

## Robert Murray M'Cheyne:

Perhaps some of you may remember, about six months ago, I preached to you on the subject of an eternal hell — upon the worm that never dies, and the fire that is never quenched. There are many people that do not like to hear preaching about hell, and some people think that it is not preaching the gospel; nevertheless it is the counsel of God.

I showed you then, who they were that spoke most about hell. I showed you that David speaks of it, he who was a man after God's own heart. He says, 'The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God' (Psalm 9:17). Then, again, I showed you Paul was another. Although this man spent his whole life preaching the gospel, yet he spoke of 'destruction', of being a 'castaway' (I Corinthians 9:27). Another was John. Though he was the disciple that was filled most with love, yet he calls it 'the bottomless pit' seven times over. It is called the 'bottomless pit' because the soul will be for ever sinking in it. And we saw that he calls it what no one else does - 'the lake of fire' (Revelation 20: 10). And we saw that another one was Christ himself. We saw that all the apostles put together do not speak so terribly of hell as he. He says, 'How can ye escape the damnation of hell?' (Matthew 23:33). 'He that believeth not shall be damned' (Mark 16:16).

A second thing we inquired into was, why they speak so much about hell? And one reason was - it is true. Christ came to tell the truth. Brethren, if it be true, can we speak too plainly about it? If there be a hell of misery to the Christless, can we warn you too often to flee from the wrath to come? Another reason was - it was love. If Christ loved you less, he would warn you less. We saw that when Christ spoke about hell he wept. And Paul could not write about the enemies of the cross of Christ without tears: 'Of whom I have told you often, and tell you now even weeping that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ' (Philippians 3:18). And O, brethren! if only we could pity you more, we would tell you, even weeping. Another reason was - that we might be free from your blood. You remember how David cried, 'Deliver me from blood-guiltiness, O God (Psalm 51:14). And this is the reason why God speaks so solemnly in the Bible. He says, 'Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die?' And Christ said, 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her brood under her wings, but ye would not!' (Matthew 23:37). Does he not wash his hand of your blood? And Paul says, 'I am pure of the blood of all men' (Acts 20:26).

Another subject I then opened up, was the different names by which hell is called. It is called 'fire' - 'the gehenna of fire'. It is called a 'furnace of fire'. In another part it is called 'everlasting fire'. We saw again it was called 'darkness'. Three times over our Lord calls it 'outer darkness'. Then again Peter calls it 'the mist of darkness'. Then again Jude calls it 'everlasting chains under darkness' - 'the blackness of darkness for ever'. In one parable of the Scriptures it is called a 'prison'. 'Agree with thine adversary quickly, lest he deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison' (Matthew 5:25). And Peter speaks of 'the spirits in prison' (I Peter 3:19). And in other parts it is called 'the pit' - 'Deliver him from going down to the pit' (Job 33:24). Another name by which it is called is 'the second death' - 'the lake of fire, which is the second death' (Revelation 20:14). It is called the second death because it undoes the sinner.

A fourth point was that hell was not annihilation. We saw that it was not annihilation by listening to the cries of the damned: 'I am tormented in this flame' (Luke 16:24); 'There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matthew 13:50). We saw the same thing in the parable of the tares, 'Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them' (Matthew 13:30). There will be bundles of liars and bundles of drunkards and bundles of those who have been the means of seducing one another, and of leading one another to hell. Another thing that proves that it is not annihilation is the case of Judas. It is said, 'It had been better for that man that he had not been born' (Matthew 26:24). Now, if Judas was annihilated, it could have been no worse for him than if he had not been born; better not to be than to be in hell.

The last part of the subject was that hell was eternal. We saw this from the remarkable expression that 'their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched' (Mark 9:46). And we saw that if ever there was a time when the worm would die, and the fire be quenched, then that would be a lie. Another argument was, that hell was to be 'for ever and ever'. And we noticed that that expression is nowhere used except to express a real eternity. It is used of the existence of God - and so it is used of the saints in glory, that they live for ever and ever. So in like manner it is used of the souls in hell.

There was another part of the subject which I had not time to enter upon, and for which reason I have chosen this text and that was to prove that an eternal hell was consistent with the attributes of God. 'Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire, and brimstone, and an horrible tempest! this shall be the portion of their cup, for the righteous LORD loveth righteousness.'

From this passage I draw these three propositions:

- (1) Hell will be sudden to the wicked, 'Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire, and brimstone', etc.
- (2) God will punish the wicked eternally because he loves righteousness.
- (3) God will justify the believer for the same reason that he condemns the wicked - 'For the righteous Lord loveth righteousness.'

