

This ebook is in the public domain.

This excerpt was recovered from Google photographic archives and transposed into text formatting using OCR software. Therefore typographical errors may have occurred in the transfer of the text. The original archive file in photographic format can be found at this URL:

<https://ia600504.us.archive.org/29/items/aseriessermons00skingoog/aseriessermons00skingoog.pdf>

The following is an excerpt from:

A SERIES OF SERMONS

**IN DEFENCE OF THE
DOCTRINE OF UNIVERSAL SALVATION.**

BY OTIS A. SKINNER.

BOSTON: ABEL TOMPKINS,

No. 38 Cornhill.

1842.

Sermon IV.

THE DOCTRINE OF ENDLESS WO IRRECONCILABLE WITH REASON.

Why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right? —Luke xii. 57.

THE great pre-eminence of man above the brute creation results from his powers of reason. It is this faculty which enables him to distinguish between good and evil, truth and falsehood, and constitutes him a moral and an accountable creature. Hence, man is uniformly addressed in the Bible as a reasonable being, and called upon to exercise the exalted powers by which he is distinguished.

Sometimes man permits his reason to slumber, or to become the slave of error and superstition. Such was the case with those to whom our text was addressed. They lived in the times of the Messiah, and were surrounded by the brightest evidences of his divine commission. They saw the eyes of the blind opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, and the predictions of the prophets meeting their fulfilment; and yet, such was their stupidity, that they did not believe. For this Jesus reproved them, and declared that they not only ought to be convinced by the signs of the times, but that of themselves they should judge what was right.

This declaration of Him who cannot err, is a full refutation of the idea which declares it wrong to reason on the subject of religion, and shows that Jesus never sought thus to degrade the human mind. So far from this, he called upon people to exercise reason, to hear and judge for themselves, and examine with care what was taught. “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.”

The same call is made by all the inspired teachers :—“Come now, and let us reason together”—“Prove all things”—“Try the spirits, and see whether they be of God.” Not only are we thus required to reason, but even to judge of the ways of God, and decide whether they are equal or unequal.

I wish not to be understood by these remarks as exalting reason above revelation, or as saying that reason is a sufficient guide in the concerns of faith and practice. It is the office of reason to judge of what God has said—to weigh testimony. Thus reason and revelation go hand in hand. Without the former, the latter would be of no use; and without the latter, the former, as all history shows, would be a

poor guide. It has been will said, that what a telescope is to the eye, revelation is to the reason; and that man who takes away reason to make way for the light of revelation, is like him who plucks out his eyes, the better to receive the light of the invisible stars by the aid of a telescope. It is, then, the duty of all men to judge for themselves; and in this discourse I propose to offer some arguments, drawn from reason, against the eternity of suffering.

I will first ask your attention to the admissions of those who hold to the eternity of misery. Whenever we offer an argument against their doctrine, and declare it wholly incompatible with the Divine character, we are met with the reply, that reason is carnal, and, therefore, the fact that such a torture appears unreasonable, is no argument against it. It is said that we should believe it, though it contradicts all our sense of right, and appears like the height of injustice.

Those who take this ground, call upon us to make an entire surrender of reason, and not exercise it at all in regard to matters of religion. In times of religious excitements, the great object sought is to make the people give up reason, and trust wholly to feeling; and it is not until this is accomplished that those excited and terrified will fall prostrate under the power exerted over them.

Now, I ask whether a doctrine, which cannot be embraced till reason is surrendered, is worthy of support? Can such a doctrine be from god? Why, brethren, God is a reasonable being—he is just and right in all his ways—righteousness and truth go before his face—his dealings are all perfectly equitable. Wherein, then, is the necessity of surrendering reason, in order to believe the doctrines he has published? Why do not his doctrines accord with the reason which he has given us?

