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GOD A CONSUMING FIRE.

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For our God is a consuming fire. – Heb. 12:20.

By a very natural antithesis we have become accustomed to set this definition of Jehovah, “Our God is a consuming fire,” over against that other one, “God is love,” as indicating the two opposite poles of the divine nature. But perhaps the definitions are rather identical than antithetical. The same fire that burns and consumes, also warms and illuminates. The same love that comforts and caresses, also chastens and afflicts. What if we say then that God is love—a love which burns and chastens us when we abuse it; and which gladdens and blesses us when we obey it? We shall then avoid the misconception into which we so constantly fall, that God’s punishments are the result of his justice alone, while his mercies are the issue of his love. There are distinct and different attributes indeed in the character of God. But it may be that these are all resolvable into the one underlying and primary attribute of love, even as the colors of the rainbow, when blended, resolve themselves back into the original and colorless white. At all events, we have constantly in the Scriptures the illustration of attributes issuing in their opposites. “Whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth”—love punishing. “He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins”—justice pardoning. And so we learn that we have no right to imagine that God has ceased from his love because he afflicts us, or that he has ceased from his justice because he forgives us. He is one, and indivisible in his actions, as he is one in his being. He does what he does, with the consent of all his nature; and the most opposite and irreconcilable manifestations of his providence, as they seem to us, all harmonized no doubt with him in the unisons of perfect love. The musician, with the full melody in his mind, touches now a very soft and limpid note, and now a very stern and rugged one, in bringing out that melody. And so it is in the oratorio of Divine Providence. As the spirit rehearses in the mouth of David we hear such strains as these: “To him that smote Egypt in their first born—for his mercy endureth forever. To him which smote great kings— for his mercy endureth forever. And slew famous kings—for his mercy endureth forever. And strange and almost incongruous as the refrain may seem to us, we are sure there can be no inharmony.

Seeking now our interpretation of the text directly from the Scriptures, we have these lessons:

1. The inapproachable holiness of God.
Jehovah first revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush—“the bush that burned with fire, and was not consumed.” And as his servant turned aside to see this great sight, the Lord called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, “Draw not nigh hither, put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.” Had Moses come nigh, we may believe that he would have been consumed, as Nadab and Abihu were, for their sacrilege, when “there went out fire from the Lord and devoured them.” This seems to be the lesson. The holiness of God, self-originated and self-sustained, glows on forever like a fire. It is unconsumed itself, for there is nothing in it that can be destroyed. But the unholy man would kindle and waste before it like the stubble, were he to approach it.

And in saying this, I do not utter a merely mystical and inexplicable saying. In the sphere of morals, purity is just as scorching and caustic in its action upon impurity, as a flame is upon fuel. The sanctity of a truly consecrated man is an annoyance to his unconsecrated neighbor; and to his godless and impure neighbor a positive torment, if he is compelled for any time to endure it. There is more than mere contrariety between sin and righteousness, there is an antagonism which tends to mutual repulsion or extermination. If water is thrown upon fire, either the fire will be put out or the water will be vaporized according to the relative strength of the elements. And if sin comes in contact with holiness, it will either quench that holiness or be itself consumed and overpowered by it. And it is in this sense, I believe, that it is true that the holiness of God is a consuming fire. Not that there is any heat of vindictive anger in it; not that it is surcharged, like the thunder-cloud, with the elements of destruction, ready at any moment to leap forth and smite the wicked. But that it is so intrinsically and eternally opposed to sin, that it must scorch and wither that sin when it is brought in contact with it.

And I am sure that this is a most important lesson for us to learn. The sin of the age is irreverence. There is little putting off of the shoes of worldliness and unspirituality, in coming into the presence of the Most High. With what light familiarity, with what flippant and presumptuous freedom, we approach the King of purities. The doctrine of the infinite patience of God beguiles many into a most un filial liberty; and they who are by nature “the children of wrath” hesitates not to climb upon the knee of their Heavenly Father before they have been washed or sanctified by his Spirit, and to touch with unclean hands his feet which are “like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace.” We cannot dwell too much upon the believer’s privilege to say, “Abba Father;” but neither can we remember too carefully or fearfully that only he hath clean hands and a pure heart can ascend unto the hill of the Lord or stand in his holy place. Behold the priest about to enter within the curtain of the tabernacle. First he must come to the altar, where lays the sacrificial victim; then to the laver, wherein is the water for making clean the hands. Only thus atoned for and washed could he enter within the holy place and look upon the bright and burning cherubim. And were these types only meaningless symbols, think you—the shadows of facts and requirements that have ceased now that grace has superseded law? Nay! Holiness and the requirements of holiness are alike unchangeable from age to age. Look up to the true Tabernacle—the Holy of Holies—in the heavens; and then listen to the solemn words of the Apocalypse: “And before the throne was there a sea of glass like unto crystal.” The laver of the heavenly tabernacle is there,—the brazen sea of the upper temple, telling by glowing symbol what is elsewhere declared in literal and solemn language, that “there shall in no wise enter into that place.

anything that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination or maketh a lie.” And we are defiled by sin and therefore must be cast out, unless we have been justified by the blood of Christ and sanctified by the washing of regeneration.

