



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Various

“Doctrine of Eternal Punishment, part I”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for the opportunity that is ours to study the Scriptures which contain the truth of God. And we know that the Scriptures are the full truth, the true truth, the unmitigated truth. And we know too that the truth is good for us and the thing that we should be fearful of more than anything else is the lie. And we pray that as we consider this great subject, this very serious and solemn subject, that we may understand the truth concerning it and then, Lord, may our lives be lived in the light of it. We ask Thy blessing upon us in this hour. We pray Thy blessing upon the hour that follows. And we ask that Thy wilt guide our understanding into that which Thou wouldst have us to know and believe and practice. We pray. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

[Message] Well, as you can see by the outline that I have put on the overhead that our subject is “The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment.” Endless punishment, as I’m sure you know, is one of the perennially troublesome questions. And this particular question of eternal punishment is usually put popularly in this way. Will a loving God send anyone to an eternal hell? It used to be the leading question of the Universalists or the adherence to annihilation and the believers in conditional immortality, which is really a form of

annihilation. But now the mainline church adherents ask it also because universalism has become one of the doctrines that is characteristic of the preaching of many of the preachers in our mainline denominations today. They frequently do not say it boldly, sometimes they do. But if you will study the things that they're saying and analyze them carefully, you will see that what they're really saying is that ultimately everybody is going to be in heaven with our Lord in the forgiveness of sins.

Now, the question, of course, is an unpopular one. We never will find that people rejoice in the idea of an endless punishment of the finally impenitent. Even good Christians are troubled by it. They puzzle over it. It is an unpopular subject. But the question is really, is it truth? Just as Mr. Russell was saying, “Is it that which is true?” And if it is that which is true and if we yield ourselves to that truth, we will find that ultimately it will be good for us.

It's a rather strange thing that the Universalist denomination existed for a long period of time as the Universalist denomination. And one of the great doctrines that they held to was the doctrine that everybody was ultimately going to be saved. You might think that a denomination like that would have millions of adherents with such good doctrine that everybody is ultimately going to be saved. Why wouldn't people flock into a denomination like that? Well, the facts are that after many years of existence they could only manage less than fifty thousand people in their denomination. And furthermore, they were so small that they had to join with the Unitarian church which believed something of the same thing in order to form now the Unitarian Universalist denomination. There's an old saying, “Nobody is quite a Universalist in moments of indignation.” Well, that's probably true.

One of the German commentators who wrote a book on sin has made this comment, “No one is surer of applause than the man who discovers some new method of evading justice under the pretext of humanity.” And in this case people do evade the justice of God and do it under the pretext of humanity by suggesting that a God of love

could never send anyone to an endless punishment of separation from him. Two principal theories have been advanced in opposition to this church doctrine of eternal punishment. And they are these, first of all, the doctrine of universalism. That is, the ultimate well being of every person. Sooner or later everyone is going to come to a relationship with the Lord God that we could call a saving relationship.

Now, universalism has existed in two forms. It has existed in the form of restoration at death. That is, the moment a person dies. At that moment, he is restored to a right relationship to the Lord God. The other way in which it has existed is restoration after some future punishment, something like a purgatorial punishment. That is, an individual will die. He will suffer some form of remedial punishment. But ultimately, he will come into the presence of the Lord in the possession of salvation. So, these are the two ways in which it has existed.

Now, universalism, as you know from reading the Bible if you've read the Bible at all, has a very slender exegetical basis. I have listed in my notes two texts just to read tonight. We will later probably have reference to them in more detail. But I'd like for you to turn with me to Romans chapter 5 and verse 18. In Romans chapter 5 and verse 18 this is one of the texts that Universalists have often pinned their hopes upon. It's found in the 5th chapter of Romans in which the apostle is comparing the results that flow from the sin of the one man Adam with the results that flow from the righteous act of the last Adam, the Lord Jesus, and the gift of himself upon the cross at Calvary. And the 18th verse taken out of its context says, "Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation (That is the result of Adam's sin); even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life." So does not that say it rather plainly? By Adam's sin, judgment came upon all men to condemnation. Jesus Christ went to the cross, offered himself there as a sacrifice for sins and by that righteous act of dying upon the cross at Calvary the free gift came upon all

men unto justification of life. So, we have in the one case all men condemned. We have in the other case all men unto justification of life.