Do I hear one say, reason is carnal, and not to be trusted! I reply, on many subjects in theology, what is called carnal reason agrees with the reason of those who pretend to be specially illuminated. This is an important consideration, and I ask your special attention here. Suppose my reason is carnal; how does it happen that it does not deny the existence of God, his wisdom, power, love, mercy, goodness and grace? Why does it not pronounce those precepts unreasonable which require us to love God and worship in his sanctuary, and pray for his blessing? Why does it admit the justice of those requisitions which make it our duty to love each other fervently, and do as we would be done by? On these great matters, carnal reason, as it is called, agrees with what is termed sanctified

reason? Now why should they agree here? Why not disagree on these topics, as well as on the duration of torture? Why should my carnal reason see so many things in the same light in which sanctified reason sees them? Suppose here is a colored glass, through which we all look at certain objects; would the objects to some be tinged with one color, and to others with a different one? You answer, they would be all of the same hue. So with reason. If, in consequence of its carnality, it sees some religious subjects entirely wrong, why should it not see them all wrong?

These questions show that the doctrine to which we object is of a different character from the other doctrines to which we have referred, and that the fault is not in our reason, but in the doctrine itself. That is unreasonable, and wars against all true ideas of justice and goodness. It is not only our reason that says this, but it is the reason of all men that says it. The most strenuous advocates of the doctrine in question call it a mystery—the strange work of God, and declare that it opposes all their ideas of mercy and goodness. But though thus mysterious and strange, they think it taught in the Bible, and therefore believe it.

Thus, sanctified reason, as well as carnal reason, declares that this doctrine is false. Reason utters but one voice on the subject, and that is the voice of utter condemnation. I know not how this subject may appear to you, but I am frank to confess that I cannot admit a doctrine Divine which wars against the reason of all men, and which cannot be held but at the entire surrender of reason. Reason, I admit, cannot comprehend all truth—it cannot find the Almighty out to perfection; but all it can see of truth accords perfectly with its sense of justice and equity. Now is it not much more proper to conclude that the part which we cannot comprehend of truth accords with the part we can comprehend, than that they are entirely different in their character? All Divine truth is consistent with itself—one part cannot clash with another; and the man who has obtained one truth, has a rule by which to decide in regard to all truth. But, according to the doctrine of endless misery, different parts of the system of truth are directly at variance; it contains antagonistic principles, between which there is no more harmony than between light and darkness, truth and error. Certainly, I cannot subscribe to such an idea; and no man has any authority for teaching it. All truth is from the same source, and consequently harmonious in all its parts.

I object to the doctrine of endless suffering because it is unreasonable; and because we are obliged to deny reason, before we can give it our support. I wish for a doctrine which I can adopt in the calm and deliberate exercise of judgment;

and which I shall prize in proportion to the knowledge which I have of it. I wish a doctrine that I can investigate, and in which my confidence will increase as I advance in my investigations. This is the case with Universalism. It is embraced, not in a moment of phrensy, when highly excited and terrified, and after having made an entire surrender of reason ; but it is embraced after a full and careful investigation—such an investigation as we would make of any new astronomical system presented for our belief.

Look at the large number of clergyman among us, who were once believers in endless suffering. They rejected the doctrine they had preached, after a full investigation, and when free from every excitement unfavorable to the right exercise of reason. I look around upon this congregation, and see hundreds here, that once believed in endless torture, and many of which were connected with churches holding to that opinion; but they were led to examine our system, and, after examining, they fully and cordially embraced it. Let others examine it, and the result will be the same. So certain are we of this, that we constantly court investigation. This is all we ask. But we cannot get this. People are not allowed to read our books and hear our preachers. The most untiring and active measures are employed to prejudice people against our faith. But why this attempt to create prejudice, if a candid investigation is not feared ? The truth is, our doctrine is known to be reasonable, and to stand the test of inquiry. Hence everything is done which can be to make people distrust reason, surrender it entirely, and be governed wholly by feeling. This admission ought to convince all men that the doctrine of endless suffering has no foundation in truth; that it cannot be of God, but originated with man.

