

FUTURE PUNISHMENT A FEARFUL THING

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A SEMON
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“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”
Hebrews 10:31

YOU will most cheerfully bear me witness that my most frequent subjects are the mercy and abundant lovingkindness of our God in Jesus Christ. And that it is my favorite employment to invite the very chief of sinners to come to Jesus Christ, with the assurance that He will cast out none who come unto Him, but will assuredly give unto them eternal life. It is not to my honor to say so, but still you know how seldom I have forced upon your attention those terrible subjects which concern the state of the lost in hell.

I have felt more at home in using the drawings of mercy than the drivings of terror, and I can most honestly plead innocence of any charge of delighting in declaring the torments of the finally impenitent, or of entering upon the discussion of the miseries of the lost with eagerness and enjoyment.

He who searches all hearts knows that under an overwhelming sense of urgency and necessity, and purely out of love to the souls of men, I bring before you the text which I have announced. The burden of the Lord hangs heavily upon me. I must deliver myself of the blood of some of you who are living in impenitence, and who will probably die in it, and who, if you die unwarned, having often listened to my voice, may be able to reproach me in another world if I do not faithfully and earnestly bear my solemn testimony concerning the wrath to come.

Beloved, we know by observation in our pastoral work that while the mercy of God draws many to Him, there are some who are more affected at first by the terrors of the Lord. We have many now, who are members of this church walking in holiness and in the fear of God, who listened to sermons upon the softer and more tender topics, and were not affected, but when they came under the heavy blows of the hammer of God's law, their flinty hearts were broken into shivers, and ere long they turned unto the hand which smote them. God has ordained both the terrors of the law and the tenderness of the Gospel, that by means of both, men may be saved.

Gospel husbandry employs many implements, and there are some lands which will never yield a harvest without much more exercising with the plough than others may require. The light of Tabor and the fiery flashes of Sinai are equally divine, and so long as we learn to rest in Calvary it little matters by what means, whether tender or terrible, we may have been brought there.

The complete ministry leaves no revealed truth unuttered, but looks for a blessing upon the Word as a whole. The themes of mercy need, in order fully to manifest their brightness, the dark background of the terrors of the law, for men will never value a Redeemer as well as when they have a very clear consciousness of the ruin from which He has redeemed them.

The preciousness of mercy is best known by those who discern the terror of justice. If we really feel that God is angry with the sinner, and loathes and hates his sin, and will certainly take fearful vengeance upon him on account of it, we shall the better understand the force of that divine mercy which led Him to give His own dear Son, and which now leads Him to cry unto the sons of men, “Turn ye! turn ye! Why will ye die, O house of Israel?”

In addition to these considerations, I have been urged to bring this subject before you because the assaults which are now made against the Gospel frequently assail the doctrine of future punishment. It was once the business of infidels to revile the terrible sanctions of the divine law, but they may now

suspend their exertions, for certain clergymen of the Church of England are doing the work most effectually. Nay, more, there are certain Dissenting ministers, successors of good and venerable men, who are never more at home than when they are making sport of the terrors of God.

Just now it seems to jump with the humor of certain philosophic schools to depreciate our God as a judge, and to magnify a supposititious divine fatherhood, which is the offspring of their own effeminate imaginations and flesh-pleasing dreams. It therefore behooves the servants of the Most High and Righteous God to confess the faith which they have received and not be ashamed thereof, whatever obloquy may cover them.

I. The text asserts that “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God,” and our first statement shall be, that SURELY IT IS SO, as we may certainly gather from several considerations.

1. It must be a fearful thing for impenitent sinners to fall into God’s hands when we remember the character of God as revealed in His judgments of old. Taking the Scriptures as our guide, we see in them a revelation of God differing very widely from that which is so current nowadays. The God of Abraham, as revealed in the Old Testament, is as different from the universal Father of modern dreams as He is from Apollo or Bacchus. Let me remind you that ever since the day when Adam fell, with but two exceptions, the whole of the human race has been subjected to the pains of sickness and of *death*.

If you would behold the severity of Him who judges all the earth, you have only to remember that this whole world has been for ages a vast burying place. Men whine out their abhorrence of God’s justice, and scout the idea of future punishment with the question, “Would a father do thus and thus with his children?”

