**THE FUNDAMENTALS: A TESTIMONY TO THE TRUTH**

**VOLUME 3; CHAPTER 4. WHAT CHRIST TEACHES CONCERNING FUTURE RETRIBUTION**

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There are four reasons for confining our consideration of the subject of Future Retribution to the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ:

**(1)**. It limits the range of our inquiry to what is possible in a brief essay. There will be no occasion to examine the 56 passages in the authorized version of our Bible which contain the word "Hell," (most of which are the translations of the Hebrew "Sheol" and the Greek "Hades," meaning "the grave" and "the unseen state,") and we can concentrate our attention on the ten passages in which our Lord uses the word "Gehenna" (which was the usual appellation in His day for the abode of the lost) together with those other verses which evidently refer to the future state of the wicked.

**(2).** It affords a sufficient answer to the speculation of those who don't know, to refer to the revelation of the One who does know. Many other passages might be quoted from the New Testament, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who was promised by our Lord to His disciples to "guide them into all truth," and "show them things to come" (John 16:12, 13); but, in taking the words of Christ Himself, we shall find the greatest ground of common agreement in these days of loose views of inspiration. Surely, He who is "The Truth" would never misrepresent or exaggerate it on a matter of such vital importance, and would neither encourage popular errors nor excite needless fears.

**(3).** It also affords a sufficient answer to those who represent the doctrine as unreasonable and dishonoring lo God, and who regard those who hold it as narrow minded and hard hearted, to remind them that all the very expressions which are most fiercely denounced in the present day fell from the lips of the Saviour who died for us, and came from the heart of the "Lover of souls." Surely we have no right to seek to be broader minded than He was, or to nurture false hopes which have no solid foundation in His teaching; while to assume a greater zeal for God's honor, and a deeper compassion for the souls of men, is little short of blasphemy. The current objections to the orthodox doctrine of hell are made by those who allow their hearts to run away with their heads, and are founded more on sickly sentimentality than on sound scholarship.

**(4).** In considering the subject as professing Christians, the words of the Master Himself ought surely to put an end to all controversy; and these are clear and unmistakable when taken in their plain and obvious meaning, without subjecting them to any forced interpretation. It is greatly to be regretted that they are not more frequently dealt with in the modern pulpit; but ministers are only human, and there is a strong temptation to preach what is palatable, rather than what is profitable. In this case, surely, history repeats itself; for we read in Isa. 30:10 of those who said to the prophets of old: "Prophesy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits"; and a cowardly yielding to this demand has produced an emasculated Gospel and an enfeebled ministry in the present day.

Coming now to consider briefly Christ's teaching on the subject, let us ask, first of all:

**1. What did our Lord teach as to the certainty of future retribution?** The word "retribution" is to be preferred to "punishment" because the Bible teaches us that the fate of the wicked is not an arbitrary (much less a vindictive) infliction, but the necessary consequence of their own sins. Taking the passages in their order, in Matt. 5:22; Christ speaks of causeless anger against, and contemptuous condemnation of, others as placing us "in danger of the hell of fire, while in verses 29 and 30 He utters a similar warning concerning the sin of lust; and these are in the Sermon on the Mount, which is the most generally accepted part of His teaching! In chapter 8:12 He speaks of unbelieving "children of the Kingdom" being "cast forth into the outer darkness", and adds, "There shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth" - expressions which are repeated in chapters 22:13 and 25:30. In chapter 10:28 Jesus said: "Fear Him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" - a wholesome fear which is decidedly lacking in the present day, and which many people regard as a remnant of superstition quite unsuited to this enlightened age! In our Lord's own explanation of the parable of the tares and wheat, He declared: "The Son of Man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His kingdom all things that cause stumbling, and them that do iniquity, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire; there shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth. The angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the righteous, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire; there shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth" (chapter 13:41, 42, 49, 50). In chapter 23:15 He speaks of the hypocritical Pharisees as "children of hell," showing that their conduct had fitted them for it, and that they would "go to their own place", like Judas (whom He describes as "the son of perdition" in John 17:12), while in verse 33 He asks: "How shall ye escape the judgment of hell?" The law of retribution can no more be repealed than that of gravitation; it is fixed and unalterable. That hell has not been prepared for human beings, but that they prepare themselves for it, is clear from the sentence which our Lord says that He will pronounce upon those on His left hand in the last great day: "Depart from Me, ye cursed, into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels" (Chapter 25:41).