This conclusion will be confirmed by considering,

I. That it is unreasonable to suppose God will punish a finite creature with endless misery. It is impossible to discover any resemblance to justice in such a punishment. Justice would proportion punishment to the guilt of the offender. This is the idea which all men have of justice. We do not punish the offences of a child with the severity we do the offences of a man. Neither do we punish a trifling offence as severely as we do an aggravated one. Thus, punishment is always proportioned to crime. But if thus proportioned, how can any be doomed to endless suffering? Is not man finite? This is not a matter of dispute—all are agreed with regard to this. Hence, when it is said God will punish man endlessly for sins committed in this life, he is accused of infinite injustice, and represented as administering punishment without any reference to the magnitude of sin. We

cannot, then, see a shadow of justice in the infliction of endless pain; for such a punishment bears no proportion to sin. That is endless, but the sins are finite.

It has been argued that the degree of misery will be in proportion to the degree of sin; that there will be all grades of condition, from that of comparatively light suffering, down to perfect wretchedness; that those who suffer the lightest degree of misery will be only one step removed from those occupying the lowest state among the blessed; and this is called being punished according to the deeds.

This is essentially different from the popular view of punishment. According to that, all sins are infinite, and will be punished with infinite agony. But here is a false assumption. It is false to say sin is infinite; for nothing can be infinite which proceeds from a finite cause. It is equally false to say all sin is measured by the greatness of the being offended; for the gible, reason, and conscience declare that every man is guilty according to his intentions, and the light against which he acts. To whom much is given, of him much shall be required. Some shall be beaten with many stripes, and some with few. Hence sin is finite, because the act of a finite creature. Punishment, then, cannot be infinite in degree, as some teach.

But can it be endless in duration, if suited in degree to the magnitude of the crime? I ask particular attention to this question, because the day is not far distant when this will be the prevailing doctrine among those who now hold to the eternity of suffering. Allow me to submit this question for your attention—*Why would it be any more proper to punish a finite sin endlessly, than with a punishment in finite in degree?* Suppose a case. Here is a man who has stolen twenty dollars. He is arraigned for trial, found guilty, and sentenced to receive two hundred lashes. This we should call the very extreme of cruelty, and cry out with a voice of indignation against the court which should order it. But suppose the punishment should be imprisonment for life; would that render the case less aggravated? Would it not be vastly more unjust to punish for life such an offence, than to punish it with two hundred stripes? Let us change the court which is to inflict the punishment. Suppose the man goes into the future world with this crime upon his soul; would it be any more just in God to doom him to endless misery than for an earthly tribunal to doom him to imprisonment for life? The truth is, the duration, as well as the degree of punishment, must be proportioned to the crime. All human tribunals act upon this principle. All offenders are not doomed to the same period of suffering; but the periods vary according to the offence committed. If you look into our prisons, you will find some sentenced there for one year, some for two years, some for five, and some for life. The

duration of the punishment is fixed according to the crime committed. By what authority, then; can any say punishment will be endless? God declares that he will punish men according to their deeds—that is, the punishment shall be measured by the sin of which we are guilty; but will it be, if a finite sin is punished endlessly?

Suppose, for instance, a parent, who believes in endless misery, has a boy that has told a daring falsehood. The parent is an acquaintance of mine, and he asks my advice with regard to the punishment which should be inflicted. I tell him that the sin is very great, and that he ought to doom his son to confinement for life. The father is horror-struck—he calls me a barbarian—he rejects my advice with indignation.

Suppose another case. Here is a boy, of the same age, lying upon a sick bed. He tells the same falsehood which the other one told, and he dies with that falsehood upon his soul. A person, knowing the facts, submits the case to this very father, who had called me a barbarian for saying his son should be imprisoned for life. After considering the subject, the father says the boy should be doomed to endless punishment; that justice demands such a sentence. Thus he says a sin which it would be barbarity for man to punish for life, God will punish endlessly!

What an inconsistency! Who would suppose men of judgment could ever adopt such sentiments? Reason, then, teaches that God will not inflict endless pain. He is a God of justice, and will proportion punishment to the magnitude of sin; and as sin is finite, punishment will be limited.

II. Reason teaches that God will never do what he forbids his people to do. The doctrine that laws are made for the people, and not for kings, we have all abandoned. We cannot, therefore, subscribe to the idea, that God has principles of action which would be sinful in us.