The question needs no other reply than fact. All men die. Would a father suffer his children to pine in sickness and die, when it was in his power to prevent it? Certainly not. Since, then, the great God evidently permits much pain, and even death to happen to His creatures, He is evidently not Father merely, but something more. To ungodly men JEHOVAH reveals Himself in the light of a judge, and a judge too whose stern severity has brought to pass the terrible doom of death upon every man of woman born, with two exceptions, from the fall of Adam even until now. This is the God of love, but not the newly-devised God, who is love and love alone.

Our business is not to think out our own idea of what God should be, but to find out, as far as we can, what God really is. Let me then remind you of the deluge. When the world was covered with inhabitants, and according to the computation of some, owing to the longevity of man, with a population more numerous than the present which crowds it (however that is not a material point in the question), when the world was covered with inhabitants, and these had sinned, God destroyed all flesh from off the face of the earth with the exception of eight souls, whom in His sovereignty He saved in the ark.

Can you picture to yourself the horrors of that tremendous day, when the fountains of the great deep were broken up and the rains descended from on high? Here were millions of creatures like ourselves destroyed at a blow!

Can you hear their shrieks and cries? Do you see them clambering in fright to the mountaintops? Do you behold them struggling for existence amidst the devouring flood? Can you hear the cries of the last strong swimmers in their agony? Who does all this? It is that God who so hates sin, that though He is infinite love—and we would never detract from that attribute—He is also infinite justice, and will by no means spare the guilty.

Do not imagine that He who thus destroyed the world with a flood was never at any other time equally severe. Let me show you the dreadful picture of Sodom and Gomorrah and the other cities of the plain. Those cities were filled with inhabitants, happy and cheerful like ourselves. They found their happiness, however, in sin, and their sin had so provoked God to anger, that after a personal visit to the spot what did He?

Ho, you who believe in an effeminate personification of shallow benevolence, turn hither your blind eyes if perhaps the fire which fell from heaven may yield you some ray of light. Can you see the dwellers of those cities when the fiery hail begins to fall? In vain were their cries, in vain their tears, the

burning sleet pitilessly descends until one dreadful sheet of flame enwraps the sky and all the men of the plain are consumed before the terrible wrath of the Most High. What think you of this scene of horror? And what of those words of Peter where he speaks of God who, turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them with an overthrow, making them an example unto those who after should live ungodly.

Let me direct your eye to Egypt. You read the story of the slaying of the firstborn in one night, and it does not strike you with horror, but only conceive of the firstborn throughout all London dying in one night—what a visitation that would be! The whole of Egypt, it is to be believed, contained far more inhabitants than London, and yet without regarding Egypt's bitter cry, which He foreknew would ring in His ears, that God who revenges and is terrible slew in one night the chief of all their strength.

Forget not the destruction at the Red Sea. Pharaoh and his hosts descended into the midst of the sea and perished there. You rejoice, and rightly so, because Israel was preserved, but what a fearful thing it was that Egypt should be destroyed!—Pharaoh and all the chivalry of Mizraim swallowed up by the waves, to be mourned by innumerable widows and orphans.

Do I hear anybody accusing our God of cruelty on account of this? And why not, if the new benevolence theory be true? Let those who accuse the infinite JEHOVAH beware! Let them strive with their fellow potsherd, but strive not with the rod of iron. JEHOVAH needs none of our defenses. O terrible God! little matters it to You what man's judgment of You may be, for with You the inhabitants of the earth are as grasshoppers. Thou doest as Thou wilt, and Thy judgments are past finding out.

Think you of the slaughter of the Canaanites. Palestine was filled with Hivites, Jebusites, and other nations. All these were given to the edge of the sword by God's express command. Dispute the Bible and you may get rid of this, but believe it and you have that terrible fact before you, that He gave a whole population to unmitigated slaughter. And I believe, justly and rightly so. I profess not to understand the ways of God. Who am I that I *should* understand Him? Should the potter's vessel think of understanding the potter? I bow before what He does, and believe that He is just let Him do whatever He may.

There is no need to detain you over the terrible spectacle of thousands smitten by pestilence at the time of David's numbering of the people, over of Sennacherib's hosts slain in one night by God's own hand, or even over that direst of all judgments the destruction of Jerusalem. But I cannot forbear quoting the memorable words of Moses when he said of JEHOVAH, "He repayeth them that hate him to their face, to destroy them: he will not be slack to him that hateth him, he will repay him to his face" (Deu 7:10).

