

ETERNITY!

J.C. Ryle, 1878 (From Practical Religion)

"What is *seen* is temporary — but what is *unseen* is eternal." (2 Corinthians 4:18)

A subject stands out on the face of this text, which is one of the most solemn and heart searching in the Bible. That subject is *eternity*.

The subject is one of which the wisest man can only take in a little at a time. We have no *eyes* to see it fully, and no mind to grasp fully it — and yet we must not refuse to consider it. There is a depth of *stars* in the Heavens above us, which the most powerful telescope cannot pierce — yet it is well worth it to look into them and learn *something*, even if we cannot learn *everything*. There are heights and depths about the subject of eternity, which mortal man can never comprehend; but God has spoken of it, and we have no right to turn away from it completely.

The subject is one, which we must never approach without the Bible in our hands. The moment we depart from "God's written Word," in considering eternity and the future state of man — we are then likely to fall into error. In examining points like these, we must have nothing to do with *preconceived notions* as to what God's character is like, and what *we* think God ought to be, or ought to do with man after death. We only have to find out what is written. *What does the Scripture say?* What does the Lord say? It is foolish to tell us that we ought to have "noble thoughts about God," independent of, and over and above, Scripture. The noblest thoughts about God, which we have a right to hold, are the thoughts that He has been pleased to reveal to us in His "written Word."

I ask for the attention of everyone into whose hands this paper may fall, while I offer a few thoughts about eternity. As a mortal man, I deeply feel my own insufficiency to handle this subject. But I pray that God the Holy Spirit, whose strength is made perfect in weakness, may bless the words I speak, and make them *seeds of eternal life* in many minds.

I. The first thought that I bring to your attention is this — *we live in a world where all things are temporary and passing away.*

Surely, a man must be blind who cannot realize this. Everything around us is decaying, dying, and coming to an end. There is a sense, no doubt, in which "matter"

is eternal. Once created, it will never entirely cease to exist. But in a popular practical sense, everything about us is dying except our souls. No wonder the poet says, "Change and decay all around me I see — O You who does not change, abide with me!"

We are all going, going, going — whether eminent or unimportant, gentle or cruel, rich or poor, old or young. We are all going — and will soon be gone!

Beauty is only temporary. Sarah was once the loveliest of women, and the admiration of the Court of Egypt; yet a day came when even Abraham, her husband, said, "Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead." (Genesis 23:4)

Strength of the body is only temporary. David was once a mighty man of valor, the slayer of the lion and the bear, and the champion of Israel against Goliath; yet a day came when even David had to be nursed and ministered to in his old age like a child!

Wisdom and power of the brain are only temporary. Solomon was once a marvel of knowledge, and all the kings of the earth came to hear his wisdom — yet even Solomon in his latter days played the fool, and allowed his wives to "turn his heart after their gods." (1 Kings 11:2)

As humbling and painful as these truths may sound, it is good for all of us to realize them and take them to heart. The houses we live in, the homes we love, the riches we accumulate, the professions we follow, the plans we formulate, the relations we enter into — they are only for a time. "What is seen is temporary." "This world in its present form is passing away." (2 Corinthians 4:18; 1 Corinthians 7:31)

The thought is one which ought to awaken everyone who is living only for this world. If his conscience is not completely seared, it should stir in him a great searching of his heart. Oh, be careful what you are doing! Awake to see things in their true light, before it is too late. The things you live for now, are all temporary and passing away! The pleasures, the amusements, the recreations, the profits, the earthly callings, which now absorb all your heart and drink up your entire mind — will soon be over. They are poor fleeting things which cannot last. Oh, do not love them too much; do not hold on to them too tightly; do not make them your idols! You cannot keep them, and you must leave them. Seek first the kingdom of God, and then everything else will be given to you. "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." Oh, you that love the world, get wisdom! Never, never forget that it is written, "The world and its desires pass away — but the man who does the will of God lives forever." (Colossians 3:2; 1 John 2:17)

The same thought ought to cheer and comfort every true Christian. Your trials, crosses, and conflicts are all temporary! They will soon come to an end; and even now they are working for you "an eternal glory that far outweighs them all." (2 Corinthians 4:17) Receive them patiently; bear them quietly; look upward, forward, onward, and far beyond them. Fight your *daily fight* under a steadfast conviction that it is only for a little while, and that rest is not far off. Carry your daily cross always remembering that "what is seen is temporary." The *cross* will soon be exchanged for a *crown* — and you will sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of God.

