

The Last Assize

by G.H. Lang

The speaker argues that eternal punishment is a necessary consequence of sin and that the Bible teaches this doctrine.

Scripture: Genesis 2:17

Topics: "Eternal Punishment", "Hell And Judgment"

Description

G.H. Lang delves into the topic of eternal punishment, emphasizing the belief in endless conscious experience of God's wrath for the impenitent Christ-rejector. He discusses the errors in presentation from both advocates and opponents of this doctrine, cautioning against exaggeration and appeals to sentiment. Lang highlights the importance of seeking truth from the Word of God alone, rather than relying on preconceived philosophies or human reasoning. He addresses the objections to eternal punishment, refuting claims that it leads to disbelief and atheism, and stresses the significance of understanding the Biblical definitions of 'life' and 'death' in relation to the doctrine of annihilation.

Transcript

CHAPTER I

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

OVER fifty years ago I preached and published a sermon with the title "The Sinner's Future." At or about that time I studied the chief attacks upon the doctrine of eternal punishment, some in favour of the annihilation of the wicked, some advocating the ultimate restoration to God of all created beings. In the intervening half century I have read and meditated much upon these themes. Of late I have read again those older treatises and have added more recent works, English, American, and German. The outcome is here set forth. I cannot hope to have canvassed every argument or to have dealt with every passage of Scripture employed in them, indeed, many of the latter seem irrelevant; but I have sought to deal with all that is material to the subject. I will first touch upon some general topics.

1. My essential and vital conclusion remains as in those earlier years. I see no fair escape from the belief that for the impenitent Christ-rejector there awaits endless conscious experience of the wrath of God. But I now see

(a) No teaching in Scripture that the destiny of all men is fixed at death.

(b) No authority in Scripture to assert that the unevangelized - and they are the vast majority of our human race - will necessarily and inevitably be lost for ever.

2. We ought to deplore the flights of imagination and unrestrained rhetoric with which the solemn warnings of eternal punishment have been too often exaggerated and disfigured. One of the greatest preachers of the nineteenth century thus declaimed: "When the damned jingle the burning irons of their torments they shall say 'For ever!' When they howl, Echo cries 'For ever!'" Such language does not befit the awfulness of the prospect. The metaphors of Scripture are sufficiently solemn and, produce all the effect desired, without human amplification.

3. On the other hand it cannot be denied that the men whom God most used to the awakening and conversion of sinners taught the doctrine of eternal punishment. Their emphasis upon it was not nullified even by the needless and regrettable additions just indicated. In spite of these the Spirit of God used them mightily. One need only mention in more modern times men such as Jonathan Edwards, Wesley, Whitefield, Finney, Spurgeon, and Moody. Conversely, has any teacher of the doctrine of annihilation or of universal restoration been used thus mightily to the awakening of the lost?

4. If advocates of the doctrine of eternal punishment have erred in presentation, its opponents also are guilty. To intensify their argument they dilate upon the horror of the prospect and employ mathematics to drive the nail home. Of one of the most celebrated of their books it was said, not unjustly, that it was everything that such a treatise ought not to be, being from first to last a passionate appeal to prejudice. This may be said in measure of all their writings which I have seen. Let the reader be cautious of appeals to sentiment. They disturb that balance of mind indispensable to sober inquiry and sound judgment. Opponents labour such arguments as that eternal wrath is inconsistent with the nature and character of God as merciful and loving. The searcher for truth must be alert when he meets such reasoning. It is easy to form one's own notion of God and so to be unbalanced. It is possible to dwell unduly upon His holiness and justice; it is much more common to regard Him as only love and grace. In either case there is distortion, and then follows a distorted view of either His wrath or His mercy.

6. It is characteristic that opponents, of all schools, are not content to submit on this subject to the Word of God alone. They insist that history, conscience, nature, experience, and reason are also books of God and entitled to a direct voice in these great matters. Now history tells of the past; it is not a revelation of the future. Conscience does no more than insist that I must do what I think to be right, and not do what I think wrong; it cannot settle what is right or wrong, for this is not its function, and certainly it tells nothing distinct about the future. Nature has a voice about the Creator, but gives no revelation as to the hereafter. Experience is based upon the past, and likewise does not open out the future. How shall reason guide us as to eternal matters, seeing that it has no data upon which to work? If reason has ought to say upon the subject, surely it is that God alone knows the future, that He alone can foretell it with certainty, and that it is in the Holy Scriptures alone that He has done so to man. Moreover, how shall our natural faculties be trusted, seeing that they are perverted and enfeebled by sin and are not capable of comprehending things spiritual? (I Cor. 2. 14).