Well does our JEHOVAH deserve the title which Isaiah gives Him, "The LORD that rendereth recompense to his enemies" (Isa 66:6). What instances does the Scripture give of what Paul calls "the severity of God," and how true is it that "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"!

2. Pursuing our heavy task, we shall now draw your solemn attention to *the words of the Savior*. Our Lord Jesus Christ we believe to be the incarnation of God, and to represent our God under a most tender aspect. It is a very remarkable fact that no inspired preacher of whom we have any record ever uttered such terrible words concerning the destiny of the lost as our Lord Jesus Christ. You may search the Scriptures through, but you will not find more solemnly alarming expressions than those which the loving Jesus employed.

Now, sinner, that you may feel their power, instead of quoting them hurriedly, let me just remind you of them slowly and solemnly. It was that tender Savior who still cries, "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"—it was He who said this, "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mat 10:28).

Read in Matthew 13:41, turn to the passage and read it with your own eyes that you may feel the more its power, "The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be

wailing and gnashing of teeth.” He repeats that expression in the forty-ninth verse. “So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

In the same Gospel, in the twenty-second chapter, you will find words equally suggestive in the thirteenth verse, “Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

And so again He says of the unprofitable servant in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew, which chapter also records those dreadful words which it is well for us to read as we find them at the forty-first verse, “Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.” And as if this were not enough, Jesus closes His discourse with these words at the end of the chapter, “And these shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal.”

Who was it who uttered that fearful sentence written in the ninth of Mark at the forty-third verse? Let it duly affect you as you read it, “If thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.” Did Jesus say that once? Read the forty-sixth verse—“Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.” Did He only say it twice? Look at the forty-eighth verse—“Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.” Three times over in one discourse.

Do not complain of the preacher if you think him harsh. Oh beloved, he does not wish to be harsh, but to preach with tears in his eyes these dreadful things, but look at my Master the Lord Jesus Christ. Did He preach smooth things on this matter? We heard the other day that the unquenchable fire and the undying worm were mediaeval ideas to be scouted at in these enlightened times. A courtly preacher insinuated as much and more—but a greater than he, who wore no soft raiment and dwelt in no king’s palaces, uses such expressions unmodified and undiluted.

I pray you laugh not at them, and scoff not at them, for the lips that spoke them were the lips of Him who loved the souls of men even to the death, the lips of Him who shall come a second time to judge the quick and the dead.

My terrible list is very far from being exhausted. Look at the twentieth chapter of Luke and the eighteenth verse, and the eighteenth chapter of Matthew and the eighth and ninth verses. But still more memorable is that parable of Lazarus and the rich man. The punishment of Dives is not described in terms of gentleness, he cries “Father Abraham, send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am tormented in this flame.”

Abraham gives him no hope of escape from his misery, for the answer to the inquiry is, “And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot, neither can they pass to us that would come from there.”

Oh, mournful picture, but Jesus drew it! He it was who told us of a certain sinner, it were better for that man that he had never been born, and of others, that it were better for them that a millstone were hung about their necks, and that they were cast into the depths of the sea. He it is who describes certain sinners as being miserably destroyed, and in another place uses this fearful sentence which I confess, although it is figurative, makes me shiver as I utter it, “The lord of that servant will come in a day when he looketh not for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in sunder, and will appoint him his portion with the unbelievers” (Luke 12:46).

Do not talk about grim mediaeval expressions after this, this is the Master Himself, and these are His own words, and I dare to say it that all the glowing pictures ever painted, designed to compel souls to escape from hell, never reached the dread reality which is implied in the words of our Savior Jesus Christ.

I hope that perceiving these terrors to have come from the lips of Jesus, who is all love, kindness, and benevolence, you will understand that it is the highest benevolence to warn men of their danger, and

to exhort them to escape from the wrath which will surely come upon them, for “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

3. We feel that it must be a fearful thing to be punished for sin when you remember the atonement. It is our full belief as Christians, that in order to the pardon of human sin, it was necessary that God Himself should become incarnate, and that the Son of God should suffer, suffer excruciating pains, to which the dignity of His person added infinite weight.

Brethren, if the wrath of God be a mere trifle, there was no need of a Savior to deliver us. It were as well to have let so small a matter take its course, or if the Savior came merely to save us from a pinch or two, why is so much said in His praise? What need for heaven and earth to ring with the glories of Him who would save us from a small mischief?

