

THE OLD TESTAMENT AND SIN'S PENALTY

A voice from the past (Part One)

By Henry Constable

.....

A graduate of Ireland's University of Dublin, Henry Constable (1816–1891) was an able Bible scholar. After his ordination to the Anglican priesthood in 1850, he served at Kilgarriffe, Cork, Desertmore and later London. The contents of this article are abridged with some stylistic changes from his classic book, *The Duration and nature of Future Punishment*, first published in 1868. You'll enjoy this voice from the past, regardless of his affiliation with the Anglican church. He speaks strictly from what the Scriptures have to say about the nature of human life as God made it in His image, which most traditionalists reject because of the teachings of Plato. He would be turning over in his grave if he knew what the church he belonged to turned into. He would not agree with Anglicans' beliefs, for he came to the Conditionalist stand on salvation.

.....

Chapter Three:

Future punishment for the sins of the present life is universally allowed to be taught in Scripture; but with respect to its nature and duration, very different opinions are entertained as being each of them the doctrine of God's word. Therefore, "In what will the eternal state of the lost consist?" is our question.

We hold that it will not consist in an eternal life spent in pain of body or remorse of mind, but that *a state of utter death and destruction is that state* which will abide forever. We will first consult the testimony of the Old Testament. This is indeed by no means so clear either as to the future of the redeemed or the lost as the New Testament; but there are undoubtedly in it many places, not only in its later but in its earlier portions, which speak of both.

Death was the penalty which God originally pronounced against human sin. All that God purposed to inflict upon Adam and his posterity in case of transgression is included in that word "death", "In the day that thou eat, thou shall die" (Gen. 2:7). It is of the utmost consequence then that we should understand what God meant by death; nor is there the smallest difficulty in doing so if we will only attend to what reason and justice require, and what Scripture expressly declares. Its meaning, then, we contend to be, when it is thus attached to sin as its penalty, *the loss of life, or existence*.

One of the first principles of justice requires that parties threatened with a penalty for transgression should have the fullest opportunity of understanding *what the penalty is*. God, accordingly, speaks to Adam of death as a thing whose nature Adam knew. Now Adam knew very well what death was in one sense, and *in one sense only*. He knew it to be the law of the lower creatures, and to *consist in the loss of their being and existence*. He knew nothing of any other sense of death, such as "death in sin" or "death to sin;" for, in his innocence, he did not know what sin was at all. Still less did he understand by death an eternal existence in agony. He had one clear, well-understood sense for death — the *loss of life and being*. When God, therefore, threatened death to Adam as the penalty

for disobedience, Adam could only know that penalty to mean that he would become like the beasts that perish; and therefore, in agreement with a fundamental principle of justice, such an end was that which God threatened to inflict for sin.

So fully persuaded are the advocates of the Augustinian theory [of eternal conscious torment], that Adam could not possibly have understood death in their fearful sense, that they are compelled to deny a fundamental principle of law — that parties living under it should have the means of knowing to what they expose themselves to if they violate it. “It is not essential,” writes Professor Bartlett, the ablest advocate of the Augustinian theory that either this country or America has produced, “it is not essential to inquire whether the first pair understood all that was involved in the penalty, ‘Ye shall surely die!’” And then he goes on to lay down the astounding proposition that “neither the judicial dealings of God nor man” require that “the extent” of the penalty should be “unfolded” before the minds of those who may expose themselves to it if they offend!¹

If this professor of theology had consulted a professor of jurisprudence, he would have been informed that when a man is incapable of knowing the nature of a penalty, he cannot be subjected to it. He must at least have the opportunity of knowing it, or human law will not make him liable. If the professor had consulted that divine law which he has undertaken to teach, he should have known that justice is one of the qualities that the divine Lawgiver claims as the foundation of his throne. The old morality of the land of UZ was higher than that breathed in some theological seminaries: it spurned the idea that a mortal man could be more just than God.²

The only meaning which Adam could attach to death as the threatened penalty for transgression is that which God himself expressly attached to it. As soon as Adam transgressed, God came to him and repeated to him in other words the penalty he had just incurred. It was, “Dust thou art; and unto dust shall thou return” (Gen. 3:19). God’s definition of death inflicted for the first transgression is frequently repeated in the later scriptures. Paul tells us that it is the death which all men actually undergo, whether they are among the saved or the lost; and therefore an eternal existence in pain can be no part of its meaning.³ Such too was the death which Christ endured for human sin — the very same penalty to its full extent to which man was exposed; and therefore spiritual death, or an eternal life in misery, can form no part whatsoever of its meaning.⁴

