

# The Punishment of the Wicked Dreadful and Interminable.

by Edward Payson

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*The punishment of the wicked will be a dreadful and interminable experience, characterized by eternal suffering, a gnawing worm, and an unquenchable fire.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 9:17, Proverbs 24:20, Isaiah 66:24, Matthew 10:28, Matthew 25:46, Mark 9:44, 2 Thessalonians 1:9, Hebrews 10:31, Revelation 14:11

**Topics:** "Eternal Punishment", "Hell And Judgment"

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## Description

Edward Payson preaches a powerful sermon on the eternal punishment that awaits impenitent sinners in a future state, emphasizing the importance of preaching the whole truth of the Bible, including the doctrine of future punishment. He vividly describes the sufferings of the soul, including the gnawing worm of passions and desires, and the torment of conscience, as well as the unquenchable fire of God's presence and displeasure. Payson stresses the endless nature of these sufferings, urging both sinners and professing Christians to heed the warnings and turn to Christ for salvation.

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## Transcript

"Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched"

Mark 9:44

minister, my hearers, who would be faithful, must frequently compare his preaching with the scriptures, and inquire, not only whether he preached the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, but whether he gives to every particular doctrine and precept just that place in his sermons, which its importance deserves, or which is given to it in the word of God. On instituting such an inquiry, I find that it is long since I called your attention, particularly, to the punishment, which awaits impenitent sinners in a future state.

I have, indeed, frequently alluded to it, and mentioned it incidentally, as was unavoidable; but I have not, I believe, for some years, made it the subject of a discourse. In a word the doctrine of future punishment has not, of late, filled such a place in my sermons, as it fills in the Bible, as it fills in the discourses of our great teacher, Jesus Christ. I, therefore, feel bound in duty to call your attention to the subject, painful as it is. Some of you may, perhaps, say, or at least think, that it will do no good.

I know not that it will; for, so far as I can learn, nothing that I have said of late has done any good. Tell me what subject will do you good, and I will preach upon it. But some will, perhaps, go farther, and say, this doctrine has no tendency to do good it is altogether idle, to think of frightening men into religion. With such remarks I have nothing to do. It is my duty, not to decide what doctrines are likely to do good, but to preach such doctrines as I find in the scriptures; not to determine what means will prove effectual, but to use those means which God has appointed.

Of these means this doctrine is one: and whether it does good to any of you, or not, I know that it has done good to thousands; that thousands have been moved by fear to fly from the wrath to come. I know also, that if you believe it, it will do good to you and no truth can be of service, which is not believed. In fine, I dare not pretend to be either more wise, or more compassionate than our Savior; and he thought it consistent both with wisdom and with compassion, to utter the words of our text.

And he evidently uttered them with a view to alarm his hearers. He addressed himself to their fears, with a view to produce obedience to his commands. The command, which he thus enforced, was this; If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee; for, he adds, it is better for thee to enter into life with but one eye, than having two eyes, to be cast into hell, where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. There can, I think, be no doubt, that in these expressions our Savior alludes to the manner, in which the Jews disposed of the bodies of the dead.

Sometimes, as is the custom with us, they placed them in tombs, where they were, of course, consumed by worms. At others, they prepared a funeral pile, on which the body was placed in order to be consumed by fire. After the fire had been suffered to rage, till nothing remained but cinders and ashes, they quenched the glowing mass, and carefully deposited it in an urn. If we suppose that our Savior alluded to these customs, his expressions may be thus paraphrased You have seen what is done with the body after death.

You have sometimes seen it consumed by worms, which, after they had devoured it, died for want of nourishment. And you have sometimes seen it consumed by a fire, which, after a while, was quenched: But there is another death, which is followed by consequences far more terrible, which affect not the body only, but the soul. Those who die this death, shall be preyed upon by worms, which will never die, and become the fuel of a fire, that will never be quenched. They will be forever dying forever suffering the pangs of the second death, but will never die, never cease to exist.