Let me ask, then, what would be sinful in us! I answer, 1. It would be sinful to seek the evil of any human being. 2. It would be sinful to render evil for evil. 3. It would be sinful not to render assistance to those perishing with want, when we have the means of relieving them. The Christian rules on these points are so plain, that I need not refer to them. All, of every sect, will readily assent to what I have stated. But if right in regard to these points, I see no way in which we can differ respecting the course which God will pursue; for if it is wrong in us to seek the evil of any human being, it is wrong in God; if wrong in us to render evil for

evil, it is wrong in God; and if wrong in us, not to assist those who are perishing with want, it is wrong in God. These are self-evident conclusions, which we cannot deny, without denying the leading rules of Christianity.

Let us suppose, then, that God made a certain number for endless perdition; that he singled them out for this end; and that it is certain those thus selected will never be saved; does he not act upon a principle which would be sinful in us?

Allow me to illustrate by a simile. A father has ten sons. Five he nourishes, clothes, educates and protects; the other five he treats the reverse: he imposes unreasonable burdens upon them; keeps them in confinement, and compels them to toil beyond the endurance of nature; should we not pronounce him one of the most cruel and heartless of all human beings? Should we not say, he inflicted the greatest possible injustice upon five of his children? Apply this case to Deity. If he makes a part happy, and drives the other part down to endless agony, is he not cruel—does he not seek the evil of some—does he not inflict the worst torture possible on the unfortunate part of his creation?

Let none say, the misery of a part contributes to the welfare of the other part; for the cruel father could justify himself in the same manner; he could say—the earnings of the five in confinement, are expended upon the other five. Neither let it be said, God, in his plan of grace, found it necessary to make a part miserable; for a being of infinite perfection, could labor under no such necessity; he has all wisdom, power and fulness; and, therefore, can give happiness to all with the same ease that he can give happiness to one. Reason, therefore, shows that God made none for misery; for that would have been as wrong as for you or me to seek the evil of our fellow-beings.

Again: let us suppose that God says to the sinner, when he enters the future life, “Sinner, you have always done evil—you have despised me, and violated my law, and trampled upon the rights of your fellow-beings; and now I must doom you to endless pain.” What might be said on hearing such a sentence pronounced? Might it not be asked, what benefit will result from such a punishment? Will it reflect honor on the Divine name? Will it give stability to the Divine throne? Is it essential to the accomplishment of any good end? The answer would be, no. For what, then, it might be asked, will it be inflicted? There is only one reply that can be made. It is inflicted simply because the sinner has done evil; and, therefore, it is rendering evil for evil; cursing for cursing. Now God commands us not to act upon this principle; he requires us to overcome evil with good; to render blessing

for cursing. Shall We say, then, that God is the greatest violator of his own laws; that instead of seeking to overcome evil with good, he renders endless evil for the evil man commits on earth? There is then no vindictive punishment; God will never punish in revenge; he will always punish for a benevolent purpose; and, consequently, he will doom none to endless suffering

Again. Let us suppose that though God did not create man for misery, and will not inflict upon him endless torture, he will allow him to destroy his own eternal interests; can we reconcile such a course with the Christian precepts? This is a plain question. Christianity requires all to do as they would be done by, to help the needy and relieve the distressed; and it pronounces the man a cold, heartless wretch who will stand still and see a fellow-being perish, when by proper effort his life could have been saved.

Suppose a case. A vessel is returning from sea; all on board are in health, and are cheered by the prospect of reaching home in a few days. At length one of the crew sees a wreck far ahead, which he watches with anxious care. He soon discovers men clinging to the same, waving their signals of distress. Information is communicated to the commander; but he heeds it not, and disdainfully declares that he will grant no assistance. The crew press around him, and beg that he will not leave the men, to perish; but his heart is unmoved. Even the cries of the unfortunate sufferers affect him not; and in a selfishness that cannot feel, he passes directly by. Soon he reaches his destined port, and the particulars of his conduct spread as on the wings of light. The public are indignant, and pronounce the man a barbarian, guilty of one of the worst sins which could disgrace the earth. Now, could the conduct of this man be reconciled with the Christian precepts? Was he not bound by the laws of Heaven to render aid? Here there is no difference of opinion. Did not our whole country condemn, as with one voice, the captain who saw the ill-fated Lexington in flames, and yet went not to proffer assistance?