Our heaven, let us never forget, depends on what we are, and not on where we are. And I fully believe that we cannot imagine a greater punishment for an unholy and reprobate soul than to summon it into the unveiled presence of God. To have the Eternal Eye forever upon him—that eye of holiness which is joy and life to all holy things—would be to him a flaming fire of punishment. There need be no anger in that eye; only the beaming vision of eternal purity. There need be no flashes of divine displeasure in it; only the dazzling whiteness if the great holy soul shining calmly and forever forth. And yet this gaze would be intolerable to the sinner. It is in the very nature of things that it should be so. The calm, benignant face of Purity is as terrible as a tropic sun to the naked sinner. “Oh, whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?” is his cry. Even the rapt and holy Isaiah, as he saw the Lord sitting on a throne high and lifted, cried “Woe is me, for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips and dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts.” It is the pain of infinite contrast. As the gleaming flash of lightning throws into strong and startling relief the objects which the night had covered; as sudden entrance of the sunlight shows that the air which had before seemed pure now is mixed and turbid with the motes that afloat in it, so will the soul of the darkened sinner be astonished and dismayed as by one glance if his burning eyes, the Lord shall set his iniquities before him and his secret sins in the light of his countenance. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” The purity which they share in common with him who is the source and centre of all pureness will be as a pellucid atmosphere, revealing to them the light of his countenance, and yet tempering and assuaging the naked fierceness of that light, that it may not smite them. But the impure, with no such protecting or revealing medium, will be dazzled and struck to the earth by the sight. The beatific vision of the pure will be to them a vision of terror. Oh! Friends, how can we stand before God unless we have Christ for a shield and covering? The sight of his burning face is enough to overwhelm us. How significant that saying concerning the doom of Antichrist, “No fiery darts are shot at him from the battlements of heaven. No flaming sword of vengeance is drawn against him. The Lord simply shows himself to him in his glory. “Whom he shall destroy with the brightness of his coming.”

2. We may infer from these words of unsparing righteousness of God in making atonement of sin.

Recall that scene in the tabernacle. Moses and Aaron had come forth and blessed the people and the glory of the Lord had appeared to them. And then the record proceeds, “there came a fire out from before the Lord and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fat; which, when people saw, they shouted and fell on their faces.” As the altar sacrifice is a type of the great atonement, is not this event the foreshadowing of what happened to the Lamb of God? Literally was he, the spotless victim, consumed for our transgressions, as the burning penalty of a broken law came forth upon him from the Father. God is always God, and sin is always sin. And as certainly as the fire must scorch the fuel with which it comes in contact, so certainly must the righteous judgment
of God kindle upon iniquity whenever it is found. Therefore when "he, who knew no sin, was made sin for us," the burning of divine penalty fell upon him, till he was consumed upon the altar and yielded up the ghost. "God spared not his own son." Nay, though with strong crying and tears, he pleaded that he might be spared, and though with deathly faintness and bloody sweat he shrunk back from the impending blow, yet God spared him not. Spared him not, that he might spare us. As the rays of the lurid sun, passing through the burning glass, leave the glass untouched and unaffected, but burn and scorch the object in which they find a focus, so—think of it, oh, ye that esteem sin a little thing—the burnings of God’s penalty against sin were not restrained or softened in the least, but they passed through race of sinners, leaving them unscathed, and, lighting on him, the sinless one, who was the focal man of our humanity, consumed him unto death for us. I know not why it need be said that the wrath of God fell on Jesus Christ. Perhaps we should speak as truly if we said that it was only the kindlings of his righteous love that smote him. I ask you to bring together two sentences from the Bible and tell me if such depths in the mystery of love were ever touched before. "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." "Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him." Here is no anger. Here is no burning of vengeance or indignation. It is love, but love so righteous, and so just, that it is pleased to smite, and smites the one in whom it is alone and supremely pleased. It is a great mystery.