But mark the word. As the sufferings of the Savior were intense beyond all conception, and as no less a person than God Himself must endure these sufferings for us, that must have been an awful, not to say an infinite evil, from which there was no other way for us to escape except by the bleeding and dying of God’s dear Son.

Think lightly of hell, and you will think lightly of the cross. Think little of the sufferings of lost souls, and you will soon think little of the Savior who delivers you from them. God grant we may not live to see such a Christ-dishonoring theology dominant in our times.

4. But once again, and with this we close this point. The conscience of every sinner tells him that there will be a wrath to come. I do not mean that the conscience of the sinner tells him what kind of punishment it will be, or dictates to him its duration, but we know from facts that dying men who have lived in impenitence have often exhibited fears that are not to be accounted for, except upon the supposition that the shadow of a terrible doom had cast itself upon their minds.

These were not the old women of whom so much has been said in the way of despising them. These have been strong men, once as boastful as Tom Paine and his fellows. These were men of intellect, sharp reasoners, who once threatened to strike the Gospel through the heart, and yet when they have come to die their boastings have all ceased, and the blanched cheek, and the terror of the wrath to come, have all proved the truth of what they denied, and have declared that “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

I am sure we all feel, at least I speak of my own conscience, I feel that God could not be truly God if He did not punish evil; that it would be a pity that there should be a God if He did not punish sin; that He might as well have had no existence at all if such were the fact, and that if a preacher should arise who would tell men that God would not punish their sins, such a man ought to be carefully secluded from society because of the mischief which his doctrines would assuredly cause.

I feel like the judge in America, who when he was waited upon by the Universalists for assistance in setting up a place for their meeting, after hearing the arguments, said, “No, I cannot help you, for in the first place, I do not believe that your doctrines are at all consistent with Holy Writ, and though I am sorry to say I am not so well-instructed in the Bible as I ought to be, I believe that if Scripture had meant to teach eternal punishment. I do not see what other terms it could have used. At all events, if your sentiments should prevail, if there be no hell hereafter, there would very soon be a hell here. For as soon as it was known that men might commit sin with impunity, men would plunge into sin at once.”

The moral sense of man is not stamped out yet, and while it remains it will in more or less distinct terms declare that “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

II. Let me urge you, my dear hearer, in the second place, NOT TO ATTEMPT TO DEPRIVE YOURSELF OF THE BENEFICIAL EFFECT WHICH A PROPER CONSIDERATION OF THIS DOCTRINE WOULD HAVE UPON YOU.

1. Do not deny the fact, at any rate if you do, be consistent and deny Scripture altogether. If you doubt the punishment of the future state, doubt the inspiration of Scripture at once, for to doubt one and hold the other is impossible. Do not so violate your own conscience as to dream of sin’s escaping punishment. If you should persuade yourself to doubt the existence of hell, your doubting it will not

quench its fires. If there be no hell hereafter I am as well off as you are, but if there be, where will you be?

Take it on the commonest supposition, I have two strings to my bow, you have only one, and that one I believe to be a lie. Oh, my hearers, if I were to stand here and persuade you that there was no danger, you might very well say, “Then what need to tell us so? Why be in earnest when there is nothing to be in earnest about?” I would fain persuade you to escape from the punishment of whose existence there is no room to doubt.

2. In the next place, do not have the edge of this truth taken off by those who suggest a hope that though you may be punished for a time in the next world you will ultimately be destroyed and annihilated. Now nothing in nature ever has been annihilated yet, and it would be a new thing if you should be.

I am not about to argue the point this morning, but I pray you do not let the terrors of the wrath to come be taken off by that idea, for even supposing it to be true, yet those who teach it tell us that there will be a limited but a very fearful punishment. They still agree with the teaching of the text, that “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” If I knew that I should be damned for a day, I would labor to escape from it, but to be damned for a thousand years will be terrible indeed, and it would still be true that “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

I dare not, however, hold out to you the hope of annihilation while the Bible contains such words as these. “These shall go away into everlasting punishment”—*everlasting*! The word is precisely the same as that which is applied to heaven, and though I shall be told that this is an old argument, I reply that this is the very reason why I use it. Be it for others to invent novelty, we count that the old is better. If that passage does not teach the eternity of punishment, neither does it teach the eternity of reward.