Apply this case to Deity. God can save all men; he can do all his pleasure; and yet, we are told that he will allow the sinner to be swept, by the strong current of sin, down the gulf of endless ruin; that though a single word would prevent such a catastrophe, he will not speak it, but leave man to himself! Thus the very conduct is ascribed to God, which our whole country has unanimously condemned in man. According to this, God violates the laws he has given for our guidance, and punishes us for refusing to assist the unfortunate, when he will not assist those plunging into endless perdition! And, strange to say, men justify him in so doing,

and that too, when they would brand with infamy the man who should stand still and allow the most degraded wretch on earth to perish.

Reason is shocked at such a conclusion, and rejects it with abhorrence. God, therefore, will never violate the principles which he has given for our guidance; and, if so, he will neither inflict nor permit endless torture. A

III. Reason teaches that God would not adopt, as a remedy for sin, a greater evil than sin. This proposition is within the comprehension of the humblest capacity. The surgeon, in treating a sprained limb, would not adopt a course which would render amputation necessary. The oculist, in treating a slightly diseased eye, would not order medicines which would destroy it. The parent, in correcting his truant son, would not inflict a punishment, that would drive him into all manner of sin. Every man will assent to the correctness of this principle; and yet, according to the doctrine of endless punishment, it is entirely disregarded by the Almighty. He has chosen a remedy infinitely worse than the disease; he has threatened a punishment which will cause more sin and suffering than it will prevent. Now no law is far preferable to such an one. It is infinitely better to let mankind go on eternally, as their desires lead and their natural sense of right dictates, than attempt to guide them by means which produce more evil than good.

It does not remove the difficulty, to say, “the remedy saves some, and renders their condition infinitely blessed ;” for even God cannot be justified in making one endlessly happy at the expense of another. It is compatible with justice and goodness to employ the temporary blindness of one to promote the spiritual good of another, providing this blindness also works out the good of the one who endures it; but not without. He that compels me to toil for another, without in some way compensating me for that toil, does me so much wrong.

A righteous God, then, could not adopt such a system; it is fraught with injustice, and is cruel in the highest degree. It is doing evil that good may come—a principle which the Bible condemns, and which has been one of the greatest curses ever known on earth. The Judge of the earth deals by all alike; all are the objects of his regard; all are embraced in his plan of mercy. In human governments, I know, some are sacrificed for the public good; but this arises the imperfection attending such governments, and is no proof that God, who is perfect, and can accomplish all his pleasure, will make any such sacrifice without overruling it for the good of the one sacrificed.

I say, therefore, again, the remedy cannot be worse than the evil it was designed to correct. Consequently, endless suffering is not the punishment of sin.

IV. Reason teaches that God would not permit the existence of an unnecessary endless evil. This position is admitted by our opposers. Dr. Parker, in his Lectures against Universalism, reasons thus: “Universalists argue that endless misery cannot be for the good of the universe. This is the very thing which ought to be proved.” Here he allows that if it were not necessary we should be right in rejecting it. But how does he prove its necessity? We answer, by asserting that it has a better restraining influence than limited punishment. It would be easy to show the falsity of this assertion; but such a labor is foreign from our present purpose. We will, therefore, proceed by asking, whether it was not possible for Jehovah to restrain sinners without the aid of endless punishment? Possible! Why, all know that it was possible. He can do all his pleasure. He can give just what effect he desires to limited punishments. soften the heart by a manifestation of kindness, and enlighten the mind by a proclamation of truth. Hence, endless we is not necessary; it is not an evil with which God cannot dispense.

*** See Lectures by Joel Parker, D. D., President of the Union Theological Seminary, N. Y., 1841.**

This all will admit; for an infinite Ruler can accomplish all his purposes; he is not obliged to suffer an evil which he would prefer to avoid; he is not reduced to the expedient of choosing between two evils.