Now we see again at this point how squarely this doctrine goes against the current sentiment of the day respecting God. It is just the belief that God is not a consuming fire that holds a multitude of minds in easy irreligion and good-natured self-complacency today. There may be some fire of his judgments, it is admitted. But it is held in check by his gentleness. It is restrained by his loving kindness; it can never kindle upon a sinner to his hurt. It cannot be a consuming fire, for the sparsest shower of tears can put it out. But I ask you to look not into the world of the lost, but to the Cross of Christ, and lean how terribly God punishes sin, and how consuming his judgments are against transgression. In our estimate the guilt of sin is lessened according to the degree of purity of the character in which it is found. We are inclined to punish leniently the offense of him whose life has been generally correct. But when sin was found upon the sinless Son of God, the penalty fell just as heavily on him as though he had been the guiltiest of the race. God who in the beginning declared that he would "by no means clear the guilty," cleared not his Son when the iniquity of us all had been laid upon him, but freely delivered him up for us all. When he had made the soul of his beloved an offering for sin, it became as true as in the tabernacle. "There came a fire out from before the Lord, and consumed the offering upon the altar."

I dwell upon this fact not to impress you with the severity of God, but to make you see the inviolable justness of his love. From the Cross we hear God say, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love." And if, looking up. We ask, "Who art thou, Lord?" the answer comes, "I that speak in righteousness, mighty to save." When were love’s arms ever stretched so wide as on the cross?” and the roots of the law, at length satisfied, satiated, if I may say so, by the offering of the spotless Lamb, may speak pardon to him who has broken it. And thus God is severely just, that he may be the justifier of him that believeth.
3. The words of my text teach the retributive justice of God against the finally incorrigible.

“For the Lord thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God,” are the solemn words with which Moses concludes his warning to the children of Israel against apostasy. “The Lord was angry with me for your sakes,” he said to them, “and forbade me from entering into the promised land.” “Take heed to yourself, lest ye forget the covenant of the Lord your God.” And well may we take warning. If God spared not his beloved Moses, how can he spare us, if we continue in disobedience? “If the righteous are scarcely saved, where shall the sinner and the ungodly appear?” The Lord has a holy jealousy against sin that, however restrained for the time, must at last go forth in consuming terror upon evil-doers.

We have no lurid delineation of hell to set before you, but this much is certain: the fire must sooner or later kindle upon all wrong-doing. Happy are we if we baring our sins to that altar where the Son of God, on whom our iniquities are laid, has become our burnt offering, that we might be saved from the eternal burning. And even here I dwell not upon the anger of God against the wicked. How do we know but his wrath, as we call it, is but his love kindled to its white heat? Fire burns not fire. And if we have the love of the Father in us, kindling into ever-growing ardor and intensity till he comes, when he reveals himself from heaven, in flaming fire, we shall not be burned. The fire that shall fall upon an unbelieving world with overwhelming terror, will only cause his saints to shine like the firmament forever and ever.

Let me now, in closing, draw just the lesson from my subject which is found in connection with the text: “Let us have grace whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear, for our God is a consuming fire.”

Do you reverence God, my hearer? I do not mean by your bearing and postures in the house of God. I do not mean by your devout propriety and religiousness in your treatment of Christian subjects and ceremonies. These are the mere incidentals of reverence, signifying very little of themselves. But do you reverence him so much that you shrink from coming into his presence with unrepented and unforgiven sins upon you? That is the most searching test. Moses dared not draw nigh to the flaming Jehovah. But with an effrontery which is as characteristic of men’s religion as of their manners in this age, there are those who, without a scruple and with no shield or panoply of faith would rush into that presence where angels fear to tread. Sin is no hindrance; lack of faith is no hindrance. Want of spiritual acquaintance is no hindrance. Nothing is more appalling than this familiarity of vaunting unbelief. I tell you, if you have nothing upon you but the sandals of a self-righteous and fleshly boldness, you had best put off your shoes from your feet, and stand afar off, and come not nigh until you have had “your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace.”

Do you fear God, my hearer? I do mean, do you sometimes tremble before his coming judgment? Do you share that fearful looking for of the indignation that shall devour the adversaries? That is but the fear of a slave, the terror of a servant but do you fear him so that you are afraid to sin before him? Or that, having sinned, instead of hiding from his presence you are impelled to come before him and confess your guilt, that he may cleanse and justify you? If not, you know nothing of “godly fear.” The fear of God is one thing; godly fear is quite another. The one is the dismay of terror; the other is the filial caution.

of love. The one trembles for the safety of self: the other is solicitous for the honor of Jehovah. The one cries out, "Oh, I am afraid of God; whither can I flee to escape his sight?" the other says in those grand, sweet words of St. Augustine, "I am afraid of God; therefore I will run to his arms."

Our God is a consuming fire." What do those words mean to you, my hearer? That you, having been tried like gold in the furnace of his discipline, shall be found unto praise and honor and glory at his appearing? Or that you shall be only like the chaff, burned and utterly destroyed by contact with a holy love rejected, with a Saviour disbelieved, with a spirit grieved and rejected?

End

This sermon was preached by Rev. A.J. Gordon, D.D. Pastor of Clarendon Street Baptist Church, Boston.

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