Turning to the Gospel according to Mark, we find our Lord saying, in chapter 3:29: "Whosoever shall blaspheme against the Holy Spirit hath never forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin." Whatever view may be taken of the character of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, the cause and consequence are here closely linked together, eternal sin bringing eternal retribution. The words in the original undoubtedly indicate an inveterate habit rather than an isolated act, and would probably be better translated, "is held under the power of an eternal sin." This in itself precludes the possibility of forgiveness, because it assumes the impossibility of repentance; besides, each repetition involving a fresh penalty, the punishment is naturally unending. Similarly, in John 8:21, 24, our Lord's twice repeated declaration to those Jews which believed not on Him, "Ye shall die in your sins", indicates that unforgiven sin must rest upon the soul in condemnation and pollution; for death, so far from changing men's characters, only fixes them; and hence Christ speaks in chapter 5:29 of "the. resurrection of damnation". Once more, the words of the Ascended and Glorified Saviour recorded in Rev. 21:8 may be quoted: "The fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone; which is the second death."

A careful study of the Scriptural uses of the words "life" and "death" will clearly show that the root ideas are respectively "union" and "separation". Physical life is union of the spirit with the body, spiritual life is the union of the spirit with God, and everlasting life is this union perfected and consummated to all eternity. Similarly, physical death is the separation of the spirit from the body, spiritual death is the separation of the spirit from God, and eternal death is the perpetuation of this separation. Hence, for all who have not experienced a second birth, "the second death" becomes inevitable; for he who is only born once dies twice, while he who is "born again" dies only once. As against the doctrine of annihilation, Rev. 20:14 may be quoted: "Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death, even the lake of fire".

**2. What did Christ teach as to the character of future retribution?** We have already seen that He spoke of it as full of sorrow and misery in His seven-fold repetition of the striking expression: "There shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28). In Mark 9:43-48, our Lord twice speaks of "the fire that never shall be quenched", and thrice adds, "where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched". Of course He was using the common Jewish metaphors for Gehenna, taken from the perpetual fires that burned in the valley of Hinnom to destroy the refuse, and the worms that fed upon the unburied corpses that were cast there; but, as we have already seen, He would never have encouraged a popular delusion. Our Lord twice spoke of fruitless professors being "cast into the fire" (Matt. 7:19; John 15:6); twice of "the furnace of fire" (Matt. 13:42, 50); twice of the "hell of fire" (Matt. 5:22; 18:9); and twice of "eternal fire" (Matt. 18:8; 25:41).

Granted that "the undying worm and unquenchable fire" are metaphorical, yet these striking figures of speech must stand for startling facts, they must be symbolical of a terrible reality. We need no more regard them materially than we do the golden streets and pearly gates of heaven; but, if the latter are emblematic of the indescribable splendors of heaven, the former must be symbolical of the unutterable sufferings oi hell. One can no more presume to dogmatize on the one than the other, but it requires no vivid stretch of the imagination to conceive an accusing conscience acting like the undying worm, and insatiable desires like the unquenchable fire. In our Lord's parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the former is represented as being "in torments" and "in anguish" even in "Hades," and, that memory survives the present life and accompanies us beyond the grave, is clear from Abraham's words to him: "Son, remember" (Luke 16:23-25). Could any material torments be worse than the moral torture of an acutely sharpened conscience, in which memory becomes remorse as it dwells upon misspent time and misused talents, upon omitted duties and committed sins, upon opportunities lost both of doing and of getting good, upon privileges neglected and warning rejected? It is bad enough here, where memory is so defective, and conscience may be so easily drugged; but what must it be hereafter, when no expedients will avail to banish recollection and drown remorse? The poet Starkey stimulates our imagination in the awful lines:

"All that hath been that ought not to have been,

That might have been so different; that now

Cannot but be irrevocably past. Thy gangrened heart,

Stripped of its self-worn mask, and spread at last

Bare, in its horrible anatomy,

Before thine own excruciated gaze;"

while Cecil puts the matter in a nutshell when he writes:

"Hell is the truth seen too late."

