

Christian Messenger.

A RELIGIOUS AND GENERAL FAMILY NEWSPAPER.

"Not slothful in business: fervent in spirit."

NEW SERIES.
Vol. XV. No. 47.

Halifax, Nova Scotia, Wednesday, November 23, 1870.

WHOLE SERIES
Vol. XXXIV. No. 47.

Religious.

[We are glad to know that these excellent letters by Rev. Dr. Angus have been very acceptable to our readers. They are written in a style so well suited to christian readers generally, and are divested of much that is commonly found in such discussions, which is intended for, and adapted to only the theologian and the scholar.

We have preferred to give them without abbreviation, from the last revision of their author, rather than destroy their completeness by omitting portions for the purpose of bringing each one into the compass of one issue. To any of our readers who have not obtained a clear view of the subject from reading them, we recommend a perusal of the whole consecutively, and believe that in so doing their appreciation of the glorious gospel of the blessed God, will become deeper and broader, and their love of God and his holy law will be largely increased.—Ed. C. M.]

THE FUTURE STATE OF THE WICKED.

LETTER III.—ALLEVIATIONS.

THE PUNISHMENT OF SIN ONLY PART OF THE TRUTH—DIVINE LOVE AS CLEARLY REVEALED—GOD'S PUNISHMENTS ALWAYS QUESTIONED—WHAT SIN IS, AND HOW GOD REGARDS IT—ARE POPULAR VIEWS OF HELL ACCURATE?—MORE SAID THAN ANY OF US KNOW—WHAT OF OTHER ALLEVIATIONS—UNIVERSALISM—"ANOTHER CHANCE"—ANNIHILATION OF ALL SIN?—DIFFICULTIES IN SUCH ALLEVIATIONS WHEN COMPARED WITH SCRIPTURE.

1. It is a saying of Dr. Arnold's that the three chapters in Romans on election (ix.—xi.) should never be read apart. The ninth read by itself is a partial truth, and gives a very erroneous impression of God's plans. The three read together justify the outburst with which the last closes, "Of Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things; and to Him be glory for ever."

A discussion on future punishment, apart from other truths, labors under the same disadvantage. It describes God's "strange work." It forms the dark shadow of the picture of his dealings—a picture that is rich in light and in color, only when this question is discussed apart they are concealed.

It is some alleviation of the mystery of future punishment then that it is a partial truth. It covers only a portion of the canvas. There are others that cover and brighten the rest. It is a revelation of the Divine holiness, and illustrates the evil of sin. There are also revelations of the Divine love that illustrate the freeness and superabounding of grace. The whole truth honors the Divine philanthropy, as well as the Divine wrath. Both are set forth by our Lord, and both are held by most Christians. The Gospel is supremely a message of mercy; and it becomes a message of wrath only if men will not obey it and believe.

It may be true that when we take in the whole world, and remember the state of nations that have never heard of Christ, the revelation of love is dim and mixed. Yet even in their case God has not left himself without witness; nor need we scruple to say that if men are finally punished it will not be because they have sinned, but because they have persisted in sin against such light as they have; not because they have failed even to desire it.

If any are unable to accept this last statement, it is still true that punishment is only part of God's ways, and that underlying it all there is a heart of infinite tenderness and pity which would have all to be saved. We may fail to reconcile the existence of sin with this fact to our own satisfaction, but the fact itself we must strenuously maintain; and herein is some relief.

2. This mystery of future punishment is aggravated by the doubts of those whom it is to influence. Men seem to think it intrinsically improbable. And how can we believe what has been questioned in every age? But these doubts are rather confirmations of the truth—alleviations of the mystery. There have always been men

who questioned or denied the threatenings of God's Word, ever thinking that they should escape, or abusing the riches of His forbearance to strengthen the hope that He would not punish. The first lie told on earth came in the form of a suggested doubt of God's goodness: "Hath God said, Ye shall not eat of any of the trees of the garden?" and the second in the form of a denial of his threatening: "Ye shall not surely die." For a hundred and twenty years, Noah, "the preacher of righteousness," warned the antediluvians of the coming flood. They watched the building of the Ark; they probably helped to build it. Yet they were moved by no fear; they deemed it a very needless precaution; and they perished. Lot had to be "hastened" out of Sodom. His message to his sons-in-law, seemed as the "words of one who was joking," and through unbelief they perished. The captivity and the final overthrow of Jerusalem, though both foretold again and again, came upon men "unawares." They were "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage," till God swept them all away. The Apostle Peter confirms these conclusions, and tells us that the infidelity of the last days will show itself chiefly on this question. Men will deny the reality of the Judgment, among other reasons, because in the constancy of the great laws of Nature they think they see a proof that it will never come. "All things continue as they were," say they, "since the beginning of the Creation." The Bible is largely a history of God's judgments on men and nations, and yet men still say—"dreams," "fanatic fears"—"God is too good to inflict them." No new thing, at all events, has happened to us. The mystery of wide-spread unbelief in relation to this solemn theme is only what prophets and righteous men have had to struggle against in every age!

