

# If the punishment of sin is eternal why did not Christ suffer eternally?

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THIS question is often asked, and I believe that the Word furnishes the answer distinctly enough. If it were merely the cavilling of a contentious mind it would not be worth replying to; but true enquirers are often puzzled to answer it.

Manifestly the answer should be sufficient, if there were no other, that the glory of His person give infinite value to His sufferings and death. This surely is the foundation of all, but I believe that a still further answer is supplied by the Word, and one that puts it beyond all cavil.

I first ask a question. What lies at the root of the eternity of sin's punishment? Men plead that the act of a moment, a trivial act of disobedience, if one may so speak, could hardly merit *eternal* wrath, and there is some appearance of justice in this. But this is not the true way to meet the question, though I believe no human mind or conscience can estimate the due of sin, and it may suffice for faith that "the judge of all the earth" will do right. For the creature to pretend to arraign God before his bar, as to any of His acts, shows where the creature is.

The true answer to the question, I believe, is this, that the *condition* of the punished is *unchanged*, and therefore the necessity of eternal doom.

I find in Rev. xvi, 10, 11, when the angel pours out his vial upon the seat of the beast, his kingdom is filled with darkness.

What then? "They gnawed their tongues with pain and blasphemed the God of heaven and *repented not* of their deeds." So again in verse 9, and in chapter ix. 20, 21.

Even *now*, those only are forgiven who *repent*. Those who repent not, are still in their sins, and those who pass into eternity so, are where repentance is neither found nor looked for, and where the carnal mind, which is enmity against God, manifests its true character in rebellion against the One who has righteously excluded it from restored creation, and Himself, though made to feel the weight of His authority and power.

There is a germ of truth, I believe, in a common plea used by some, who use only to abuse it. It is, that the object of punishment is correction, to vindicate the claims of righteousness, and to correct the moral state of the offender. I would add also the restraining effect produced on others and used doubtless by God in the government of the universe (see as to the Gentiles, Isa. lxvi. 23, 24, and as to Israel, Ezek. xlvii. 2). If that end is reached, the punishment would cease. Did but a sinner in hell turn upon himself in hearty self-judgment and repentance, I believe that God would deliver him from it. That such a thing is an impossibility I believe as fully. That which is in itself enmity can never become by itself ought else, and the solemn sentence is in God's eternity. "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still; and he that is filthy, let him be filthy still."

To some this may seem an unfounded statement, without sanction from the Word. To that then I must turn and seek to show that the principle is there, and is the key to the difficulty raised.

If we turn to Heb. v. 6-9, we find some remarkable words, that give us the ground upon which the Blessed Son of God was delivered from the anguish into which His soul was brought, by the hand of God for sin. "Who in the days of His flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications, with strong crying and tears, to Him that was able to save Him from (*lit.* out of) death, and was heard in that He feared (*marg.* for his piety,) &c."

This then, the Spirit of God assures us, was the ground of His deliverance. He gave Himself the spotless and willing victim, and bore our sins in His own body on the tree, and God in righteousness dealt with Him as if guilty of them all. If inflexible justice dealt the blow, it could not spare, even though it were

the Son who bore the punishment; and it was accompanied with the withdrawal of every moral support from circumstances and surroundings that the Blessed One was made to taste that wrath of God, which is now revealed from heaven, against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. But the stroke that fell upon that spotless victim, made manifest that there was nothing *in* Him though sin was *on* Him, but moral perfectness. His love to man how perfect still. "Father forgive them, they know not what they do." His piety towards God, "But Thou art holy, Thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel." The perfect justification of the One who brought Him into the dust of death, though conscious of His innocence of that which he was suffering for, was His piety. Measuring the distance sin had brought in between man and God, and estimating in His spirit what its due was, He owns the justice of the judgment He was bearing of sins not His own. How unlike man in every way, yet true and perfect man. No word of reproach for men, nor complaint against God, passed from His lips, or was found in His heart. "He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He opened not His mouth." Could justice, when its claims had been vindicated, in judging in the extreme the sin the Holy One stood identified with—could justice go on smiting still, where naught but moral perfectness was found? No, surely not, and heard "from the horns of the unicorns," where God had brought Him into the dust of death, for His piety He is saved out of death, "raised from the dead by the glory of the Father," for He had made that glory debtor thus. He sits at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens, with a name given to Him, which is above every name, and to which in worship and praise our hearts, who believe in Him, bow down. This, then, I believe is the answer to the difficulty. That it was a part of righteousness as much to own His claims, whose perfectness was thus manifested in the place of sin bearing, as it was to deal with Him in judgment, when He took, in love to us, that place. In Him no moral change was wrought by suffering. In us it is, and must be by grace, and therefore in the gospel, side by side with faith in Christ, is preached *repentance* toward God, that

right mind about our ways and doings, which godly sorrow works. 'Tis thus, we who believe reach, through grace, that moral level on which He ever stood, and to which redemption lifts us, through the gift of a new life and the remission of our sins with the indwelling of the Holy Ghost. Dead and risen with Him, set on new ground, in a relationship with God as endless as the life that makes it, and loved with a love from which nothing can ever separate us. His people are being educated by the discipline of the wilderness to have the mind of Christ, and feebly as we follow in His steps and reflect His character, we yet shall be with Him and like Him in a little, and that forever.

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