1. Hell will be sudden to the wicked.

'Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire, and brimstone, and an horrible tempest; this shall be the portion of their cup'. It is quite obvious that the description here given is taken from what befell Sodom (Genesis 19:23-25). It was a fine summer morning, the sun had just risen and was shedding his rays down upon the meandering Jordan; the women were busy about their employment, the children were sporting in the morning sun, when suddenly, darkness overcast the sky, and in a moment God rained fire and brimstone from heaven upon them. One moment they were rejoicing in the morning sun, the next they were weltering in the lake of fire.

Brethren, I believe that the most of those in this congregation who will finally perish, their destruction will be sudden. It is written, 'And take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares' (Luke 21:34). Observe these words, 'And so that day come upon you unawares.' Compare this with the words of the text. 'Upon the wicked he shall rain snares.' Both passages are taken from the way in which the fowler catches birds; he draws in the snare suddenly, else the bird would escape. Such is the way with the wicked; the second coming of Christ will be like a snare.

And, brethren, I believe, again, it is so with all you who die without finding Christ, you will perish suddenly. 'Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, and an horrible tempest; this shall be the portion of their cup.' There are many among you that do not believe that there is a hell. Though you read of it in the Bible, and are told about it, still you always put in as a salve to your conscience: 'Perhaps there is not such a place after all - perhaps it is just a bit of priest craft got up to frighten people with.' I believe that many among you think that, and many of you will die thinking that; but, oh! the moment you let go the last friend's hand that is grasping yours, that moment, sinner, when you find your soul in the presence of God, and when you find out for the first time that you have God to do with, that moment you will find that there is an eternal hell. 'Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire, and brimstone, and an horrible tempest! this shall be the portion of their cup.' Oh my brethren, methinks hell would not be so bad if you were counting the cost of it; but to have the eyes lifted on it in a moment - ah! you will know what the second death is then.

2. I come to the second proposition, and I desire you to attend to it, for it is what I have chosen these words for. It is the righteousness of God which makes him punish the wicked eternally. 'Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fur, and brimstone, and an horrible tempest; this shall be the portion of their cup, for the righteous LORD loves righteousness' (verses 6, 7).

I believe there is a great deal of ignorance about an eternal hell. There are many men that think God will cast sinners into hell on account of mere passion. Now, it is right to know that God did not create hell merely out of passion. Brethren, if it was passion it would pass away. But it is not from mere passionateness that he has kindled hell.

And it is right that you should still farther consider that it is not that God hath pleasure in the pain of his creatures. I believe that God does not delight in the pain even of a worm. You will see this in Ezekiel 18:23: 'Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord GOD; and not that he should return from his ways, and live?' And then, verse 32: 'For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God; wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye.' You will observe in this chapter that you have it put in two forms; you have it put in the interrogative form, and then you have it in the affirmative. Again, we are told in the New Testament, that 'God will have all men to be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2:4). 'He is not willing that any should perish' (2 Peter 3:9). And in Acts 17:30, it is said, 'God commandeth all men everywhere to repent.' These passages show that there is an essential benevolence in God, that he has no pleasure in the pain of his creatures. Speaking humanly, God would rather that the wicked should turn from his evil ways and live. Some will ask, Why then is there a hell? The answer, brethren, and it is an answer I desire to be written on the heart: it is that the righteous Lord loveth righteousness. The only reason why God casts the

unbelieving into the fire that never shall be quenched is because God is a God of righteousness, and therefore he will reign till all his enemies are put under his feet.

Perhaps, brethren, some of you will say, why does his love of righteousness make him punish sinners in an eternal hell? There are two answers to that: First, sin is an infinite evil, and therefore it demands an infinite punishment. I do not know if you understand this. The thing I was praying for in secret was that I might be enabled to vindicate God's proceedings. Then, brethren, sin is an infinite evil, because it is the breaking of an infinite obligation. I suppose there are none here who will say that God is not infinitely lovely; and therefore none will say that there is not an infinite obligation upon us to serve him. Then, if you and I do not this, we are breaking an infinite obligation; and if it be an infinite evil, then it demands infinite punishment. But how can man bear infinite punishment? If God were to put on infinite punishment, who could bear it? Therefore it is eternal in duration: 'Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire, and brimstone, and an horrible tempest, this shall be the portion of their cup, for the righteous LORD loveth righteousness.'