These past judgments alleviate other difficulties besides those created by the unbelief of men. How shocking it must have seemed to our first parents had they foreseen all the consequences of their sin—that one sin—what misery, what sins it was to entail. To have been told of them would have excited the profoundest wonder. To have believed in what was told them would have made Paradise itself intolerable.

How little it is men know, how easily they sin, how fearful and mysterious under a government of Almighty power and love their transgressing and the penalties that follow! The prophet's scroll, written within and without, "with mourning and lamentation and woe"—sin tingeing and staining all—is the history of our race; and when we attempt to reconcile it with Divine love and holiness we can only bow before the mystery, and, through our faith, believe it right. The miseries and sins of men which have lasted for ages, and will last on any suppositions for ages to come, are as little realisable by the imagination, would be as oppressive, all things considered, if they were realized, and are well-nigh as hard to reconcile by mere reason with the Divine goodness, as eternal punishment itself! And yet, alas! they are none the less true.

In short, neither general disbelief nor profound mystery in the facts is any proof against the reality of the facts themselves. Here is some relief!

3. It would be a further alleviation if we were to ascertain what the sin is against which everlasting punishment is denounced, and with what feeling God regards it.

I cannot say that it is only the rejection of the Gospel though in most of the passages which describe everlasting punishment that is the sin condemned. There are expressions no less strong against the fearful immorality in which ungodliness ends. I can say, however that in most passages it is not a single sin that ends in ruin, but a settled habit. Every precept of the law and every principle of the Gospel has been violated by men who are now safe with God. The tenses and the words of Scripture all imply, when fairly interpreted, that it is not the single act that destroys men, but the character; not the evil-doing of a day, but the drift of a life. Some-

times this truth is concealed by our version as when it is said, "If we sin willfully," when the meaning is "if we go on in sin;" sometimes by a misunderstanding of the meaning, as when men conclude that a word against the Holy Ghost will ruin them. I cannot now discuss the question; I only repeat the conviction that everlasting punishment is the result only of habits of sin, of ungodliness, or of disbelief. Men may be saved by acts—true penitence and faith, for example, in a dying hour. Men are destroyed only by character, by the sin or the impenitence that is habitual.

Not that single sins are other than fearful evils. Under law, and in the case of a holy being a single sin is a fall—a fall that may bring death, and in its issues endless woe. Even under a dispensation of grace a single sin is ruin if the sinner appeal to law. They are single sins, moreover, that form character, and that reveal it. Nor can any finite mind tell the fearful consequences a single sin may produce. All this, however, leaves untouched my previous statement.

And how does God regard these sins and the sinful nature from which they spring? The strongest language of Scripture is reserved to describe His feeling in relation to them, His purpose to punish them. Is it not significant that as men grow in holiness they grow in their appreciation of the evil of them, while their sense of personal sinfulness deepens with their growth? "I cannot think that God will punish my fellows eternally," said one of the most intelligent and holy defenders of annihilation, "though I feel that eternal punishment is what my sins have deserved." The case is that the best amongst us fails to feel what sin is. Everything in us and everything around us lessens our sense of its evil. We frame excuses for men, and often speak of sin in slighting terms—acts and states alike. It seems so natural. But this tendency of ours Scripture never sanctions. It shows indeed the utmost tenderness to the errors of the man who is on the whole struggling after holiness; but men who sin "with a will," who "take pleasure in iniquity," who yield to coward fears, to disbelief and gross sin, are spoken of by our Lord and by His apostles in language that ought to ring in the ears of us all. Here is some relief.