It is to be always *punishment* too—always *punishment*. Now if the lost should suddenly be annihilated, that annihilation would be no punishment, it would be a boon to be sought with tears. It would be the cessation of all punishment, for how can they be punished who have ceased to be? The *punishment* spoken of is said to be everlasting, and everlasting it will be!

In the second epistle to the Thessalonians, the first chapter and seventh and ninth verses, we are told that such men shall be *punished* with *eternal destruction*. Some lay hold upon the word “destruction” as meaning annihilation, but it is eternal destruction. Annihilation is done at once and done with, but this destruction lasts on forever. It is eternal destruction, and then it is explained, “eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord, and the glory of His power.” Therefore to be forever banished from the glory of God and shut out from every source of hope is the destruction here meant.

There is a very terrible passage in the twentieth chapter of Revelation where in vision John speaks concerning the condition of lost spirits. If you read the tenth verse speaking of Gog and Magog, it says, “And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” I do not know what the words forever and ever can mean if they do not mean forever and ever.

Yes, cries one, that torment is for the devil. Very well, why do not you sympathize with the devil as well as with men? Is not there as much reason to sympathize with fallen angels as with fallen men? But our Lord has said that the same punishment which awaits Satan will befall the impenitent, for He says, “Depart, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.” And in the last verse of the twentieth chapter of Revelation we find, that whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire, that same place into which death and hell were cast.

This fire will not cause annihilation, for in Rev 21:8 we are told that certain sinners, such as the “fearful and unbelieving, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone.” How can those have a part who have no existence? To have a part in that fire is the second death. When Jesus speaks of the fire of hell, He does not say that annihilation is effected by it, but speaks on this wise, “shall cast them into a furnace of fire, there shall be (not annihilation, but the signs of conscious misery) weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth.”

Now I am not going fully into this subject, but I can only say this much—if our Lord and His Spirit intended to make us believe that there would be a worm that never dieth, and a fire that never could be quenched, and did mean to teach us that there was a punishment for sin which would last forever, I do not know what other words could have been used. And I do pray you, dear friends, whether you think so or not, be on the safe side, for even if it were but a thousand years only, think what that must be.

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, even if you could get out again. But when it comes with the solemn sanction, as I am persuaded it does, that you never will escape from those hands, oh, why will ye die? Why will ye die? Look, look to Jesus, and find eternal life in Him. Beware lest you be “wandering stars, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever.”

3. Some suppose that instead of annihilation, restoration awaits the lost. There are no texts in Scripture which when read by honest men can mean this, they must be wickedly and perniciously perverted before they can be made to teach anything of the sort. Scripture does not speak of the fire of hell as chastening and purifying, but as punishment which men shall receive for deeds done in the body. They are to be visited with many stripes and receive just recompense for transgressions.

What can there be about hell fire to change a man’s heart? Surely the more the lost will suffer the more they will hate God. When God sent plagues upon the earth men blasphemed His name (Rev 16:9). Men do so now. Are they likely to turn at His rebuke then? Satan has been punished for these six thousand years—do you see any signs of repentance about him? Do you see any tokens of his being reclaimed? Is he not just as much a roaring lion, going about seeking whom he may devour, as ever he was?

And the case of Satan must run parallel with ours. There are no tokens of his restoration now, nor will there be any tokens of ours then. Besides, if the Gospel of Christ cannot save you, what can? If the wooing of Christ’s wounds cannot make you love Christ, do you think the flames of hell will?

Oh, my hearers, if, with such a Gospel as that which is proclaimed to you, you will not turn, do you think you will turn in the world to come? Jesus says not so, but declares that, “he that believeth not shall be damned.” You live in the company of saints now—at all events, you live in a land which represses immorality, but in hell there are no preachers of the Gospel—no holy examples to win you to holiness. The dwellers in hell are enemies of God—a pretty school for virtue that.

Do you suppose, then, that you who leave this life without the fear of God will be led to turn to Him then? Cast away the thought, my hearer, it will deceive you. This fearful doctrine did much mischief in America at one time, but it was so revolting to the common sense of many consciences that its day was soon over. This error will eat out the very soul of piety. Still were it true, believers in Jesus are as well off as you are.

A gentleman once said to a Universalist who had been arguing with him, “I suppose if I hate your religion, laugh at it, ridicule it, and spit on it, it will be all the same with me at the last?” “Yes,” said the other. “Well,” said the first, “mind you do not do that with mine, or you are a lost man.”