Again, what material pain could equal the moral torment of intensified lusts and passions finding no means of gratification, insatiable desires that can have no provision for their indulgence, or if indulged, all the pleasure gone while the power remains? Surely, such expressions as the undying worm and the unquenchable fire represent, not pious fictions, but plain facts; and we may be sure that the reality will exceed, not fall short of, the figures employed, as in the case of the blessedness of the redeemed. The woes thus pronounced are more terrible than the thunders of Sinai, and the doom denounced more awful than that of Sodom; but we should never forget that these terrible expressions fell from the lips of Eternal Love, and came from a heart overflowing with tender compassion for the souls of men.

**3. What did Christ teach as to the continuity of future retribution?** Is there any solid basis in His recorded words for the doctrine of eternal hope, or the shadow of a foundation for the idea that all men will be eventually saved? Much has been made of the fact that the Greek word "aionios" (used by our Lord in Matt. 18:8 and 25:41, 46, and translated "everlasting" in the Authorized, and "eternal" in the Revised, Version) literally means "age-long"; but an examination of the 25 places in which it is used in the New Testament reveals the fact that it is twice used of the Gospel, once of the Gospel covenant, once of the consolation brought to us by the Gospel, twice of God's own Being, four times of the future of the wicked, and fifteen times of the present and future life of the believer. No one thinks of limiting its duration in the first four cases and in the last, why then do so in the other one? The dilemma becomes acute in considering the words of our Lord recorded in Matt. 25:46, where precisely the same word is used concerning the duration of the reward of the righteous and the retribution of the wicked, for only by violent perversion and distortion can the same word in the same sentence possess a different signification. Again, it is sometimes urged that, as salt has a purifying power, the words, "everyone shall be salted with fire," in Mark 9: 49, have this significance in the case of future punishment; but the context clearly shows that its preserving power is alluded to, for the passage speaks of the undying worm and the unquenchable fire. Besides, if the Divine chastisements are ineffectual here in the case of any individual, when there is so much to restrain men and women from wrong-doing, how can they be expected to prove effectual in the next world, with all these restraints removed, and only the society of devils? It is certainly somewhat illogical for those who make so much of the love of God to argue that punishment will prove remedial hereafter in the case of those whom Divine Love has failed to influence here. Not only is there not the slightest hint in the teaching of our Lord that future punishment will prove remedial or corrective, but His words concerning Judas in Matt. 26:24 are inexplicable on that supposition. Surely His existence would still have been a blessing if his punishment was to be followed by ultimate restoration, and Christ would therefore never have uttered the sadly solemn words: "It had been good for that man if he had not been born." Similarly there is a striking and significant contrast between our Lord's words to the unbelieving Jews recorded in John 8:21: "Whither I go ye cannot come," and those to Peter in chapter 13:36: "Whither I go thou canst not follow Me now, but thou shalt follow Me afterwards."

As character tends to permanence, heaven is a place of perfect holiness and hell must be of the opposite; and this throws light upon the words of Rev. 22:11, which were apparently uttered by our ascended, glorified, and returning Lord: "He that is unrighteous, let him do unrighteousness still; and he that is filthy, let him be made filthy still; and he that is righteous, let him do righteousness still; and he that is holy, let him be made holy still." The doctrine of universal restoration springs from a natural desire to wish the history of mankind to have a happy ending, as in most story books; but it ignores the fact that, by granting man free will, God has (as it were) set a boundary to His own omnipotence, for it is a moral impossibility to save a man against his will. Surely eternal sin can only be followed by eternal retribution; for, if a man deliberately chooses to be ruled by sin, he must inevitably be ruined by it. One never hears of the doctrine of final restoration being applied to the devil and his angels, but why not? If the answer is, "Because they cannot and will not repent," the same is surely true of many human beings.

