

Like him they were perfectly holy; they loved him with perfect love, delighted in obeying his will, and for, we know not how long, a period, perhaps for thousands of ages, were employed in performing it. In a word they were the immediate attendants on his throne, the inhabitants of that heaven which is the habitation of his holiness and glory. Hence if creatures can be dear to God and objects of his love, they were so. But they sinned, and what was the consequence? Let inspiration answer.

God spared not the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell, and reserves them under chains of darkness to the judgment of the great day. And our Savior teaches us, that hell itself and its torments were prepared for the devil and his angels. My hearers, look a moment attentively, and without prejudice, upon the awful display of God's justice and holy displeasure against sin. See how high these exalted intelligences once stood, how low they have fallen, how irremediable is their destruction.

This one fact is worth ten thousand of those vain sophistical arguments with which sinners attempt to persuade themselves that God will not destroy them, though they persist in sin. Here are no human conjectures or human reasonings, but plain matter of fact. And O, how awful, how alarming is the fact! What a death blow does it give to all the presumptuous hopes of impenitent sinners! How does it trample on all their vain reasonings! My hearers, were an angel from heaven to assure me that God is too merciful to cast any of his creatures into hell, I could not believe him, while the fact stands recorded in the Bible.

Indeed, how could I, how could any man believe that God will not do what he has actually done? If with the fact staring him in the face, any impenitent sinner can hope that God will not destroy him, I would say to that sinner, are you of more consequence, or more dear to God, than were the angels of his presence? If not, why should he treat you more favorably, than he has treated them? You have transgressed the same law which they violated. The sentence which has been executed on them is already pronounced on you?

How then can you hope that the same God who spared not them, will spare you? Let me prevail upon you to dismiss all such hopes at once; for as the Lord liveth, though you were the signet on his right hand; though you were dear to him as the angels of his presence he would not save you, if you continue in sin. It is a much greater thing to cast down sinning angels from heaven to hell, than to cast sinful man out of the lower world into hell; and since God has done the greater, be assured he will not fail to do the less.

Another instance, in which God has verified the declaration in our text, is afforded by our first parents. That God loved them, there can be no doubt. That their happiness was dear to him, what he did to promote it, abundantly proves. He made them but little lower than the angels, stamped upon them his own image, crowned them with glory and honor, gave them a world with all that it contained; and as if this were not sufficient, planted for them a garden in that world, resembling heaven as nearly as any thing earthly can do it.

Yet in the very day in which they first sinned, he pronounced on them sentence of death, banished them from paradise, and cursed the earth for their sake, to show his abhorrence of their sin. And can any of their descendants be more dear to him than they were? Can any of them hope to escape the curse which fell on the first sinful pair? Surely not. Know, sinful child of Adam, that, were you dear to God as were your first parents, he would not spare you in sin. A third instance of a similar nature may be seen in the destruction of mankind by the flood.

We have often read and heard of this event; but our conceptions of it are probably exceedingly inadequate. Indeed, they must be so; for who that has not witnessed such an event, can adequately conceive of it? We have good reason, let it be remembered, to believe, that the world was at least as populous then as it is now. Let your thoughts then run through the world; collect in imagination the many millions of its inhabitants into one vast assembly. See in this assembly all that is lovely in youth and beauty, all that is magnificent in rank and power, all that is admirable in intellect, all that is venerable in gray hairs.

See the eternal Sovereign of the universe contemplating this vast assembly. He doubtless loves them; for they are the work of his own hands, and he hates nothing which he has made. Their happiness is doubtless dear to him, dear as the signet on his right hand; for we are assured, in language suited to our capacities, that it grieved him at the heart, when he saw them pursuing the road to misery. But though his love and mercy plead for them, their sins and his justice call for their destruction.

Yet how much was there in such an assembly to move his pity; to forbid him to listen to the claims of strict justice. Surely, if he will ever relent, when the guilty stand before him, he would have relented then, when he saw how numerous were the victims which justice demanded. But he did not relent. He waited indeed one hundred and twenty years to give them an opportunity for repentance; and he sent Noah as a preacher of righteousness to warn them of their approaching fate; but he did not relent.