I said there is another answer to this question; how is it a righteous thing in God to punish sinners eternally'.? You know you would not care what a criminal said at the bar whether his sentence was just or not. He might probably say it was not just; but you would believe the judge. Now, God says it is a righteous thing. See 2 Thessalonians 1:6: 'Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you.' You will observe it is said: 'It is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you.' And how much more then will everlasting destruction be righteous. God's whole way is equal. God, who holds the balance in his hand, says it is a righteous thing.

Dear brethren, I pray you, in God's name, to think of this. If punishment come from the righteousness of God, then there is no hope. If it were out of passion, then it might pass away. Often you observe a man whose face is red and swollen with passion, but it passes away. But ah! it is not out of passion. If it were out of passion surely God would have some pity when he saw the sufferings of the lost for many ages; but ah! no. From what then does it proceed? It proceeds from the rectitude of God. If God can cease to love righteousness, then the fire may be quenched; but as long as he is a righteous God, that fire will never be quenched.

Oh! brethren, it is a foolish hope you entertain that the fire will be quenched. I have seen some on their deathbed thinking that the fire may be quenched. Ah! it is a vain hope, sinner, God will never cease to be a righteous God. God will do anything to save a sinner; but he cannot part with his rectitude in order to save you. He parted with his Son in order that he might gain sinners, but he cannot part with his righteousness - he cannot part with his government; he would need to call good evil, and evil good first. 'Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire, and brimstone, and an horrible tempest; this shall be the portion of their cup, for the righteous LORD loveth righteousness.'

3. I come now to the last point, and that is that the very same rectitude saves the believer in Jesus. 'For the righteous LORD loveth righteousness.'

I think this is the meaning of these words, 'His countenance beholdeth the upright' (Psalm 11:7).

The same thing is spoken of in the passage we read in Thessalonians, 'It is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you; and to you who are troubled rest with us', etc. The same thing we are taught in I John 1:9: 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all righteousness.' It is not said he is merciful, but he is just to forgive us our sins.

The same thing we are taught in the first and second verses of the 40th chapter of Isaiah, 'Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God, speak ye comfortably unto Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins.' Here God puts the pardon of Israel on rectitude. 'Her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins.'

Why? Because in her Surety she hath received double for all her sins. Suppose, then, a sinner was to come to the Surety this night, you will observe that the sins you have committed are doubly paid. If the curse had fallen upon you, you could never have exhausted it; and therefore, upon the ground of equity, 'she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins'. 'He is just to forgive us our sins'; 'His countenance beholdeth the upright.'

My dear brethren, in impressing this subject upon you, I would speak:

(1) To those of you who are believers. Dear brethren, you were once condemned to this hell. Over this hell you walked; but God has brought you to a Surety, where you have received of the Lord's hand double for all your sins. Prize this Surety! Ah! brethren, it is better to be saved through Christ, than even if it were possible to be saved in any other way; for not only are we saved, but God's rectitude is displayed. Prize this Surety then.

(2) I would say a word to those of you who are under concern about your soul. I am glad that there are any concerned. Oh! that I could say all were concerned. But, dear anxious friends, this is the hell you are going to by nature. I would say, then, see the necessity of fleeing from it. Many will say, there is no use of all that anxiety, there is no need to fear. But, dear anxious soul, if you have understood what I have been saying, you will see the necessity of a thousand-fold more earnestness. Ah! it is a fearful hell; but oh! it is more fearful to think that it is kindled by the rectitude of God. Ah! then there is need to flee. Ah! dear, dear souls, do not be turned away by the world's flattery.

(3) Let me speak to those who are careless. My dear brethren, I have shown you a solemn truth tonight; and unless I knew that no truth in itself will convert you, I might think that you would be converted by what you have heard. I showed you that the destruction of the wicked will be sudden. Dear friends, do you think that it will be sudden? The very fact that you can sit so easily, shows that you do not believe it. Therefore, when hell comes to you, it will come like a snare. Ah! dear, careless soul, think when you go home tonight, what if it should be tonight. 'This night thy soul shall be required of thee' (Luke 12:20). Careless sinner, what would become of you if God were to shoot his darts, and rain snares, fire and brimstone upon you? Ah! tell me, sinner, would it not embitter your eternity to think that you were told of it? Ah! you are like Lot's sons-in-law, 'he seemed as one that mocked unto them' (Genesis 19:14). Ah! do you think they thought it a dream when they lifted up their eyes in hell? And oh! sinner, will it not embitter your eternity to think you had been warned to flee? 'The minister is free of my blood, I was warned, but I heeded not. I am the cause of my own undoing; my hands made the snare wherewith I am caught.' Amen.

Sabbath Evening, 4th December, 1842