It will be as if the bodies, which you have seen entombed or burnt, could feel the worms, which devour, or the fires, which consume them. Such must have been the import of these expressions, if our Savior alluded, as we have every reason to believe he did, to the funeral ceremonies of the Jews. But whether he did, or not, allude to them, the import of his language is substantially the same. It is indeed figurative; but not, on that account, less full of meaning, or less terrible.

Let us then, with feelings similar to those which prompted him to utter this language, lift the veil of figurative expression, and contemplate the awful truths, which it partly discloses, and partly conceals. I. In dilating upon these truths, I shall say little of the corporeal sufferings, which await impenitent sinners beyond the grave. Such sufferings will certainly compose a part of their punishment; for we are assured that their bodies shall come forth to the resurrection of damnation; and our Savior's language respecting the rich man, who in hell lifted up his eyes, being in torments, more than intimates, that anguish of body was an ingredient in his wretchedness.

Indeed, as the body is the servant of the soul, and at once its tempter to many sins, and its instrument in committing them, there seems to be a manifest propriety, in making them companions in punishment. We shall only add, that as after the resurrection the bodies of the wicked will be immortal, they will be capable of enduring suffering, which in this world would cause instant death. But though we know little, because the scriptures say little, of the nature of their bodies, or of the miseries which await them, it is otherwise with respect to the sufferings of the soul.

To these sufferings the declarations of scripture seem principally to refer; and these declarations our knowledge of the soul, and of the causes which will hereafter operate to render it miserable, enable us, in some measure, to understand. Especially, will it assist us in understanding the first clause in our text--where their worm dieth not. This expression evidently intimates, that the soul will suffer miseries, analogous to those which would be inflicted on a living body, by a multitude of reptiles constantly preying upon it.

And it may be understood to intimate further, that as a dead body appears to produce the worms which consume it, so the soul, dead in trespasses and sins, really produces the causes of its own misery. What are those causes? or, in the language of our text, what is the gnawing worm, which is to prey upon the soul hereafter! I answer, 1. Its own passions and desires. That these are capable of preying upon the soul, and occasioning, even in this life, most acute suffering, those of you, whose passions are naturally strong, need not be informed.

And those of you, whose passions are less violent, whose tempers are comparatively mild, may be convinced of the same truth, by seeing the effects of passion upon others. Look, for instance, at a man who is habitually peevish, fretful, and discontented. Has he not gnawing worms already at his heart! I look at the envious man, whose cheek turns pale, and who feels a secret pang, when he hears a rival commended, or sees him successful. Is there no gnawing worm in his bosom! Look at the covetous man, who wears himself out in the pursuit of wealth, and who is daily harassed by craving desires, cares and anxieties.

Can any worm gnaw worse than these! Look at the votary of ambition, whose success depends on the favor of the great, or of the multitude; who pants to rise, but is kept down by a rival, or by adverse circumstances; and whose mind is full of contrivances, jealousies, and rival-ships. Is there no corroding tooth at work in his breast? Look at the proud man, whose blood boils at every real or fancied neglect; at the passionate or revengeful man, who has always some quarrel upon his hands; at the drunkard, whose passions are inflamed by intoxicating potions, and you will find fresh proofs of this truth.

It is true, indeed, that none of these passions make men completely wretched in this world, and the reasons why they do not, are obvious. In the first place, there are, in this world, many things, which are calculated to soothe, or, at least, to divert men's passions. Sometimes they meet with success, and this produces, at least, a transient calm. At another time, the objects, which excite their passions, are absent, and this allows them a little quietness. And there are so many things to be attended to, that men have not always leisure to indulge their passions, or attend to the uneasiness which they produce.

Above all, they are from their infancy under the operation of causes, which tend to restrain their passions, and weaken, or at least confine, their rage. Besides, every man must sleep, at intervals, and while he sleeps his passions are at rest. But suppose all these things to be removed, suppose a man to be deprived of sleep, and chained down with nothing to do, but to feel his passions rage continually; suppose

him to meet with no success, nothing to soothe his ruffled feelings; suppose the objects, which excite his strongest passions, to be constantly before him; and, finally, suppose all outward and inward restraints to be taken off.