Now, if you took that text out of its context you would have some basis for saying that. It's the same old error in biblical interpretation practiced by so many people, some unwittingly and others wittingly. We read this text without reading the text, for example, that just precedes it. Verse 17 says, “For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ.” Verse 17 says that there is an act of receiving this grace that leads to the blessing that is set forth in verse 18, “justification of life.” So, if we read it outside of its context we might say that's a text for universalism. But if we read it in its context, it's a text for orthodoxy.

The other text that is sometimes appealed to, and there're several others which we will talk about later, we're going to spend two or three of our Tuesday nights on this particular doctrine. In 1 Corinthians chapter 15 and verse 22 the apostle writes in a context that clearly is parallel with Romans 5:18. He says, “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.”

Now, again if I were looking at this text and wanted to support a doctrine of universalism, I would lay great stress upon those two words “all” that are found there. “For as in Adam all die.” Is not that everyone? Well, you would say, “Yes that is everyone, for every person fell in Adam.” “So in Christ shall all be made alive.”

Now, there is one way in which you might get around that by saying, “Well, made alive means simply to be resurrected and we know, of course, that resurrection pertains to the unsaved, as well as to the saved. The unbelievers will have a resurrection also.” Unfortunately, this chapter, however, deals with the resurrection of believers. And furthermore, the word “make alive” is never used of bodily resurrection. So, that interpretation has some serious questions about it. But how then shall we escape? “As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.” Well, we can escape from

orthodoxy if we just omit the little phrase “in Christ.” For in the first part of verse 22 we read, “As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.” And while every individual is in Adam because he’s our federal head, Jesus Christ is the federal head of the redeemed alone. And that’s why we read, “So also in Christ all shall be made alive.” It’s just a matter of paying attention to what Paul says in the text.

It’d be nice to have Paul here, but you wouldn’t learn anything. He’d say, “Lewis is right.” [Laughter] You see, it’s so easy for us to find support for false doctrine if we won’t pay any attention to the texts of Scripture or the context in which they’re found.

So, universalism is one of the theories that have been advanced in opposition to the church doctrine of eternal punishment. The other theory that has been popularly advanced is – Some of you looking up there, you want to know where I am. I’m not going to put everything on the transparency. I’m on Arabic II in the introduction, principal opposing theories.

Now, the second one is the doctrine of conditional immortality. Now, this is a very common doctrine. And, for example, it’s one that’s held by the Jehovah’s Witnesses. And so you will run into them constantly. They believe in conditional immortality. So, conditional immortality, what is that? Well, that is the teaching that immortality is only for believers. The wicked are subject to annihilation. In other words, it’s a kind of middle course between eternal punishment and universalism. It’s not universalistic. At the same time, they don’t believe in eternal punishment. But those who believe, well, they will enjoy immortality. But those who do not believe, while they have a conditional immortality, they will ultimately be annihilated. They believe the soul is immortal by grace, not by nature. In other words, if a man should die apart from grace, he will ultimately just go out of existence. He will be annihilated.

The eternity of punishment then refers to its finality rather than its duration, its consequences, not its continuation throughout eternity. In other words, if a person does not believe, then, of course, he will suffer eternal punishment. Not in the sense that he

will be punished endlessly, but rather he will be annihilated and thus the consequences of his unbelief will be eternal. That’s the sense in which they would put upon it.

Jehovah’s Witnesses, I say, are those who believe this. In the witness teaching, the one hundred and forty-four thousand, which for a longtime was a number bigger than the membership, were those who were going to heaven. But then when the number of the witnesses became more than a hundred and forty-four thousand, they had to find another interpretation to encompass those new members which they were having. And so they devised the interpretation – this is long after the fact of Mr. Rutherford and Mr. Russell – they devised the doctrine that the one hundred and forty-four thousand would reign with our Lord in heaven. And the rest of those would reign up on the earth. And they were called men of good will, other sheep or Jonadabs. That’s where you get the expression a little dab will do you. [Laughter] But anyway, I thought Dick Parker would enjoy that. I just saved that for him all day long. But at any rate, you can see that their doctrine is one that is devised by circumstances, not by the interpretation of the word of God.

But Jehovah’s Witnesses believe in conditional immortality. These are the two principal means by which the doctrine of eternal punishment is countered in professing Christianity. There are, of course, other doctrines by other religions which are attempts to avoid the idea of eternal punishment, but we’re not going to talk about them tonight. The issues on the subject of eternal punishment are tremendous issues. I’m not sure that we often realize how tremendous they are. In fact, the doctrine of universalism and the doctrine of conditional immortality undercuts the gospel itself. In other words, we cannot really have a Christian gospel if we have universalism. We cannot have a Christian gospel if we have conditional immortality.