No; the windows of heaven were opened to rain down destruction on the impenitent; and the fountains of the great deep were broken up, to whelm the guilty race in one common grave. And can you then hope,

impenitent sinner, to escape the justice of a God who could do, who has done this? Can you hope that he, who did not relent when he saw a world ready to sink under the sword of justice, will relent when he sees you stand before his bar? No; were you the signet upon his right hand, could you unite in yourself all the beauty, the strength, the intellect, and the life, which now fills the world, he would not hesitate for a moment to doom you to destruction.

A fourth instance, similar in kind, though not equally awful, is presented to us in the history of God's ancient people, the children of Abraham, his friend. How greatly he loved them, how much he did for them, you need not be told. He chose them from among all the families of men to be his peculiar people. For their deliverance, protection, and support, miracles of the most wonderful kind were wrought so frequently, that they almost ceased to be considered as deviations from the established course of nature.

For them God descended from heaven and spoke in an audible voice on Mount Sinai. Among them he dwelt almost two thousand years in a visible cloud of glory. To them he came and manifested himself in flesh. To them, says an apostle, pertained the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law and the promises. Theirs, he adds, are the fathers, and of them as concerning the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, God blessed forever. They were indeed, if any nation ever was, as the signet on God's right hand.

Yet how terribly were they scourged! What is their history for some centuries, but a history of desolating judgments, inflicted on them by their offended God? And still his indignation follows them. For eighteen centuries, one generation of them after another has lived a wretched life; and then died without hope, under their Maker's curse. During all this time, God has been fulfilling the awful declaration which he made respecting them. It is a people that hath no understanding, therefore he that made them will not have mercy on them, and he that formed them will show them no favor.

Behold, says an apostle, to the Christian church, speaking of their sufferings, behold the severity of God. If he spared not them, take heed lest he spare not thee. And will he then, O impenitent sinner, spare thee? No; though thou wert the signet on his right hand, though thou wert dear to him as all the people whom he loved, and chose, he would not spare thee, unless thou shalt renounce thy sins. We might easily refer you to multiplied instances of a similar character in the history of God's dealings with smaller communities, and with individuals.

We might show you Moses, the highly favored and honored servant of God, shut out from Canaan, and doomed for one hasty, passionate word, to die with those whose carcasses fell in the wilderness. We might show you David, the man so beloved of his God, smarting with wounds, the anguish of which none but a parent's heart can conceive, and followed by an avenging sword, which God declared should never, while he lived, depart from his house. We might show you the mangled corpse of an otherwise faithful prophet, who was for a single act of disobedience into which he was led by deceit, torn in pieces by a lion.

But without insisting on these striking proofs of God's displeasure against sin, I shall mention only one instance more; but one which, above all that has been mentioned, displays God's inflexible adherence to the spirit of the declaration in our text. The instance to which I allude is that of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He was indeed the signet on God's right hand in such a sense as no other being ever was; for he was his only begotten and well beloved Son. This object of his affection, though not himself a sinner, stood by his own consent in the place of sinners, to bear the punishment which their sins deserved.

And was he treated more favorably than sinners are treated? Did God abate him one pang, take one drop from the bitter cup, or show him the least favor? No; it pleased the Lord to bruise him. He spared not his own Son. And will he then, O impenitent sinner, who by refusing to believe in Jesus Christ crucifiest him afresh, will God spare thee? No; though thou wert the signet on his right hand; though thou wert dear to him as the Son of his love, he would not spare thee, when his violated law and his insulted justice call for thy destruction.

Such, my hearers, so terrible, so convincing are the proofs which God has exhibited, that he will sooner give up all that is dearest to him, than suffer sin to go unpunished, that he will sooner see heaven and earth pass away, than suffer one jot or one tittle to pass from his law, till all be fulfilled. Hear then, O earth, earth, earth! hear this word of Jehovah. I am well aware, my hearers, that the light in which God has now been exhibited, will by no means be agreeable to the natural heart, that heart which, as inspiration assures us, is enmity against God, and not subject to his law.

If any of you have such a heart in your bosoms, you will probably feel disposed to quarrel with what has been said. But remember, if you quarrel, you quarrel not with the speaker, but the Bible. If you strive, you strive not with man, but with that being who has said, Wo to him that striveth with his Maker. I have simply stated facts, as I find them recorded in God's word. I have only stated what he has declared he will do, and what he has actually done, to verify this declaration.

