

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 29

Halifax, 17 February 2008

Q. 29 What are the punishments of sin in the world to come?

A. The punishments of sin in the world to come are, everlasting separation from the comfortable presence of God, and most grievous torments in soul and body, without intermission, in hell-fire for ever.

Introduction:

The scriptures everywhere testify that God does not punish all sin in this life.

- We saw last week that every kind of trouble we have in this world is God's response to the apostasy of the human race in the Garden of Eden.
 - Whether we speak of inward afflictions, like the corruption of our nature that causes us to do evil, or the outward troubles of storms and sickness and poverty and war,
 - all of these troubles are God's response to human sin.
 - It's not that each one is a response to a specific sin, but rather that all are as the result of our turning against our Creator from the beginning.
 - Our holy Creator reveals something of His displeasure with our sin through all these things...
- But the Bible constantly testifies that there is much more to come.
 - The troubles we experience now are only a partial revelation of His holy anger against our sin.
 - He has appointed a day when He will fully judge the world...
 - This judgement will fall upon all who have not been pardoned through faith in Jesus Christ...
 - His displeasure will be so strong that it will involve them in torment without intermission forever and ever.

2 Thessalonians 1 is one of many places where the Bible speaks of the glorious day when the wicked will be judged and when their final state of suffering will be initiated.

- As we read this chapter, I want you to notice that it is presented as a revelation of the glory of God.
 - The Day of Judgement is the revelation of God's glory to us because it is not until that day that He will unveil what He is really like to us.
 - Until that day, He is holding back His wrath, keeping it hidden from us, until all His elect have been safely gathered into Christ...

- The wrath is there, but it is restrained until the appointed time.
- He hates our sin with wrath that is so strong and so glorious it can never be quenched,
 - but the fullness of that wrath will not be experienced by anyone until the appointed day.
 - Then we will see what God really thinks about sin.
 - Then we will see what He is really like.
 - Then we will see how glorious in holiness He truly is.
- Hear then, what God's holy and perfect word says in 2 Thess 1 about this day of judgement:
 - READ> 2 Thess 1:1-12.

I. I want you to see first of all the persons on whom the punishments of the world to come will fall...

- A. In the overall context of the chapter, Paul is talking about those who were persecuting the believers in Thessalonica.
1. The Thessalonians had suffered much at the hands of the Jews, right from the beginning...
 - As soon as Paul had preached the gospel there, they stirred up a mob in the city that brought the authorities to examine the situation...
 - Their aggression was so great, that those who believed had to secretly escort Paul out of the city...
 - He went to Berea, and as soon as these aggressive opponents of the gospel heard that he was there, they went in pursuit of him there,
 - once again causing the believers in Berea to escort him away to safety.
 - Imagine what it would be like to live in the city with these aggressive opponents of the gospel.
 - In 1 Thess 1, Paul commends the Thessalonians for how they glorified God in that they received the word of God with much affliction.
 - Receiving the word did not mean an easy life, but a hard life for them!
 2. In 2 Thess 1, Paul is encouraging the Thessalonian believers that the Lord is not indifferent about all the things they have endured at the hands of these enemies...
 - He assures them that God's judgement will indeed catch up to them at the end.
 - He is, in effect, encouraging them not to expect justice in this life, but to be confident that everything will be addressed in the world to come.

TRANS> That is the overall context of the passage...

- It is about the judgement that will fall on these persecutors...but...

B. The Apostle Paul says that it will fall on all those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- Look at verse 8
 - **2 Thes 1:8: in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.**
 - See how he generalises the ones on whom God's wrath will fall!
 - It is not just the persecutors, but those who fall under these two very general classifications...

1. By those who know not God, Paul includes even those who have never heard the gospel at all.

- They will bear judgement because they don't know God and they should know God.
- The reason they don't know Him is because they suppress the revelation of God given in nature...
 - I haven't time to develop this again, but I would refer you Psalm 19 and Romans 1 where it says there is no excuse for their idolatry.
 - I would also refer you to message I preached on Q. 2 a while back...

2. Secondly, he speaks of those who obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- The grammar indicates that these are not the same as those who do not know God.
 - These are the ones who have had direct exposure to God's revelation of the gospel, but have rejected it!
 - There was a gospel for them to obey, and they did not obey it.
 - We learn from Jesus that their punishment will be greater than those who never heard...
 - But both will be judged!

TRANS> So you must never get the idea that only those who are the devils of society will suffer eternal punishment—

- This teaches us the certain truth that only those who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved...
 - We have seen in previous lessons that our sin is such from our very birth that we must be redeemed by Jesus Christ or bear the curse of the living God.