Let me read you a paragraph from one of the greatest of the theologians of the 19th century. It has to do with universalism, but the ideas in it are true also of conditional immortality. This theologian writes, “The dogmatic bearings of Universalism are not to be overlooked. The rejection of the doctrine of Endless Punishment cuts the ground from

under the gospel. Salvation supposes a prior damnation. (If a man is going to be saved, he must recognize that he is lost). So, salvation presupposes a prior damnation. He who denies that he deserves eternal death cannot be saved from it so long as he persists in his denial. If his denial is the truth (That is, if he denies eternal punishment), then he needs no salvation. If his denial is an error, the error prevents penitence for sin, and this prevents pardon.

No error, consequently, is more fatal than that of Universalism. (The man who believes it is one who cannot believe that he is lost and therefore he cannot have the mind to receive the gospel. He goes on to say), it blots out the attribute of retributive justice; it transmutes sin into misfortune, instead of guilt; it turns all suffering into chastisement; it converts the sacrificial work of Christ into moral influence (Because after all he didn't die for sins bearing judgement for us, eternal judgement, because there is no eternal judgement. So he didn't bear that. He only gave us an example of the love of God and designed to morally influence for better), and makes it a debt due to men, instead of an unmerited boon from God. No tenet,” he says, “is more radical and revolutionizing, in its influence upon the Christian system. The attempt to retain the evangelical theology in connection with universalism is futile.”

Just yesterday I was reading a new book that I had received and on one of the pages beginning it there is a quotation from the pope. And even the pope in this quotation says, “Let us never forget that sin is sin.” That's a biblical expression. He goes on to say, “The destructive nature of the error is still more apparent in practical theology. Could it be proved that the Christian church have been deceived in finding, the doctrine of Endless Punishment in the Christian Scriptures, and that there is no such thing, havoc would be made of all the liturgies of the Church, as well as all of its literature.” And he goes on to talk about the fact that the Christian church has been built up upon belief in the doctrine of eternal punishment.

Now, I'd like to turn to the history of the doctrine. And we'll talk first about the early church, or the ancient church. We won't spend a whole lot of time on this. But tonight I'd like to spend the remaining time that we have discussing a few of these things. The common opinion of the early church was belief in the endless future punishment of the impenitent wicked. When we talk about eternal punishment, that's what we mean. We mean the endless future punishment of the impenitent wicked. This was the Catholic faith, just as much as belief in the trinity was the Catholic faith. There were deviators. It's not surprising. I'm sure that when the doctrine of eternal punishment, which is really grounded in the Old Testament teaching, began to be preached by the early church, Satan was very anxious to raise up some individuals from within the professing church to deny the doctrine. There were deviators, but they caused no great controversy, nor did they bring about ecumenical councils. It was not such a big issue like the deity of Christ with the Arians and the other issues surrounding the person of Christ. We don't have any ecumenical council in which the question of endless punishment was discussed because the mass of the church believed in the endless punishment of the lost.

The teaching of restoration or universalism died out in the early church by its own intrinsic mortality, one of the theologians has said, because the doctrine of itself cannot really stand if individuals will think about it. Just as we said a moment ago, how is it possible for anyone to preach a salvation at all through Christ if universalism is true? If universalism is true, there's no need to preach a gospel. That's why in Universalist churches, where that particular kind of good news is proclaimed, there is no biblical gospel at all.

Now, in the West there was much greater belief in this doctrine than in the East. When you study early church history you notice that in the West – I am speaking of North Africa and Italy and other places to the West – there was generally a tendency to be more biblical and orthodox and more restrictive in their thinking. But in the East, in Asia Minor and also in the Near East, there was a tendency to be looser in the biblical doctrine. I'm

not suggesting that they were not Christians, but they simply were looser in their approach to the biblical teaching. There was just greater latitude of belief there.

Now, Capital B, the early decenterers. The principal deviation from the doctrine of eternal punishment began and came with the Alexandrian School of Clement and Origen. Origen was one of the most famous of the ancient interpreters of the Bible. A very learned man who wrote some very interesting works. In fact, it has been said that Origen wrote the first systematic theology. It's not really quite like that. But he was an advocate of restoration, or Christian universalism. He denied endless punishment and he taught that the wicked, including Satan, after suffering the pains of hell for a season would come forth purified for heaven. This remedial punishment is the doctrine of the restitution of all things. And sometimes it will be put that way, the doctrine of the restitution of all things. Can you imagine Satan in the company of the saints of God? Well, that, of course, is what Origen believed.