Would not such a man be, even in this life, inconceivably wretched? And yet even his wretchedness would be nothing, compared with that, which the sinner's passions and desires will occasion him in a future state. There his passions, which are now in their infancy, will start up into giant strength; there, all outward and inward restraints will be taken off; there he will have nothing to divert his attention, nothing to assist him in forgetting even for a moment, his tormenting feelings; there every object, which he ever desired, will be removed from him forever, while the desire will remain in equal, in vastly increased force; there he will be surrounded with malicious, cruel, raging companions, who will continually blow up his passions to the highest pitch of fury.

There not even the respite, which sleep now affords, will be found. Nor is this all. Nothing inflames the passions of men more than suffering. Even men, who are at other times good tempered, often become impatient, discontented, and even angry, when harassed by severe pain, long sickness, or repeated disappointments. How terribly, then, will the passions of sinners be enraged by the exquisite, hopeless sufferings of a future state! How will they curse themselves, and all around them, and as the scriptures declare, blaspheme God because of their plagues.

Against him and against all good beings, they will feel the most furious, implacable hostility; for they will be entirely under the dominion of that carnal mind, which is enmity against Jehovah. In addition, the scriptures teach us, that they will see, though afar off, and with an impassable gulf between them, the happiness of the righteous; and this sight will occasion envy, compared with which, all the envious feelings ever entertained on earth are nothing. Every sinner too will find in the regions of despair some, whom his arguments, his solicitations, or at least his example, helped to bring there; and they will overwhelm him, and enrage his passions, with the bitterest reproaches.

Nor will sinners there retain the least shadow of those natural affections, or amiable disposition; which some of them possess here; for our Savior declares, that from him, that hath not, shall be taken away even that which he seemeth to have. Now consider all these things, and say, who can describe, or conceive of, the misery which sinners will suffer from their own gnawing passions, or of the blasphemies, the execrations, the wild uproar, the raging madness, which will be witnessed, when all the wicked, from all ages and parts of the world, are imprisoned together in the blackness of darkness, like ravenous lions in their dens.

To this God refers, when he says of sinners, They have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind; that is, they have indulged sinful passions in this life, and those passions, blown up, as from a wind to a whirlwind, shall be their future companions and tormentors. 2. The gnawing worm, of which our Savior speaks, includes the consciences of sinners. The sufferings inflicted by conscience will be even more painful, than those which are occasioned by the sinner's passions; for terrible as are the gnawings of passion, those of conscience are still more so.

Her scourge draws blood at every stroke. Even in this world she has drawn many, as she did Judas, to despair, madness, and suicide. But her loudest rebukes, her keenest reproaches here, are mere whispers, compared with the thundering voice, in which she will speak hereafter. Here she speaks only at intervals. There she will speak without intermission. Here the sinner has various ways of stifling her reproaches, or

diverting his attention from them. He may rush into scenes of business or amusement; he may silence her with sophistical arguments and excuses, or with promises of future amendment; and, when all other means fail, he may drown her for a season in the intoxicating bowl, as too many, alas, madly do.

But there, he will have no means of silencing, or escaping from her reproaches, for a moment. Here she knows comparatively little of God, of duty, or of sin; and therefore, often suffers the sinner to escape, when she ought to scourge him. But there she will see every thing in the clear light of eternity, and in consequence, instead of a whip of small cords, will chastise the sinner as with a scourge of scorpions. There the sinner will clearly see what a God he has offended, what a Savior he has neglected, what a heaven he has lost, and into what a hell he has plunged himself.

All the sins which he has committed, with all their aggravations and consequences; all the sabbaths he enjoyed, the sermons which he heard, the warnings and invitations which he slighted, the opportunities which he misimproved, the serious impressions which he banished, will be set in order before him and overwhelm him with mountains of conscious guilt. And O, the keen unutterable pangs of remorse, the bitter self-reproaches, the unavailing regrets, the fruitless wishes, that he had pursued a different course, which will be thus excited in his breast!

