

**WHEELER  
JOSEPH  
MAZZINI**

THE CHRISTIAN  
DOCTRINE OF HELL

Joseph Wheeler

**The Christian Doctrine of Hell**

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# Содержание

THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF HELL	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	7

# J. M. Wheeler

## The Christian Doctrine of Hell

### THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF HELL

I WOULD not willingly quit this world without having said my say upon the most terrible of all its superstitions, the doctrine of eternal torments—which Archdeacon Farrar describes as the "hideous incubus of atrocious conceptions"—and which, in my own experience, is the cause of appalling apprehensions and even insanity in the minds of the sensitive and weak-minded.

If there is a hell, that is the most important fact in the universe. Compared with an eternity of torment, all that this little life has to offer is but as nothing. If there is no hell, then, it seems to me, the faith in Jesus is vain, for no such salvation as that offered by orthodox Christianity is necessary. Not only is the doctrine of eternal torments clearly taught in Scripture, but it is, as I shall show, historically bound up with the creed of Christendom.

It may be said, why attack a superstition confessedly falling into decay? Satan, that once excellent scapegoat for all misdeeds, is superannuated. Hell is never mentioned to ears polite. Since Freethought came into the world its temperature has considerably decreased. The brimstone business threatens to become obsolete. It is none the less the corner-stone of the whole system, and when it finally collapses it will bring down other doctrines with it. The Salvationist, no less than the Jesuit, knows its power. As the old beadle said, "A kirk without a hell is'na worth a damn."

Upon the healthy-minded the doctrine of eternal torments will soon have no more effect than water upon a duck's back. But mental health and strength are not the inheritance of all. If the dogma was not taught until minds were mature enough to examine it, it might safely be left; but while it is continually taught to infancy, to seek to eradicate it is the duty of those who regard it as a pernicious error. To me it appears that the best way to do this is to show what the doctrine has actually been in the days when Christianity was unquestioned. Christians are becoming ashamed of their hell—which they rarely realise as possibly the fate of themselves or their friends; that way madness lies. They cannot get rid of the definite statements in the New Testament, but they avoid dwelling on them, or attempt to construe them figuratively. Hell was hot enough when religion was powerful. As it declines it is discovered that hell is not so terrible after all.

Modern exegesis, striving to explain hell away, only steps in when conscience and freethought have declared against it. It is taught in the plainest terms. Take but the passage, Matt. xxv. 46, "These shall go away into *everlasting* punishment, but the righteous into life *eternal*." It is said everlasting does not mean lasting for ever, and in some cases this might be granted, but surely it is a different matter when eternal punishment is, without any limitation, directly compared with eternal life, and the same word is applied to both. Again, exactly the same expression which is used to signify the eternity of God, that of his being *for ever and ever*, as in Rev. iv. 9, v. 14, x. 6, and xv. 7, is used of the torments of those in hell in Rev. xiv. 11.

In the explanation of the parable of the tares, Jesus tells his prosaic disciples: "The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world" (Matt. xiii. 39-40). There we see the simile is used to illustrate hell; not hell used as a simile to illustrate something else. The early Christians undoubtedly believed in a literal Devil, angels, and end of the world, and with equal certainty in a literal hell and material fire. Yet we are now asked to believe that when Jesus spoke of hell, "where the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched" (Mark ix. 46), since there is *no* fire it cannot require quenching.

Jesus relates, in the most matter-of-fact way (Luke xvi.), that a certain rich man died, and "in hell," "being in torments," he lifted up his eyes and beheld Lazarus in Abraham's bosom. He cried for a drop of water to cool his tongue, "for I am tormented in this flame." The man had committed no other recorded offence than faring sumptuously, yet he was met with the stern response, "between us and you there is a great gulf fixed." He then asks that his brethren may be warned of his fate, and this, too, is denied. The voice of humanity cried from hell, and heaven answered with inhumanity. If this picture of heaven and hell is true, God and his saints are monsters of infamy. If false, what other "revealed" doctrine can be credited, since this is so devised for the benefit of those who trade in terrorism? If hell is a metaphor, of which there is no indication in the narrative, so also is heaven. Give up material fire and brimstone, you must resign the bodily resurrection, the visible coming of Christ, and the New Jerusalem. Allegorise hell, you make heaven unreal. A figurative Devil suggests a figment God.

The Revelation of St. John expressly speaks of the worshippers of the beast, or enemies of God, being "tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever" (xiv. 10-11). Nice enjoyment, this, for the elect. Fancy parents regarding the eternal anguish of their children! Converted wives looking on while their unbelieving husbands are tormented and "have no rest day nor night" in "the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone"! Picture it, think of it, Christian, and then offer praises to your God for having provided this place of eternal torture for some other than yourself.

Who go to hell? According to the Bible and the creeds the immense majority of mankind. "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matt. vii. 14). Many are called but few chosen; and there is no other name under heaven, save that of Jesus, whereby men can be saved. The proportion of those who lived before Christ must be, even according to Bible chronology, immensely larger than all who have lived since, and of these now, after eighteen centuries of the divine religion, not more than a third of the world's inhabitants are even nominal Christians. When we consider how few Christians are really believers, and how scarcely any of them attempt to carry out the precepts of their Master, it must be allowed that the population of hell is out of all proportion to that of heaven.

The doctrine of the church has been "He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved, and he that believeth not shall be damned." The idea of this text has probably done more harm to humanity than it has benefited from the rest of the gospel, for it has countenanced all the ill-will and persecution that has everywhere followed in the train of Christianity. I know it will be said that this passage, indeed the whole of the sixteenth of Mark from the ninth verse to the end, is wanting in some of the ancient manuscripts; but while the Authorised version is circulated as the word of God, it is properly cited. And indeed if this doctrine is discarded there is much else that must go with it.

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