II. And just look at what this punishment will entail, according to the scriptures.

- I say “according to the scriptures” because there are so many who deny what the Bible teaches about the punishment in the world to come...

A. First, it will involve a great loss—a deprivation!

1. This is likely what verse 9 is getting at when it says:
 - **2 Thess 1:9: These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,**
 - a. The word “from” is likely used in the sense of “away from”
 - In other words, one aspect of their punishment will be that they are cut off from God’s glorious presence.
 - b. The word ‘from’ (apo in Greek) could also be understood to mean that the punishment will come from the presence of the Lord...
 - in other words, as soon as those who are not sanctified are brought into the presence of God,
 - His judgement will fall on them because of the very glory of His presence as a consuming fire...
 - that as soon as God shows Himself to them, it will be to envelop them with wrath and torment because they are contrary to His nature.

TRANS> But whether or not it is the meaning of this particular verse that the wicked will be cut off from God’s presence or not,

2. This idea of being cut off from His comfortable presence is clearly the teaching of scripture elsewhere...
 - a. In many of Jesus’ parables and teachings, He describes the wicked as being cast into the place of outer darkness, away from the presence of the Lord.
 - One very striking passage to this effect is Matthew 8:11-12.
 - Listen to how it contrasts those who come into intimate fellowship with God in His kingdom with those who will be cast out...
 - **Matthew 8:11-12: “And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”**
 - b. We also have Jesus’ description of what He Himself will say to those who are hypocrites...
 - “depart from me, for I never knew you.”

3. What a huge loss this will be to be cast out forever from the presence of the Lord!
 - a. We can't possibly know how great a loss it will be until we see how great a gain it is to be brought into the glorious presence of God!
 - For our Lord Jesus, according to His prayer in John 17,
 - the hope of seeing His disciples brought into the glorious presence of God was the hope He seemed to cherish most of all...
 - He longed for them to see the glory He had with the Father from before the foundation of the world!
 - The beatific vision!
 - Beholding the love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
 - experiencing that love in their immediate presence!
 - All longings in the human heart will here be satisfied and filled to expanded capacity!
 - We shall see the glory of our Creator and live in undisturbed communion with Him and with our brothers and sisters!
 - b. Notice how Paul says in verse 10 that the Lord will come to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe!
 - You will miss out on this if you do not believe...
 - What a huge loss it will be—and that for all eternity!
 - Cut off from this blessed, satisfying communion of perfect love and delight!
 - May it not be so for any of you who hear my voice!

TRANS> But if you are hardened in your sin, you may say,

- “I can bear the loss of communion...I would find no pleasure in the presence of a holy God.”
- But see further that the punishment of those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel is not only a deprivation...

B. Secondly, I want you to see that the punishment of sin in the world to come involves torment in soul and body.

1. 2 Thess 1:8 uses the familiar figure of fire to describe the torments of Hell...
 - a. He says, “in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who know not God and obey not the gospel”
 - b. This language of fire is used by our Lord Jesus to describe Hell at least seven times in the gospel of Matthew alone...
 - He talks about the one who hates his brother being in danger of hell fire...

- and about the tree that does not bear fruit being cast into the fire
 - and about the tares being gathered and burned in the fire
 - and about many being cast into the furnace of fire where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth
 - and about it being better to lose a hand or a foot than to be cast into the everlasting fire.
2. It is plain to see from the language that is used that this is used to describe a place of indescribable torment...
- a. A fire of vengeance is a fire that causes pain and suffering...
- 1) Why else does Jesus describe it as that which causes weeping and gnashing of teeth, such as is done when one is in terrible anguish...
 - 2) And why does He say that it is better to go through life with an amputated hand or foot than to be cast into this fire, if it is not a fire of anguish?
- b. And that this anguish is one that afflicts both soul and body is made clear in Jesus' encouragement to His disciples that they have more reason to fear God than to fear man...
- **Mt 10:28** “**And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.**”
 - If there is no torment, but only loss, Jesus could not say this.

TRANS> Anyone who is honest with the scriptures can see that Hell is a place of dreadful suffering and torment—

- it is deliberately designed by the Lord to be a torture chamber for the Devil, and for all those who follow him...including all the impenitent sons of Adam.
- In Matthew 25:41, Jesus says to those who did not follow Him:
 - **Mt 25:41: “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels”**
- And this brings us to the third characteristic of God's eternal punishment as it is revealed in scripture...