One of the commentators says with reference to Origen's views that his “Restorationism grew naturally out of his view of human liberty. He held that the liberty of indifference and the power of contrary choice, instead of simple self-determination, are the substance of freedom. These belong inalienably and forever to the nature of the finite will. They cannot be destroyed, even by apostasy and sin. Consequently, there is forever a possibility of a self-conversion of the will in either direction.” But this is, of course, an ancient expression of the doctrine of the free will. And so Origen, because he did believe in free will, he believed that the “free will may turn to God at any time,” even after he's passed out of this human existence. “This led to his theory of endless alternation of falls and recoveries of hells and heavens.” So you could decide for the Lord God out of your free will and then you could decide against the Lord God out of your free will. And then instead of having heaven, you would have hell. And in hell you could decide for the Lord God and then you would have heaven. So you have an endless possibility of

traversing from hell to heaven by the decisions of your free will because he insisted that you must have free will.

That kind of doctrine of the liberty of the will, the power of contrary choice, is as, of course you in Believers Chapel know and we've been proclaiming this for years, is one of the foundational doctrines of Arminianism, though, of course, we do not want to suggest that Armenians believe the things necessarily that Origen believed. “Augustine, in the *City of God*, his famous work, remarks in his refutation of Origen, ‘heaven with the prospect of losing it is really misery.’”

Suppose it were possible for you to have such a free will. And you were to go to heaven with your free will. And you could still make a decision the other way. Well, you can see that would be a miserable thing. Suppose you were told by the Lord through the word, “Now, you can come to heaven, but you're going to have a free will there.” And if you exercise your free will there against the Lord God, then, of course, you're plunged into the company of the lost. What a terrible thing that would be. I can see why Augustine says, “That would be misery,” misery to go to heaven with the idea that you can lose it when you get there.

Origen was not the only person who taught restorationism. Some of the Antiochian church fathers did also. The two Gregory's, Didymus of Alexandria and Theodore of Mopsuestia, they were very well known early church fathers of the later centuries. Origen died in 245 AD, so he lived in the latter part of the 2nd century and on into the 3rd century.

No evangelical group has embraced the teaching. Vicarious atonement is incompatible with it. Universalism treats suffering as remedial only, while vicarious atonement in the evangelical sense treats suffering as retributive. In restorationism, the suffering that a person may undergo as he leaves this life for a time is designed to fit him and prepare him and purify him for what lies ahead. But Christ does not die for that kind of thing. The suffering that Jesus Christ undergoes is not remedial suffering; it's retributive

suffering. He dies under the judgement of God. This is what we teach. This is what the Scriptures themselves proclaim. Suffering that is merely educational doesn't require vicarious atonement in order to release from it. But suffering that is judicial and punitive can be released from the transgressor only by being inflicted upon a substitute. And so, the only way in which we can be delivered from retributive judgement, the kind of judgement that would bring us to hell, the only way we can escape from that is by substitution. We cannot bear it ourselves. It's eternal judgement. We need someone to bear it for us. And the story of the gospel is that Jesus Christ does bear it for his people. If the sinner himself is not obliged by justice to suffer in order to satisfy the Lord he's violated, then certainly no one needs to suffer for him for this purpose. And so, consequently, that idea destroys the retributive suffering of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, since the Reformation – this is Capital C in our outline. We've had some interesting things transpire. The Reformation churches accepted the Christian orthodoxy of endless punishment. They accepted the doctrine of the trinity, the doctrine of the incarnation, the doctrine of the redemption of Christ. But they did not accept restorationism. Individuals, however, have.

One of the best known of the professing Christian theologians was a German theologian by the name of Schleiermacher. I put his name over here. Schleiermacher has been a very important theologian. He's often been called the theologian of the feeling of absolute dependence. He took Christ's words in Matthew chapter 25 and verse 46 as figurative. He took other expressions in which the Lord Jesus speaks about his death being judgement as figurative also. He taught that in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, verse 25 and verse 26 that Paul taught that all evil would be ultimately overcome. Let me read these verses, 1 Corinthians 15:25 and 26. If you have your New Testaments, turn there. Here Paul writes, and he's talking about the future, he's just said in verse 23,

“But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming. Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. So, he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.”