I like the remark of the people who were requested to accept one of these preachers as ministers. They said, “You have come to tell us that there is no hell. If your doctrine be true, we certainly do not need you, and if it be not true, we do not want you, so that either way we can do without you.” It is a most dreadful fact that there is no provision made for the future restoration of the lost, not a word said about it except that for them remains the blackness of darkness forever.

Abraham did not say to the rich man, “My dear son, you will return to my bosom when you have undergone those purifying fires.” Oh, no! That would have been something more than a drop of water to cool his tongue, that would have drenched him with buckets full of the cooling draught. But no, it was just this, “And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence.”

4. Some ungodly men say, “Well, you do not believe for a minute that there is any material fire, do you?” My dear hearer, what is that to you? There is a text which speaks of destroying both body and soul in hell, which seems to indicate punishment for the body, but if it were not so, do you think that

soul punishment is a trifle? Why man, it is the very soul of punishment. It is far more dreadful than bodily pain. Go across to Bethlehem Hospital and observe poor creatures perfectly un-pained in body, whose minds are wrung with bitter anguish, and you will soon see that a wounded spirit none can bear. Oh, fear ye the Lord, for it is a fearful thing to fall into His hands. If there be no material fire, if there be no literal worm, this will be sorry consolation for a soul on flame with woe.

Though I am thus speaking, I know what some will do. You will go away and say, "I could not bear to hear him." I do not ask you to hear me, but I pray you do not neglect your souls. You will say, "What a harsh preacher!" Say so, but do not be harsh with your own souls. You will say, "He brings up the old bugbear." If it is an old bugbear, you are men and need not worry about it. But if it be not so, should I not be a demon if I did not warn you? As long as God spares my life, I hope I shall not be found unfaithful to your souls. So long as I believe that Book, I cannot but warn you that "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

III. In the third place, and briefly, I should like you to CONSIDER HOW THIS TEXT IS PUT.

The punishment to be endured is here described as falling into the hands of the living God. Will not that be fearful? You hear men speak of falling into the hands of the devil, that, no doubt, would be something terrible, but this is much worse, falling into the hands of the living God.

But what could there be that would terrify and alarm the soul in falling into the hands of the living God? Let me remind you. You sinners, when you begin to think of God, feel uneasy. In a future state you will be compelled to think of God. God is not in all your thoughts now—it is the only place where He is not. But when you enter the future state, you will not be able to escape from the thought of God.

You will then realize the words of David, "If I make my bed in hell, thou art there also." That thought will torment you. You will have to think of God as one to whom you were ungrateful. You will look up, and think, "There is the God who made me, who fed me, clothed me, and if He chastened me, did it for my good, and I never thanked Him, but perhaps I used His name by way of blasphemy." You will feel remorse, but not repentance, as you recollect that He did honestly invite you to come to Him, that He did call and you refused, that He stretched out His hand and you did not regard to Him.

As you think of the happiness of those whose hearts were given to Him, it will make your miseries great to think of what you have lost. You will hate Him, and here it seems to me will be your misery. The hatred of the soul to everything that is good will involve fearful misery, and more so if that soul sees that good is infinite, that good is victorious, that goodness reigns in heaven.

Well may the wicked gnash their teeth, as they note the overthrow of evil and the establishment of good! Ungodly men, both here and hereafter, hate God because He is good. Just as of old, the wicked hated the saints because they were saints, and they hate Him all the more because He is so powerful that they cannot defeat Him or frustrate His designs. Ah, those sins of yours will feed the flame within your conscience, and will be an undying worm within your heart.

Oh, friends, it is misery on earth to hate God, it is misery to live with those who hate God, but when sin shall become fully developed, there will be no need of racks and kindling and flames, sin itself will be enough to make its own punishment. No punishment more acute and more terrible, while the presence of God all the while shall act as a great exciting cause to stir up the bad passions, and the vile enmity, and the horrid rebellion of lost, fallen spirits.

Oh turn to Him, for to turn FROM Him is to be unhappy! To love God is heaven, to hate Him brings hell. You are so made that you cannot sin and be happy. It was right of God to make you such a creature that holiness and happiness should go together. It was right of Him to make you such a creature that sin and sorrow must go together, and if you will have sin, you must have sorrow. Oh turn from it while you may!