How amazing the following seems: "Evil that is conquered, suffering that is probationary, . . . are exemplified throughout the whole system of nature. . . . It is when probation ends the difficulty begins. It is when the agony leads to no amendment, when suffering plunges the soul deeper to all eternity, that the difficulty becomes terrible. . . . Beyond question no analogy tending to remove the difficulty of believing this can be discovered within the whole universe as known to man. . . . An eternity of pause—of aimless, endless pain; . . . to this the realm of nature has absolutely no analogue."

What has no analogue—"the eternity of" pain? Nobody ever said it had, or can have, in time. Or is it the "aimless pain"? Who said pain was aimless? The very case supposed is that endless pain has the same aim as all penal suffering now—the maintenance of holiness, and the general interest of the universe; or is it "the agony that leads to no amendment—i.e., in the sufferer"? Alas! analogues are innumerable. Has the writer forgotten his *In Memoriam*, or his Butler, or the history of thousands and millions who have only suffered without any known good to themselves, even when their example has suggested lessons to the race? or does he suppose that the devil and evil spirits are "progressing" in penitence?

It is, in fact, as easy to conceive of circumstances that make eternal punishment subservient to the interests of the universe as to conceive of circumstances that justify the existence of sin, or the misery of brutes. "Overruled for good," "unavoidable," "conducive, on the whole, to the holiness and happiness of the vast universe of God," and other phrases, are conceivably applicable to them all.

4. Perhaps there would be alleviation of

the mystery if we had juster conceptions of what hell is, and of what the state of the lost involves. Popular conceptions are taken largely from the imagery of Scripture, and from lurid sketches drawn by Dante and the poets. Hence men have come to speak of the lost as in flames, as desiring to reform, but kept in torment by a dread necessity against their better purposes, and for the sins of a life long since ended,—as writhing under pains which it is supposed must have worked repentance ages ago.

What if much of this teaching is a mistake! What if the case be that our life is a probation, that if our nature is to be healed at all it must be healed on this side of the judgment, and that if not healed we take it with us—its passions and habits strengthened—into our future life, and our last state becomes worse,—not only more miserable but morally worse—than the first?

What if the sin which makes hell hereafter is still loved, even as the sin which makes hell now; passion and rebelliousness being preferred in the other life, with all their consequences, even as they are preferred in this? What if the sinner suffer there only what he chooses to suffer? What if men live for ever, smitten with the leprosy of hatred to a God of blended holiness and love, and with intensest selfishness—their condition at once their choice and their penalty. The worm that never dies may be the self-accusation of their own hearts, and the fire that is never quenched may be the burning eagerness with which they cherish perverse desires, an eagerness that blights and blasts everything holy. There are no doubt positive punishments as there are positive rewards, but the descriptions of each are largely figurative—"pearly gates," "golden streets," "flaming fire," "ascending smoke." Hell and heaven, however, are characters as well as places. Nor must we confound the imagery with the truths it represents. Continued punishment means continued sin; continued sin implies volition, and excludes penitence. Here again there is some relief.

5. It is some alleviation that many more may be saved through God's grace than the most large-hearted among us have supposed.

Within the last two hundred and fifty years there have been creeds, or interpretations of creeds, that doomed even infants dying in infancy to eternal conscious punishment. There are creeds now that consign all the heathen and all Christendom, with few exceptions, to the same destiny. There are also reasoners who press these views, that men may be driven to seek relief, such as it is, in the belief of annihilation or of universal restoration.

But it becomes us to beware of such language. All that live and die rejecting the Gospel, perish—that we know. All that live and die loving and practising sin, knowing the right and having their hearts set in them to do the wrong, perish—that we know. Scripture is no respecter of persons. If our literary men, our statesmen—the men whom we all delight to honour—live and die loving and rejecting Christ, we can have no hope for them, as neither can we hope, under like circumstances, for ourselves. All this we know. But how many there are in these classes we do not know, while there are many intimations in Scripture which lead us to believe that many more are saved than any of us have hoped. Elijah thought himself alone among his countrymen—the solitary servant of the true God; while yet Jehoyah had reserved 7,000 men who had never bowed the knee to Baal; nor are we to conclude that none who had bowed the knee ever repented. In the Gospels we read of twelve disciples and of seventy, and are told that at the great gathering of Pentecost the number of the names was but a hundred and twenty. Many years later we read quite incidentally of five hundred brethren in Galilee at once, while intimations in different Gospels lead us to believe that there were many more true disciples scattered throughout Samaria and Judaea. In our own age there may be many more