Here I must leave it, and proceed, as was proposed, II. To state some of the reasons why God has formed and enacted such a declaration; or, in other words, why he will sooner give up all that is dear to him, than suffer sin to go unpunished. It is needless to remark that, among these reasons, a disposition to give pain has no place. As God has sworn by himself, that the wicked shall die, so he has sworn by himself that he has no pleasure in their death. That he is not pleased to see them perish is abundantly evident from the means which he has employed to save them, and especially from the fact, that he has given his Son to open a way for their escape.

We have already mentioned the sufferings of Christ, as a most striking proof of God's inflexible justice. We may add, that they afford an equally striking proof of his willingness to show mercy. Surely, no child of Adam can apply the epithet unmerciful to that God, 'who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to die for its redemption. Nor has a desire to revenge the insults and injuries which sinners have offered to himself, any place among the motives which induce God to punish sin; for he inflicts punishment, not as an injured individual, but as the Sovereign and Judge of the universe who is under the most sacred obligations to treat his subjects according to their deserts.

This remark leads us directly to the grand reason why God is so inflexibly determined to punish sin, and to leave no impenitent sinner, however dear or highly exalted, to go unpunished. It is because the welfare of his great kingdom, the peace and happiness of the universe require it. It is because a relaxation of his law, a departure from the rules of strict justice, would occasion more misery than will result from a rigid execution of his law. If this can be made to appear, it will follow, that God's benevolence, his concern for the happiness of the universe, prompt him to punish sin, and to allow no impenitent sinner to go unpunished.

With a view to make this appear, I remark, That it is the nature and tendency of sin to produce universal misery. This is evident from the fact, that sin is a departure from God, the only source of happiness. God is the Father of lights, the Sun of the moral universe, the Giver of every good and perfect gift. To forsake

him, then, is to lose every good and perfect gift. It is as if our world should fly off from the sun into the region of eternal darkness and frost. Besides sin inflames the appetites, enrages the passions, and, deposing reason from her throne, places them in her seat.

Envy, hatred, malice, revenge, suspicion, avarice, pride, ambition and cruelty, are only different forms of sin. The breast, then, in which sin reigns uncontrolled must be the abode of misery. But this is not all. It is the tendency of sin to diffuse misery around, as far as its influence extends, as far as its power can reach. If you doubt this, consider for a moment what would be the consequence, should all the causes, which now operate to restrain the outbreaks of sin, be removed.

There would then be no law but the will of the strongest. Systems of human legislation cannot exist, or, at least, cannot be carried into operation, without the assistance which they derive from oaths. But let God cease to punish sin, and oaths would become a mere nullity. They would have no binding influence on the conscience. Truth could not be discovered. The natural selfishness of the human heart, pressed on one side by most powerful temptations, and restrained by no countervailing force on the other, would continually break out in acts of injustice and violence.

Neither reputation, nor liberty, nor property, nor life, would be safe for a single moment. Multitudes of tyrants would every where arise, who, after a brief reign of tumult and blood, would be assassinated, and succeeded by others. Their successors would pursue the same course, and share the same fate. In short, the earth would be, as it was before the flood, filled with violence. If you doubt this, look at the state of France, after her legislators had declared that there is no God, and caused the inscription, death is an eternal sleep, to be en-graven where it should meet the notice of every passer-by; when the parent was betrayed by the son, and the son by the parent; no obligations were regarded; no man's liberty or life was secure for an hour.

Yet even there all restraints were not removed; for a few years of disorder could not destroy all the effects of previous education, and obliterate all the salutary principles which had been previously imbibed. Where then would happiness find a dwelling on earth, were every restraint removed, were men suffered to go on from generation to generation in an unrestrained course of wickedness, neither fearing God nor regarding man? Will any reply, if happiness could not be found on earth, during life, it might at least be enjoyed in heaven after death?

Alas, my hearers, should God renounce his inflexible determination to punish sin, there would be no heaven. Inspiration teaches us, that the happiness of heaven consists in knowing, loving, serving, and praising God. It is his glory, we are told, which constitutes the light of the heavenly world above. But there would be no happiness in knowing, serving, or praising him, should he lose the perfections which compose and adorn his moral character. Take away his truth, his justice, his holiness, and all the glory which illuminates heaven would vanish into night.