Oh may God's Spirit turn you now, before you enter into that world where there is no turning, but where the die is cast, and the road is chosen. As the arrow once shot speeds onward in its course, and turns not from it, so must you speed on in holiness and happiness or in sin and sorrow, for there is no turning from the course.

IV. I desire to close by saying, if THESE THINGS BE SO, THEN ACT ACCORDINGLY.

Sinner, unless you are prepared to say this text is a lie, do not fall into the hands of the living God. But you say, “How can I escape then?” By falling into the hands of the living God *now*, in another sense. If you will come and confess your sin, if you will trust in Him whom God has set forth as a propitiation for sin, there is pardon for you. There is pardon for you *now*.

However great your sins may have been, if with a broken heart you will say, “I will arise and go unto my Father,” there is room in His heart, there is room at the table of His grace, there is room in heaven for you. Whosoever among you turneth unto the living God shall certainly live. “Only confess your iniquity,” saith He, “only return unto me, and I will have mercy upon you.”

*“Ye sinners, seek His grace, whose wrath ye cannot bear:
Fly to the shelter of His cross, and find salvation there.”*

To trust Christ is the true way of escape. Rely upon Him and you shall live.

To the saint, what should be the effect of this doctrine? I will show you from the lips of one who hates it. I read in a newspaper yesterday the notes of a sermon preached by a certain Congregational preacher in London, a sermon which I must confess did not altogether so much startle me as it would have done if I had not known the gentleman’s antecedents. But it did startle me when I read these words.

I will quote a few sentences, “If I dwelt upon this doctrine Sunday after Sunday in this place of worship, and induced you to believe that people who have lived and died impenitent are thrown into a state of condemnation and misery—I say, if I believed that, how could I fail to feel for you or find rest to my spirit until I grasped every one of you and beseeched you to consider how terrible is your destiny, and how awful your danger!

“Are we not giving up ourselves to all sorts of pleasures and entertainments? When the work of the day is over, do we not try to obtain some sort of relaxation among the drama, the theater, the cards, and all kinds of social delights to direct our thoughts from the terrible, piercing realities which are every day and every hour wearing out our lives? How dare you if spirits of men are going into everlasting damnation every instant that you breathe, if you believe that every breath you draw there is some soul damned forever, some poor human being which has lost its way and come into utter misery?

“Are you to be playing games, are you to be going to concerts and sitting in front of stages and theatrical entertainments and finding your pleasures and recreations there? If you do, you are like demons. If you can look on and see unnumbered millions of your fellow creatures perishing forever, and if you can live and enjoy yourselves, you deserve to perish forever.”

And then he goes on to say that if we can go to comfortable places of worship and sit there contentedly, and spend our lives in making money and live for nothing else, then we are false to our profession of belief in this doctrine, and he denounces the inconsistency and adds, “If I believe that doctrine I dare not preach here. I do not know where I dare preach, but somewhere under the open sky where I should be able to say that human beings are being lost.

“If this doctrine of everlasting damnation be true, how ought you to labor to save souls from everlasting death! You ought never to think of anything else, but declare it from the housetops, and never enjoy yourselves or make more money or sit quietly in chapel, you ought to wander over all the earth and bring spirits back again to the God who will damn them if they do not come unto Him.”

Now when I read all this, I thought, “It is even so. The doctrine of eternal punishment should thus act upon us, and for this very reason it ought to be preached and insisted upon. One would not have been surprised to hear the preacher proceed to press the doctrine in order to produce just such hatred of frivolity and worldliness, and just such zeal and fervor, but who is not horrified to find that the next sentence is—“I really believe that the doctrine of everlasting damnation is a blasphemy against God! I believe it to be demoralizing to the spirit of man, and subversive of all the laws of humanity. I believe that the doctrine of Atheism would be better.”

After first of all showing how we ought to live if that doctrine be true, and very properly showing its influence in promoting zeal and fervor, this misguided man declares that Atheism would be better than a doctrine so practically useful. No answer is needed beyond his own words. Surely that doctrine is not so very demoralizing which would make ministers and hearers earnest to win souls, keep them from vain amusements, and make them give up mere money-making, and pleasure-seeking, and self-comfort, and drive them into earnest, passionate weeping, longing and labor for men that they might be saved.

I pray God that such teachers may have a better mind, and that all of us may be kept faithful by the power of the Holy Spirit, working to win men because “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—HEBREWS 10

Taken from The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit C. H. Spurgeon Collection. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.