Dr. Parker also says, “For aught we know, endless suffering may be necessary for securing the saints against falling, in a future state.” For aught we know! What a conjecture! What support does it receive from the Bible? Where is it intimated that the only way to keep the saints from rushing into sin, is by compelling them to gaze constantly upon the damned in endless perdition? What inspired writer has said the songs of heaven would cease, and its inhabitants rise in rebellion against God, were it not for the groans and agonies of hell? And yet, on this strange conjecture—a conjecture of which the Bible is ignorant, and which reflects infinite dishonor on the redeemed—rests the doctrine of endless misery.

You may think, perhaps, that better arguments could be offered in support of the necessity of endless wo. Why, then, are they not produced? Our opposers have been pressed for years on this point. All the writers against Universalism have

given it their attention; and yet, what we have noticed is the sum of all they have advanced, if we except the idea that the sufferings of hell are necessary to the welfare of the inhabitants of the planets!

Such is the weakness of error. While it confidently asserts that some will be doomed to endless wo, it can show no good arising from that wo; and thus it makes God the author of an infinite evil, which does no good to any being in the universe. We repeat, therefore, endless misery is an unnecessary evil—it does no good—it is no advantage to God, Christ, the angels, the saints, or the damned—it accomplishes nothing which could not be accomplished without it.

V. Reason teaches that God cannot have two attributes at variance with each other. Such a variance would prove an imperfection in Deity. If, for instance, the demands of justice conflict with those of mercy, one or the other makes an improper demand; and that which makes an improper demand must be wrong.

I know it will be said, “justice simply requires that an equitable punishment should be inflicted; and that mercy interposes, and asks to have the sinner forgiven; and therefore, though at variance, both are right.” But how right? How can it be right that the claims of justice should be denied? Why should the stability of a righteous government be destroyed by interposing a barrier against the operations of justice? What can justify screening a culprit from the punishment due to his offences?

Perhaps it will be argued, that unless mercy interposes, all will be doomed to endless wo, since all are sinners; and, consequently, such an interposition is essential to salvation. This only increases the difficulty; for it shows that all who are saved are saved at the expense of justice, and all who are damned are damned at the expense of mercy! Hence there can be no warfare among the attributes of God; justice and: mercy must be perfectly harmonious.

But to be thus harmonious, justice and mercy must be entirely different from what is generally supposed. The one must not be cruelty, nor the other weakness. Mercy must not lift its voice against punishment, nor justice punish beyond what the good of the sinner requires. It has been well said, by Dr. Charming, that God’s “justice is the justice of a good being, dwelling in the same mind, and acting in harmony-with perfect benevolence. By this attribute we understand God’s infinite regard to virtue or moral worth, expressed in a moral government: that is, in giving excellent and equitable laws, and in conferring such rewards, and

inflicting such punishments as are most fitted to secure their observance. God's justice has for its end the highest virtue of the creation, and it punishes for this end alone; and thus it coincides with benevolence; for virtue and happiness, though not the same, are inseparably conjoined.

“God's justice, thus viewed, appears to us to be in perfect harmony with his mercy. According to the prevalent systems of theology, these attributes are so discordant and jarring, that to reconcile them is the hardest task, and the most wonderful achievement of infinite wisdom. To us, they seem to be intimate friends, always at peace, breathing the same spirit, and seeking the same end. By God's mercy, we understand not a blind, instinctive compassion, which forgives without reflection, and without regard to the interests of virtue. This, we acknowledge, would be incompatible with justice, and also with enlightened benevolence. God's mercy, as we understand it, desires strongly the happiness of the guilty, but only through their penitence. It has; regard to character as truly as his justice.”

The foregoing considerations are sufficient to show that the doctrine of endless misery cannot be reconciled with reason, and that it wars against all its dictates. Who, then, can believe the doctrine divine? Who will stand up in its defence? God is a reasonable being; his laws are reasonable laws; and his plan of salvation is a reasonable plan. Hence the doctrine of endless wo cannot be from God, or have any authority in his Holy Book.