The word remorse, is derived from a Latin word, which signifies, to gnaw again, or to gnaw repeatedly; and surely, no term can more properly describe the sufferings which are inflicted by an accusing conscience. Well then may such a conscience, when its now sleeping energies shall be awakened by the light of eternity, be compared to a gnawing worm. The heathen made use of a similar figure to describe it. They represented a wicked man as chained to a rock in hell, where an immortal vulture constantly preyed upon his vitals, which grew again as fast as they were devoured.

Nor is this representation at all too strong. Even in this world, where conscience is comparatively weak, I have often seen the bed, and the whole chamber of the sick man, shake under the almost convulsive agonies, which her lash inflicted. I have been told by persons, suffering under most painful diseases, that their bodily sufferings were nothing to the anguish of mind which they endured. I have seen a man of robust constitution, vigorous health, strong mind, and liberal education, tremble, like an aspen leaf, and scarcely able to sustain himself, under the pressure of conscious guilt, and pungent remorse.

A man in similar circumstances has been known to rise in winter, at midnight, and run for miles, with naked feet over the rough and frozen ground, in order that the bodily pain, thus occasioned, might, if possible, divert his attention, for a time, from the far more intolerable anguish of his mind. And a dying infidel has been known to exclaim, Surely there is a God, for nothing less than omnipotence could inflict the pangs which I now feel! What then must be the pangs inflicted by a gnawing conscience in eternity?

II. Our Savior speaks not only of a gnawing worm, but of an unquenchable fire. What reference this may have to the corporeal sufferings of the wicked, I shall not pretend to decide; but it appears evident, from other passages, that so far as the soul is concerned it refers to a keen and constant sense of God's presence and righteous displeasure. He says of himself, I am a consuming fire; and a fire is kindled in mine anger, which shall burn even to the lowest hell. These expressions evidently intimate, that a view of his perfections, and constant presence, combined with a sense of his displeasure, will affect the soul, as fire does the body, withering its strength, and drying up its spirits.

Some of you have formerly known a little of this; and you know, or, at least, will easily conceive, that no fire can torture the body more keenly, than a sense of God's displeasure does the soul. But to those of

you, who know nothing of this experimentally, it will be more difficult to convey any clear apprehension of this subject. The following supposition may perhaps assist in doing it. Suppose that when Washington was the commander of our armies, you had been a soldier under him, and had been detected in a plot to betray your country.

Suppose yourself to be brought before him, surrounded by the whole army, and compelled by some means to fix your eyes steadily, several hours, on his, --encountering, during the whole time, his stern, indignant, and withering glances. Would you not soon have found your situation intolerably painful? Would not his glance seem to thrill through your soul, and almost scorch it like fire, or blast it like lightning? What then must it be to see yourselves surrounded by a just and holy God, to meet his heart-searching, heart-withering eye, wherever you turn, fixed full upon you; to see the Author of your being, the Sovereign of the universe, the great, the glorious, the majestic, the omnipotent, the infinite Jehovah, regarding you with severe displeasure; to see his anger burning against you like fire!

O, this will be indeed a fire to the soul! A fire which will be felt in all its faculties, and fill them to the brim with anguish, --anguish, as much greater than any which could be occasioned by material fire, as the Creator is superior to his creatures. It is then, O, it is a fearful thing, to fall into the hands of the living God, that God, who is a consuming fire to the workers of iniquity III. We learn from the passage before us, that these sufferings will be endless. Their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.

And three times successively, our Savior declares, in the context, that the fire shall never be quenched. In the original language of the New Testament, the language which our Savior used, there are no expressions which more fully and unequivocally signify eternity, or endless duration, than those which are here employed. In another passage, the very same expressions are applied to the punishment of the wicked, which are used to describe the duration of God's existence. He liveth, we are told, forever and ever; and we are assured, that the wicked shall be tormented forever and ever.

If any further proof of this truth is wanting, it may be found in the nature of the punishment itself. We have seen that the gnawing worm, of which our Savior speaks, is the passions and consciences of sinners. Now these belong to the soul; they are as it were a part of it, they are some of its essential faculties. Of course, they must live as long as the soul lives; and as the soul is immortal, they must be immortal. We have also seen, that the fire, which will scorch the souls of the wicked, is a sense of God's presence and anger.