7. Another feature of those who object to eternal punishment is that they appeal to the "general tenor" of Scripture and refuse to settle the question by the text of Scripture. This is subtle and dangerous. The reader should be highly cautious of any writer who so argues, for it is a tacit admission that the separate texts do not establish his views. It is clear that the general tenor of a document can be gained only by weighing carefully its several statements. "Sound exegesis of individual passages is the foundation of

doctrine."

8. Another general point is that objection is taken to any appeal to fear as a motive of action. Is, then, man wiser than God, who has included fear as an element in man's constitution? To what but fear was the first Divine warning addressed: "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2. 17)? It was godly fear that moved Noah to prepare the ark (Heb. ii. 7). Christ earnestly warns us to "fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in Gehenna" (Matt. 10. 28). Granted that it is higher and sweeter to respond to love, which should be emphasized in our messages; yet it is better to flee from the coming wrath out of fear than to be overwhelmed by its fury. A Christian woman told me that when unconverted she went one night to a bridge to drown herself in the canal, and was deterred only by the thought that if she went down into that water, she would go down to hell.

This one-sided objection results from a defective view of the wickedness of sin and of the holiness of God. It arises from a disproportionate sense of His mercy as compared with His wrath. This distorts the subject and perverts the judgment.

9. It is strongly alleged that the thought of eternal torment is a fruitful source of disbelief and atheism. But such unbelievers usually protest against other Biblical doctrines, such as the depravity of human nature, and its incapability of pleasing God, and that it is so incurably sick that a positively new birth from God, the imparting of a new nature, is indispensable, and that there is necessity for atonement by the shedding of blood. Such persons cavil at the virgin birth of Christ, His deity, and other evidently Scriptural doctrines. Are these also, to be surrendered because fallible, fallen men object to them?

Moreover, this argument is double-edged and may cut those who use it. Have any been encouraged in sin by the hope of extinction of being or of final restoration? Let this case answer the question. The earliest well known modern advocate of the restitution of all things had his daughter as his amanuensis, who made fair copies of his manuscripts. She told me of her extreme reluctance to copy his book on this subject and of the constraint she had to put upon herself to serve her father in this instance, because the effect of that doctrine upon her brother had been so disastrous, that she was sure it was not of God.

In 1878 Dean Farrar published the five addresses he had given in Westminster Abbey against eternal punishment. In his recent book "Battle for the Mind", p.130, Dr. William Sargant has this significant statement: One of the most important occasions in English religious history may prove to have been when a workman is said to have rushed jubilantly out of a church when Dean Farrar was preaching, and shouted: 'Good news, mates, old Farrar says there's no 'ell!'

In the year 1903 I spoke with a Christian assistant in one of the largest business establishments at Brighton. She told me that when she rebuked other assistants for their immoral lives they replied with scorn: "Don't talk to us about hell: Mr. Campbell (R. J. Campbell, afterwards minister of the City Temple, London) says there's no such place."

10. It is necessary to disencumber one's mind of these and all such presuppositions in order to address oneself hopefully to the Word of God to learn what the Spirit of truth there teaches. This is the more important because persons of various schools of thought are, consciously or unconsciously, influenced by pre-Christian philosophic ideas, especially that the soul of man is naturally immortal. If this had meant only that man, once created by God, will exist for ever, it would have been true, but "immortal" is not the right word for existence. It means properly "incapable of dying" which is true of God alone, "Who only hath immortality (i Tim. 6. i6). The Apostle Paul, who wrote this statement was very well acquainted with the

current philosophical idea of man's immortality, and tacitly repudiated it. Adam was created in a condition called by God "life" ("man became a living soul," Gen. 2. 7). Through sin this condition was lost and the fallen state of man is not what God calls "life," but is rather "death" ("in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die," Gen. 2. 12). But although he died that day he did not then cease to exist. Presently death extends its power beyond the spirit of man to his body, whereupon the soul, disembodied, goes to a lower realm of existence, Hades. But he does not cease to exist, for, as Christ taught, in that realm all live unto God (Luke 20. 38). Dead in condition, out of touch with this world, they exist before God.' Abraham, Dives, and Lazarus were the same persons as previously, only in a state called death. At the close of the Millennium those of the dead not raised at the first resurrection are seen standing before the great white throne, which shows that the first death is not annihilation, nor do we see Scripture anywhere to teach that they ever cease to exist, though their condition of existence is death " not " life."