Not only is there no vestige of foundation in our Lord's words for the doctrine of universalism, there is also no shadow of a suggestion of any restoration of the wicked hereafter. So far from this being the case, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus rings the death knell of any such hope. Abraham is there represented as saying to Dives: "Between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, that they which would pass from hence to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from thence to us" (Luke 16:26). That "fixed gulf" is surely a yawning chasm too deep to be filled up, and too wide to be bridged over; and the awful description of hell by the poet Milton, in "Paradise Lost", remains sadly true:

"Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace

And rest can never dwell; hope never comes

That comes to all, but torture without end."

**4. What did Christ teach as to the causes of future retribution?** A careful study of our Lord's words show that there are two primary causes, namely, deliberate unbelief and wilful rejection of Him; and surely these are but different aspects of the same sin. In Matt. 8:12, it was the contrast between the faith of the Gentile centurion and the unbelief of the Jewish nation which drew from His lips the solemn words: "The children of the Kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness;" while, in chapter 23 the awful denunciation in verse 33 is followed by the sad lamentation: "How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not" (verse 37). Similarly, in Mark 3:29, R.V., the "eternal sin" spoken of can only be that of continued rejection of the offers of mercy; and in John 8:24, our Lord plainly declares: "If ye believe not that I am He, ye shall die in your sins." Finally, in Mark 16:16, we find the words: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned." A careful consideration of these passages, and especially of the last, will help to remove one great difficulty with regard to the whole subject, namely, the future state of those who have never had the Gospel so plainly presented to them as to enable them to deliberately accept or reject Christ, to willingly believe the good news or wilfully disbelieve it.

Another difficulty is removed when we realize that our Lord taught that there would be different degrees in hell as in heaven. Thus, in Matt. 11:20-24 He taught that it would be "more tolerable in the day of judgment" for Tyre and Sidon than for Chorazin and Bethsaida, and for Sodom than for Capernaum; and in Mark 12:40 He speaks of "greater damnation." It is clear that future retribution will be proportioned to the amount of guilt committed and of grace rejected. (See also Luke 12:47, 48; John 19:11.)

We have so far examined, as thoroughly as possible within this limited space, all the recorded words of our Lord which bear on this important subject. It only remains, in conclusion, very briefly to point out that the whole drift of Christ's teaching confirms what we learn from these isolated passages, and that future retribution is not merely an incidental but a fundamental part of the Gospel message. It is the dark background on which its loving invitations and tender expostulations are presented, and the Gospel message loses much of its force when the doctrine is left out. But, worst of all, the earnest exhortations to immediate repentance and faith lose their urgency if the ultimate result will be the same if those duties are postponed beyond the present life. Is it seriously contended that Judas will eventually be as John, Nero as Paul, Ananias and Sapphira as Priscilla and Aquila? Finally, the doctrines of heaven and hell seem to stand or fall together, for both rest upon the same Divine revelation, both are described metaphorically, and both have the same word "everlasting" applied to their duration. If the threatenings of God's Word are unreliable, so may the promises be; if the denunciations have no real meaning, what becomes of the invitations? Ruskin well terms the denial of hell "the most dangerous, because the most attractive, form of modern infidelity." But is it so modern? Is it not an echo of the devil's insinuating doubt: "Yea, hath God said"? followed by his insistent denial, "Ye shall not surely die," which led to the fall of man? Let us, therefore, believe God's truth, rather than the devil's lie; let us accept Divine revelation, rather than human speculation; and let us heed what Christ so plainly taught, without mitigating, modifying, or minimizing His solemn warnings.