Now as he lives forever, and is unchangeably the same, he must forever be displeased with sinners, and be constantly present with them. In other words, the fire of his anger must burn forever. It is a fire, which cannot be quenched, unless God should change or cease to exist. It is this, which constitutes the most terrible ingredient of that cup, which impenitent sinners must drink. Dreadful as will be their sufferings, they would be comparatively light, were there any hope of their termination.

But of this there will be no hope. Every thing will conspire to force upon the sinner's mind, a full conviction, that his existence and his sufferings must continue forever; that they will be without mitigation and without end. And this conviction will above all things, whither his courage, and his strength. It will banish all thought of summoning up patience and fortitude to endure his wretchedness, and cause him to sink down under it in the faintness of despair. My hearers, if any of you think I exaggerate, or color too highly, listen to the plain, unadulterated language of God himself.

The wicked shall be turned into hell, even all that forget God. They that know not God and obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the

Lord, and from the glory of his power. In the hand of Jehovah is a cup, and the wine is red, and he poureth out the same. But the dregs thereof, all the wicked of the earth shall wring them out, and drink them. They shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and shall be tormented with fire, in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb; and the smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever.

Will any one, on hearing these passages, reply, My feelings revolt at such statements; I will not, cannot believe them? Then you must reject the Bible; for it is full of such statements, and every fact, every doctrine, confirms them. The incarnation of the Son of God, the tears which he shed for sinners, the blood which he poured out for sinners, the joy which angels feel when one sinner repents, and the unutterable anxiety which inspired men felt for the conversion of sinners, --all conspire to prove, that the fate of those, who die without repentance, without conversion, must be inconceivably dreadful.

Will you then say, such a punishment cannot be just? It is impossible that I should deserve it? But remember that you know nothing of your sins, or of what sin deserves. Were you properly acquainted with your own sinfulness, you would feel convinced, that it is just. All true penitents feel and acknowledge that it would have been perfectly just to inflict this punishment upon them. Were not you impenitent, you would feel the same. Besides, this punishment, dreadful as it is, is nothing more than the natural, necessary consequence of persisting in sin.

The corroding passions, the remorse of conscience, and the displeasure of God, which will constitute the misery of sinners, are all the results of sin. Every sinner has the seeds of hell already sown in his breast. The sparks, which are to kindle the flames of hell, are already glowing within him. Christ now offers to extinguish these sparks. He shed his blood to quench them. He offers to pour out his Spirit, as water, to quench them. But sinners will not accept his offer. They rather fan the sparks, and add fuel to the fire.

How then can they justly complain, when the fire shall break out into an unquenchable conflagration, and burn forever! As well might a man, who should put vipers into his bosom, complain of God, because they stung him. As well might a man, who has kindled a fire and thrown himself into it, complain of God, because the flames scorched him. But I can spend no more time in answering objections, or in defending the justice of God, against the complaints of his creatures. I cannot stand here coolly arguing and reasoning, while I see the pit of destruction, as it were, open before me, and more than half my hearers apparently rushing into it.

I feel impelled rather to fly, and throw myself before you in the fatal Path, to grasp your hands, to cling to your feet, to make even convulsive efforts to arrest your progress, and pluck you as brands out of the burning. My careless hearers, my people, my flock, death, perdition, the never dying worm, the unquenchable fire, are before you! Your path leads directly into them. Will you not then hear your friend, your shepherd? Will you not stop, and listen at least for a moment?

Will you, O, will you refuse to believe that there is a hell, till you find yourselves in the midst of it? O, be convinced, I conjure you, be convinced by some less fatal proof than this. Yet how can I convince you? How can I stop you? My arm is powerless; yet I cannot let you go. I could shed tears of blood over you, would it avail. Gladly, most gladly, would I die here on the spot! without leaving this sacred desk, could my death be the means of turning you from this fatal course.