It is vastly important to grasp the Biblical sense of "life and "death," because the doctrine of the annihilation of the sinner could hardly exist apart from the false assumption that "life" equals "existence" and that by consequence "death" must mean, at least finally, "non-existence." All writers of that school known to me build upon this assumption.

ii. Again, opponents of eternal punishment give to reason almost the place given to it in the Platonic philosophy and by later Rationalists. "For the Platonist held that reason is never false; it 'contemplates the first, abiding, unchanging truths,' and always knows what is right" (C. Bigg, Chief Ancient Philosophies, Neoplatonism, 87).

It was into lands saturated with these ideas that Paul took the good and enlightening news of truth as it is in Jesus (Eph. 4. 21), and he said plainly that philosophy is "not after Christ" and could only rob His people (Col. 2. 8). Therefore if one wishes to learn truth, and secure its mighty benefits, he must turn from human philosophy and learn of and from Christ Jesus. But this meant for those first readers just what it still means for us, that we must abandon Plato and give heed to Paul and other messengers commissioned by Christ.

Luther said that they had been taught by the Scholastic theologians that one who wished to be a theologian must begin with Aristotle; but, said he, if any man wished to be a theologian he must first get rid of Aristotle. This is just. He who would learn about man's destiny, among other truths, must first become a little child and sit humbly at Christ's feet, as did Mary. From His lips he will hear the most tender of calls to the sinner to receive salvation and also the most solemn of all warnings as to the wrath of God. May we find grace to do so, as we ponder this most awful of all themes, the eternal future of the sinner.

CHAPTER II

HAS MAN A FUTURE?

Our present purpose is not to discuss once again whether the punishment of the sinner will be everlasting but to set forth, in its main features, the general question of man's 'future, from the stand point of one who believes that the punishment of the Christ-rejector will be for ever. One of two things covers the whole case; either Man has a future after death, or He has no future beyond this life.

It is needful to begin here because there have not been, and are not, wanting those who assert that man has no existence after his present life. Some ancient philosophers taught it, and their successors confront us today. Three leading considerations may be urged against this view:

i.

That the universal aspiration and expectation of the human race is that man will have a future existence.

2. That justice requires that he should.

3. That the Word of God is decisively on that side.

These arguments may be termed the natural, moral, and Scriptural.

1.

As to the first, we must not attach too great weight to the feelings and wishes of man, for he is condemned by his conscience and is therefore inwardly biased against the thought of retributive justice deciding his future. "As creatures already guilty and condemned, we are not impartial judges upon our own case, and have rather to learn what is the judgment of God than of our own reason upon it." But the point must be mentioned because some who oppose the teaching of everlasting punishment are ready to appeal to the sentiments of our own nature as being entitled to a loud voice in the settlement of these questions. Upon this particular point the longings of our race are decidedly in favour of man having a future career.

2.

As to the second argument, there would manifestly be something wrong with the government of the universe, if evil beings are allowed to work ruin to their fellows and escape with no more retribution than many receive here. Asaph of old (Psa. 73) was troubled with what, if it were the whole fact of the case, would trouble us also, namely, the present ease and seeming prosperity often attending the wicked; nor was it till he "considered their latter end," as viewed in God's sight, that his sense of security returned. If it could be demonstrated that the cruel and the abandonedly profligate will receive no more recompense than the comparative modicum that some of them suffer in this life, we might well give up belief in there being a Maker and Ruler.

For if God is, He is necessarily a God of infallible justice, the principle of whose government must be that "every transgression and disobedience shall receive a just recompense of reward" (Heb. 2. 2); and if this rule does not rule, then God is not. The allowance of inequalities and injustice in this age can only find solution and explanation in the fact of a hereafter when the balance will be made even, by both vice and virtue, here often unrewarded, being then rewarded as each deserves.

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