We have thus, if we are satisfied to accept God’s teaching, the clearly-expressed sense of death. It was not spiritual death: that was the sinner’s guilty act, but not the penalty for his sin. It was not an eternal existence in pain. It was simply the withdrawal of a life whose true aim and object had been lost. God said nothing in the first instance of transgression as to whether this death would be temporal or eternal; but what the death was he fully explained both by word and by example. He gave life to the race of man, and he would withdraw that life if man sinned. Such was the simple scriptural meaning of that word “death”, about which Christian theologians have written whole libraries of confused jargon and hopeless nonsense, ever since the introduction of the Platonic dogma of the inalienable immortality of man compelled them to hold that all men must live forever. If our readers wish to judge for themselves of the effect which the dogma has had upon scriptural exegesis, let them compare the lucid comments of the Christian father Irenaeus (who was unacquainted with it) with the flounderings of Moses Stuart, when both are discussing the same grand subject — death, the penalty of sin.⁵

This old sense, first stamped on it by God himself, in the opening period of human history, has also been the universal idea formed of it wherever man has lived and did. It is always the primary — and in the case of the great majority of humankind, the only — meaning of the word, in every language and every tribe of the earth. “The world,” says Athenagoras, “regard death as a deep sleep and forgetfulness.”⁶

This primary sense of the word [death] has been strongly impressed on the human mind by the perpetual recurrence of death itself among all the creatures. As a result, even though numberless words in the progress of time have assumed senses wholly alien or contrary to their original meaning, this word “death” has remained true to its original in its various applications. Thus we have in Scripture the expressions “dead to sin” and “dead to the law.” In our catechism we have the phrase “a death unto sin.” And in ordinary life we speak of persons being “dead” to certain passions or affections. All such expressions are derived from physical death, and are true to its original sense. They imply the departure and consequent *non-existence* of relations and feelings which were once living and strong — *their death*. Sin has ceased to be clear to the renewed mind: the old relation of the law has ceased to be for the believer: the former friend no longer loves. In every case, something has disappeared from existence.

To the sense thus imposed on death in all times and by all nations, in its primary and secondary implications, there is *one exception* — *that given to it in the theology of a portion of Christendom*. Compelled by a false dogma and a terrific creed of punishment arising from it, *death* is made to mean its direct opposite, *life* — some “condition of being or existence.”

But this late meaning attached by many Christians to the term death [as they apply it] to future punishment, has not the smallest force as regards its use in the Old Testament. There the word must be taken in the sense God has stamped upon it, and left unchanged. It is there over and over again described as the end, in the future age, of obstinate transgressors. For all such God declares He has “provide the *instruments of death*.”

Divine wisdom declares, “They that hate me love death.” And to the wicked God says, “Thou shall surely die,” for “the sold that sins it shall die.”⁷ As plainly as words can express, Scripture distinguishes between the sinful acts and the state of sinners, i.e., their moral death, and that death which God will at a future period inflict on sinners as punishment. These two things (humanity’s moral degradation and God’s penalty), although perfectly confounded by the Augustinian theorists, are always kept distinct in the Scriptures.

Careful thinkers know that the death pronounced in the passages above applies to future punishment, rather than to the death we all experience as descendants of Adam. Death, according to the Old Testament, is to be after judgment the result of sin, as life is the result of righteousness. Can we suppose that a God of truth, justice and mercy could mean by the well-understood word “death” something not only unknown to his hearers but having a character the very opposite to what they had learned from his own teaching? Indeed, that it conveyed a doom unutterable greater? The very idea is an insult to God!

NOTES:

1. Samuel Colcord Bartlett, *Life and Death Eternal: a refutation of the theory of annihilation* (Boston: American Tract Society, 1866, page 48).

2. Job. 4:17
 3. Rom. 5:12, 14, 17; I Cor. 15:22.
 4. Phil. 2:8; Acts 2:24; Rom. 5:7, 8.
 5. Irenaeus, *Heresies*, V. XXIII; M. Stuart, on Rom. 5:12.
 6. Athenagoras, *Plea*, C. XII.
- 71 Psa. 7:13; Prov. 8:36, 11:4; Ezek. 3:18, 18:4, 33:8.

This reproduction is in the Public Domain