C. That it is a place of lasting punishment—eternal punishment without intermission.

1. You can see that in our text, in verse 9.
 - Here, Hell is described as everlasting punishment.
- a. That is exactly what it means—
 - It is punishment that lasts forever.
 - It is a dreadful thing to think about enduring, but that is what it is.

- b. The word punishment here is often translated destruction...
 - It does not mean annihilation, but destruction in the sense of something that is no longer able to fulfill its proper function,
 - as when your happiness is destroyed or when your reputation is destroyed.
 - It doesn't mean that your reputation ceases to exist, but that it is ruined.
 - So a human being is eternally ruined from the happiness and dignity in which he was created as the image of God—
 - He is ruined forever without hope.
2. Sadly, it has become fashionable in this foppish age for many—even among those who claim to believe the Bible—to deny the reality of God's eternal judgement.
- a. They use high sounding arguments and go deep, deep, in the Greek to try to show that the words must mean something other than what they mean.
 - b. It is beyond the scope of this sermon for me to address all these arguments, but I will rather show you from the clear language of scripture that Hell is not temporal.
3. First, I want you to look with me at Jesus' words in Matthew 25 where He speaks at length about Hell...
- a. I just quoted from Matthew 25:41 a few minutes ago...
 - But let's look at what it says:
 - **Matt 25:41: Then He will also say to those on the left hand, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels."**
 - The word "everlasting" that is used here is *aiwniov*
 - It is the same word that is used in verse 46 where it is set in contrast with eternal life...
 - The translators have used two words here—everlasting and eternal—which mean the same thing to translate the one word *aiwniov* in the original.
 - But our Lord using the same word to describe the eternity of life that He uses to describe the eternity of punishment,
 - He makes it as clear as human language can make it that he is talking here about endless duration.

b. But as there are many who want to quarrel about this, I will have you look further at Revelation 20:10 where the unending torment of Hell is described:

1) It says:

- **Rev 20:10: “The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”**
- Now if someone wanted to tell you that Hell is a place of suffering which never ends and which lasts forever and ever,
 - I wonder if any plainer language than this could be used?
 - This verse says that they will be tormented day and night forever and ever...
 - That is so clearly not annihilation that it is hard to see how anyone could deny it.

2) But would you believe, I showed this to a denier of Hell once who countered that this is what happens to the Devil, but not to human beings!

- Now in the first place, this is a huge admission for this denier because the foundation of his objection to an eternal hell is that God is too sweet to punish His creatures forever...
 - Well guess what—Satan is one of God’s creatures!
- But what about his objection—is it possible that this could be a different hell for Satan than there is for human beings who follow him?
 - I will not deny that Hell will be more severe for Satan than for any human being.
 - Our Lord speaks of greater and lesser torment in Hell, but he never refers to any Hell but a Hell that is everlasting.
 - But more to the point, we have already seen from the lips of our Lord Jesus that the place where the wicked are cast is the very same place that the Lord prepared for the Devil and that He describes it as everlasting...
 - **Matt 25:41: Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’**
 - It is the place where there is torment night and day forever and ever.

TRANS> So you see then that according to the Holy Scriptures which cannot lie,

- the punishment of the world to come is a place of deprivation, torment, and torment that will never cease.
 - It is horrible to think that after a million years have expired, the end will be no closer for those who are cast into this fiery pit.
 - The world can mock and call it unjust, and hold us in contempt for preaching a religion of fire and brimstone...
 - but that will not change the fact that according to the word of God,
 - that is exactly the place that all those who know not God or who obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ will be cast.

III. But what about the justice of it?

- I said before that many use high sounding arguments...
 - there are perhaps, many more in our day that simply deny endless punishment because it just doesn't seem right to them.
 - In their minds, the word must mean something different and they don't even want to consider it.
- A. Well I would argue first of all that God's sending men to eternal perdition is perfectly just because God is the one who does it.
1. My friends, there is no such thing as justice apart from our Creator.
 - He is the reference point of all justice.
 - The only reason we even have a sense of justice is because He gave it to us.
 2. And furthermore, the Bible clearly teaches that as the judge of all the earth, He will do what is right.
 - The very reason God sends people to Hell is because He refuses to compromise His justice.
 - I mentioned to you recently that when Jesus was in Gethsemane, just before he went to the cross to atone for our sins,
 - He prayed, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me!"
 - It was not possible!
 - The only way God could be just and pardon our sins was by paying for those sins with the blood of His only Son!
 - It is a thought of extreme wickedness to say that God, if a loving God, should have saved all and not just some!
 - This wicked notion is a notion that denies the fact that God went far beyond what could ever be expected to save sinners!