But should God renounce his determination to punish sin, he would stain all these perfections; nay, he would cease from that moment to possess them. He would no longer be true; for he has not only said but sworn, sworn by himself that sinners shall not go unpunished. Where then would be his truth, should they escape? He would no longer be holy; for holiness implies hatred or opposition to sin. He would no longer be just; for justice consists in executing his law, and rewarding every one according to his works.

In short, he would become altogether such an one as ourselves. Who then could find everlasting happiness in seeing, and praising through eternity, such a being as this? A being without truth, or holiness,

or justice. Who could either respect or love him? How instantaneously would the praises of heaven cease! How would their golden harps drop from the hands of its now happy inhabitants; and how would angels be compelled to stop in the midst of their unfinished song, Just and true are all thy ways, O King of saints!

The sun of the moral world would be forever eclipsed, and a black, endless night would shroud the universe. But this is not all. Were sin unrestrained, unpunished, it would soon scale heaven, as it has once done already in the case of the apostate angels; and there reign and rage with immortal strength through eternity, repeating in endless succession, and with increased aggravation, the enormities which it has already perpetrated on earth. We may add, that, after God had once surrendered his truth, his justice, and holiness; and laid aside the reins of government, he could never more resume them.

Nor could he ever give laws, or make promises to any other world, or any other race of creatures, which would be worthy of the least regard. It would be instantly and properly said, He has once violated his word, and his oath, and he may do it again. He has once shown himself fickle, unjust, and unholy, and what security can we have that he will not do it again. Should he silence these clamors by an exertion of his Almighty power, he might indeed have slaves to cringe before him, but he could never have affectionate subjects who would serve him with cheerfulness and confidence; nor could he after once allowing sin to go unpunished, ever punish it again, without exposing himself to the charge of partiality and injustice.

Such, my hearers, would be the terrible consequences, or rather a part of the terrible consequences of God's renouncing his determination to punish sin. Can you then wonder or complain, that he so inflexibly adheres to this determination? Can you wonder that he will rather give up every thing most precious, than suffer any impenitent sinner, however dear or highly exalted, to escape? Do you not see that, by suffering any guilty individual to go unpunished, he would sacrifice the happiness of the universe to the selfish wishes of that individual?

And is it not then most evident, that it is his benevolence, his love, his concern for the happiness of the universe, which prompts him to punish sin? Agreeably, we find the inspired writers ascribing the punishments which he inflicts to this cause. They tell us that he destroyed ancient sinners, because his mercy endureth forever; and God himself, when he said to Moses, I will cause all my goodness to pass before thee, mentioned as one proof of his goodness, that he will by no means clear the guilty.

If this appears strange and incomprehensible to any of you, let me ask whether the concern of a just earthly monarch for the happiness of his subjects does not appear as clearly in the prison which he erects for the criminal and lawless, as in the rewards which he bestows on the obedient and faithful? If so, is it too much to say that the goodness of God shines as brightly in the flames of hell, as in the glories of heaven? And now, my hearers, allow me to close by beseeching you to lay these things seriously to heart.

I do not ask you to believe my opinions or reasonings; but I do ask you to believe plain matters of fact; I do ask you to consider attentively what God has actually done, that you may learn from it the character of the being with whom you have to do, in whose hands you are, and at whose bar you must stand. Remember inspiration has said, Why dost thou strive with him? for he giveth not an account of any of his matters. He will recompense it, whether thou choose or whether thou refuse.

O, then, be persuaded to indulge no hopes of safety which rest on a belief that God will not execute all the threatenings recorded in his word. Be persuaded, instead of wasting your time and provoking him to anger by murmuring against his justice, to embrace at once the means which he has provided for the manifestation of his mercy. Of his mercy to those who repent and believe the gospel, we cannot say too

much. We can only say, that it is equal to his justice; and that his determination to save all who repent, is as inflexible as his resolution to destroy all the impenitent.

In consequence of the atonement which his Son has made, he can now be just, and yet justify and save all who believe in Jesus. O then, ye immortal spirits, ye probationers for eternity, hear, hear, hear, the words of your God! Hear and tremble, while the thunders of his fiery law burst out from Mount Sinai. Hear, believe, and rejoice, while his glad tidings of great joy are loudly proclaimed from Mount Zion. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him turn to the Lord, for he will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

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