But what folly is this! to talk of laying down my worthless life to save you. Why, my friends, the Son of God died to save you, --died in agonies, --died on the cross; and surely, that doom cannot but be terrible, to

open a way of escape from which he did all this. And it is dreadful. The abyss, into which you are falling, is as deep, as the heaven from which he descended, is high. And will you then rush into it, while he stands ready to save you? Shall he as it respects you, die in vain?

Will you receive the grace of God in vain? Shall those eyes, which now see the light of the Sabbath, glare and wither in eternal burning? Shall those souls, which might be filled with the happiness of heaven, writhe and agonize forever, under the gnawings of the immortal worm? Shall I, must I hereafter see some who are dear to me, for whom I have labored and prayed and wept, weltering in the billows of despair, and learning, by experience, how far the description comes short of the terrible reality?

But I cannot proceed. The thought unmans me. I can only point to the cross of Christ, and say, There is salvation, there is blood, which, if applied, will quench the fires that are already kindling in your breasts. There is deliverance from the wrath which is to come. I cannot, must not, however, conclude, without addressing a word, my professing friends, to you. And I hope you will bear with me, if in view of such a subject as this, I address you with apparent severity. An apostle teaches ministers, that they must sometimes rebuke professing Christians sharply; but I trust my sharpness will be the sharpness of love; and I know that I shall say nothing to you, half so severe as the reproaches which I have directed against myself, while preparing this discourse.

We all deserve perdition, a thousand times, for our stupid insensibility to the situation of those, who are perishing around us. We profess to believe the word of God; but can you all prove that you believe it? Do you all act, as if you believed it? What, believe that many of your acquaintances, your children, are in danger of the fate, which has now been described! Dare you go to God, and say, Lord, I believe thy word, I believe that all thy threatenings will be fulfilled, and then turn away, and coolly pursue your worldly business, without uttering one agonizing cry for those, who are exposed to these threatenings?

Dare you go and claim relationship to Christ, and profess to have his Spirit, without which you are none of his, and then make no effort, or only a few faint efforts, to save those, for whom he shed not tears only, but blood? O, if you can do this, where are the bowels, I will not say of a Christian, but a man? Go, I may say to such, go, inconsistent, cruel, hard-hearted professors; go, slumber over the ruin of immortal souls; wrap yourself up in your selfish temporal interests, and say, I have no time to spare for rescuing others from everlasting burnings.

Go, wear out your life in acquiring property for your children, and leave their souls to perish in the fire that never shall be quenched. Go, adorn their bodies, and banish from them, if possible, the seeds of disease; but leave in their bosoms that immortal worm, which will gnaw them forever. And when God asks, where is thy child? thy brother? thy friend? reply, with impious Cain, I know not, I care not: am I his keeper? But I cannot proceed further in this strain. I would rather beseech, and melt, and win you by tenderness.

Say, then, Christian, dost thou believe that Christ died to save thee from the misery, which has been imperfectly described? Dost thou believe, that if he had not loved thee and given himself for thee, the gnawing worm and the unquenchable fire would have been thy portion forever? O then, where is thy gratitude, thy love? Where are the returns, which he has a right to expect? Hast thou already made him a sufficient return for such inestimable benefits? Has he not reason to say, at least to some of you, Did I die for thee; redeem thee from sin, and death, and hell, that thou mightest crucify me afresh, by thy unkindness and unbelief?



Did I watch and pray whole nights, that thou mightest neglect watchfulness and prayer? Did I purchase for thee divine grace, precious promises, and strong consolation, that thou mightest make light of them, or turn them into wantonness? And do I prolong thy forfeited life, that thou mayest live carelessly, unprofitably, or like the world around thee? No, I redeemed thee, that thou mightest be mine, wholly mine. I purchased for thee grace, that thou mightest grow. And I preserve thy life, that thou mayest live, not to thyself but to him who died for thee.

I have revealed the knowledge of thy Maker, and taught thee the way of redemption, that thou mightest adorn the doctrine of God thy Savior in all things. And wilt thou frustrate these purposes by thy sloth and negligence? Thou wilt do it, then, to thine own eternal injury; for the fearful and the unbelieving shall have their part, with the abominable, in the lake, which burneth with fire, that never shall be quenched.

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