- No one can complain if those who are not redeemed get what they deserve...
- No one could even have the least complaint if we all got what we deserved!
 - God's grace, you see, is real grace!
 - We really don't deserve it!
 - We really do fully deserve to go to Hell.

TRANS> Many will still object...

B. But I would point out to you that those who have committed a crime are not competent to decide what punishment they deserve!

1. That is the task of the judge who is set over them.
 - The perpetrator of the crime is obviously going to be very biased.
 - And we are all involved in Adam's transgression and have added to it many of our own transgressions...
 - We constantly come short of God's glory and are so familiar with our sin that we do not see the sinfulness of it.
2. But I want to say one thing that ought to help you to at least begin to see the justice of God's awful sentence...
 - a. Understand that the demerit of our sin is not measured so much by what we did (though treason is one of the highest offences even in our own courts),
 - but by who we sinned against...
 - Treason is bad enough if it is committed against an ordinary king—
 - It is even worse if it is committed against a wise and benevolent king...
 - but how much worse when it is the very throne of our gracious, loving, pure, holy, wise Creator that we tried to overthrow!
 - The infinite majesty of the One we sinned against makes our sin to be of infinite demerit...
 - That is why Hell is so severe and that is why the Son of God alone was able to atone for our sin...
 - A crime against infinite majesty justly draws an infinite penalty.
 - b. Think about it...

- If I cross the will of my dog, it is a very little thing—my dog would rather that I had stayed at home, but my dog has no lawful or proper authority over me...
 - It would be worse to cross the will of another human being, and still worse if that human being has legitimate authority over me...
 - but it is infinitely worse to cross the will of the One who has infinite authority over me...
 - the One who has all authority in heaven and earth...
 - And that is what we did when we sinned against God.
 - That is why our sin is worthy of infinite punishment...
 - A crime against infinite authority justly incurs an infinite penalty.

TRANS> And now having seen that Hell is an everlasting torment and that it is fully what we deserve,

IV. What can we learn from this doctrine?

- My brothers and sisters, I submit to you that there is much we can learn from the doctrine of Hell—much that is very important and very beneficial for our souls...
 - Do not shy away from this doctrine then, but consider well what there is for you to learn.
 - Let me show you three things
- A. First of all, the doctrine of eternal punishment teaches you about the heinousness of your sin—that it is far worse than you think it is.
 - This is beneficial because it humbles you before your God—and it causes you to fear, which is the beginning of wisdom.
 - Because God, thankfully, does not fully reveal Himself to us now—for it would mean that we would be swallowed up in His consuming fire...
 - We are able to receive the instruction about our sin so that we might seek out a remedy before it is too late.
 - Those who ignore the warnings of God’s word and what it says about us are fools...
 - We are all going to have to stand before God, and it will not go well for you unless you have repented and turned to Jesus Christ to take away your sins.
 - Oh let us all learn to flee to Him from the wrath to come—and to cling to Him and to never let Him go!

- B. Secondly, the doctrine of eternal punishment teaches you about the glory of the One you have sinned against...
1. In the doctrine of eternal punishment, we see how much our Creator hates sin...
 - And the reason He hates it so much is because He loves what is beautiful and good and just and pure...
 2. What's more, we see the glory of His majesty in that He is such a high and holy being—a being of infinite glory—that our sin demands, as we have seen, infinite punishment...
 - The day of judgement is the day when God will reveal His glory.
 - Let us worship Him now, not only for His mercy, but also for His wrath and judgement!
 - Let us sing scriptural praises to Him that glory not only in His grace, but also in His wrath.
- C. Thirdly, the doctrine of eternal punishment teaches you the extent to which Christ went in order to save you!
1. If your sin deserves eternal punishment, that means the Son of God bore that eternal punishment when He was cursed for you on the cross!
 - He satisfied the justice of God by His suffering in our place...
 - All our iniquities were laid on Him, and bore the full weight of their penalty.
 2. Understanding this fills every believer with gratitude that will last forever!
 - How could it be that when our crime was such as justly brought down God's eternal punishment...
 - and such as justly offended the Lord of heaven and earth who is not easy to offend, and such as made us obnoxious to Him—even loathsome in His sight...
 - that He should send His Son, and that His Son should willingly come for the likes of us to die for our sins?
 - It is unspeakably gracious and you need to see!
 - Let gratitude be the root out of which all your service to Him comes.
 - We can never exhaust the depth of the kindness and grace that He has shown to us, but let us give ourselves to the discovery of it more and more that we might love Him with a free and unmitigated love as we ought.