And so, Schleiermacher looked at this and he taught that 1 Corinthians 15:25 and 26 meant that all evil would be overcome. And, therefore, restorationism was true. There were other kinds of arguments that were advanced, for example, an argument like this. The damned suffer remorse in hell do they not? Do we not read that Jesus spoke about the gnashing of teeth in hell? Does not that mean remorse? And so, Schleiermacher taught that the damned suffer more remorse in hell than they did upon the earth, which proves they're better men in hell than they were when they were on the earth. One might ask the question, “Is hell abolished simply because we become used to it? Is remorse a virtue? Is remorse something that's good?” Well, remorse is the inevitable result of the wickedness of the rejection of the Lord God. It's part of the punishment. Well, the idea that remorse is good is a doctrine originated by those who've rejected biblical teaching.

So, Schleiermacher who lived in the 18th century, he was born in 1768 and died in 1834, rejected the teaching of endless punishment. He had a tremendous influence. When men go to theological seminary and liberal schools and they study systematic theology, it is inevitable that they will spend a considerable amount of time in the study of Schleiermacher. The first time I ever went into a liberal theological school and sat down to listen to liberal theologians, I took a course in which a great deal of time was spent on Schleiermacher as really the first of the best of modern theologians. And that's his doctrine.

There is another German by the name Müller. Müller wrote a very significant work on sin. In fact, he got the nickname Sünden Müller, or Sins Müller, because of this great work that he wrote on sin. It has a lot of good things in it. But he taught that there was always a universal offer of salvation. And then if a person, for example, died and went to the place of the departed dead and he did not have an opportunity hear the gospel, he wouldn't be able to hear the gospel there, so, both here and hereafter. But he seemed also to teach that men have a second chance. And that those who heard the gospel here would have another chance ultimately. In other words, his teaching was confused. But a lot of people have followed him.

Coming into the 20th century, Emil Brunner, professor of systematic theology at the University of Zurich, born in 1899 and died in 1966, one of the most famous of the European theologians in relatively contemporary times because many of Brunner's books were translated into English. And in fact, he was much more popular than Karl Barth for a lengthy period of time because his books were translated first. Brunner taught ambiguously that there was a judgement to come alright. But grace is involved in universal redemption. And he taught almost like a Calvinist in one way. He taught that God wills all to be saved and no one can resist his sovereignty. So, he taught the sovereignty of God, but he combined it with the determination that God wills all men to be saved.

I like to turn that around when people come to me and point to 2 Peter 3:9, which reads something like, “But God is longsuffering, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” And point out that if you really believe that and if you really believe the sovereignty of God, then you would believe in universalism. You see, that was the problem that Brunner had. He believed in the sovereignty of God. And he believed that God's will could not be resisted ultimately. And he believed that God had said that he did not will that any should perish. Of course, again, if you look at the context of the passage, you'll see that the “any” referred to there is the any of us whom

he has just called the beloved in the text. And so, the any of us that he's not willing should be lost is the any of us who belong to the family of God. That text ought to never be cited as saying that God would have all men to be saved, that he would in his divine sovereign will, that he has will that all men be saved. Because if he has will that all men be saved, they will be saved. Who can resist the will of God? What does Paul say in Romans 9? “Who has resisted his will?”

So, the context makes very plain that he's talking about the beloved, the people of God. He's not willing that any of them should be lost, but that all of them should come to repentance and therefore, there's been this lengthy delay for the preaching of the gospel as Peter explains in the context of that passage. But Brunner, not having both sides of the doctrine, taught a kind of universalism. But then also to muddy the waters he also taught that there was a judgement coming. So, I can only gather, though he's not clear, that he thought that there was going to be a temporary judgement which would serve some purpose for those that were lost, but that ultimately everybody would be saved.

Now, our time is just about up. But we've got just about a minute and I'd like to give you a chance to ask a question. Perhaps I haven't been clear on one point that you'd like to ask a question about. I'd be glad to try to answer your question. If you'd like to raise your hand and ask it, that'll be fine.

[Question from the audience]

[Johnson] Verse 46, Larry. It's the passage found in the parable of the sheep and the goats. It's the last verse of the chapter where we read, “And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.” And Schleiermacher took this as simply a figurative expression of everlasting punishment, but not really meaning that. Chapter 25, verse 46.

Any other questions? That’s a good question. Alright, we’ll stop. But next week, we want to pick up here and we will then talk about the contemporary errors a little bit more, but not too much and then launch into some of the proof of eternal punishment. I doubt that we finish next Tuesday. We will probably be one more Tuesday night to finish it up. Let’s close in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for the privilege of the study of the Scriptures. And, Lord, we realize that this is a very important doctrine bound up in the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Deliver us from error. Enable us to understand fully what our Lord has undergone for us. And, Lord, give us the boldness to proclaim the...

[RECORDING ENDS ABRUPTLY]