II. The second thought that I bring to your attention is this — *we are all moving towards a world where everything is eternal.*

That great unseen state of existence, which lies beyond the grave — is forever! Whether it is happy or miserable, whether it is a condition of joy or sorrow — we know that in one respect it will be utterly unlike anything in this world — it will be *forever*. There will be no change and decay, no end, no goodbye, no mornings and evening, no alteration, and no annihilation. Whatever there is beyond the tomb, when the last trumpet has sounded, and the dead are raised — we know it will be endless, everlasting, and eternal. "What is unseen is eternal."

We cannot fully realize this condition. The contrast between now and then, between this world and the next, is so very great that our feeble minds cannot grasp it all. How we live our lives in this world, brings consequences in the next, that are so tremendous, that they almost take away our breath, and we shrink back from looking at them. But when the Bible speaks plainly — we have no right to turn away from a subject; and with the Bible in our hands, we will do well to look at the "unseen things that are eternal."

Let us settle it then in our minds, for one thing, that **the future happiness of those who are saved is eternal**. However little we may understand it — it is something that will have no end — it will never cease, never grow old, never decay, and never die. "God will fill us with joy in His presence, with *eternal pleasures* at His right hand." (Psalm 16:11) Once they arrive in paradise, the saints will never ever leave that wonderful place. Their inheritance "can never perish, spoil or fade!" They will "receive the crown of glory which will never fade away." (1 Peter 1:4; 5:4) Their *warfare* is finished; their *fight* is over; their *work* is done. "Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst."

They are traveling on towards an "eternal glory which far outweighs" all their struggles — towards . . .

a home which will never be broken up,
a meeting without a parting,
a family gathering without a separation,
a day without night.

Faith will be swallowed up in *sight*, and *hope* in *certainty*. They will see as they have been seen, and know as they have been known, and "be forever with the Lord!" I am not surprised that the apostle Paul adds, "Therefore, encourage each other with these words!" (1 Thessalonians 4:17, 18)

For another thing, let us settle it in our minds, that **the future misery of those who are lost is eternal**. I am aware that this is a dreadful truth, and flesh and blood naturally shrink from the contemplation of it. But I am one of those who believe it is clearly revealed in Scripture, and I dare not keep it back in the pulpit. To my eyes, eternal future happiness and eternal future misery appear to stand side by side. I fail to see how you can distinguish the duration of one, from the duration of the other. If the *joy of the believer* is forever — then the *sorrow of the unbeliever* is also forever. If Heaven is eternal — likewise so is Hell. It may be my ignorance — but I do not know how the conclusion can be avoided.

I cannot reconcile the concept of a "non-eternal" punishment with the language of the Bible. Its advocates talk loudly about love and kindness, and say that it does not harmonize with the merciful and compassionate character of God. But what does the Scripture say?

Who ever spoke such loving and merciful words as our Lord Jesus Christ? Yet His are the lips which three times over describe the consequence of refusing to repent of sin, as "the worm that does not die, and the fire that is not quenched." He is the Person who speaks in one sentence, of the wicked going away to "eternal punishment," and the righteous to "eternal life." (Mark 9:43-48; Matthew 25:46)

Who does not remember the Apostle *Paul's* words about love? Yet he is the very Apostle who says, the wicked "will be punished with everlasting destruction." (2 Thessalonians 1:9)

Who does not know the spirit of love that runs through all *John's* Gospel and Epistles? Yet the beloved Apostle is the very writer in the New Testament who dwells most strongly, in the book of Revelation, on the reality and eternity of future agony.

What will we say to all these things? Will we be wiser than that which is written? Will we admit the dangerous principle that *words* in Scripture do not mean what they *appear* to mean? Is it not far better to put our hands over our mouths and say,

"Whatever God has written must be true!" "Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments!" (Revelation 16:7)

I lay no claim to any unusual knowledge of Scripture. I daily feel that I am no more *infallible* than the Pope of Rome. But I must speak according to the light that God has given to me; and I do not think I would be doing my duty if I did not raise a warning voice on this subject, and try to put Christians on their guard. Six thousand years ago sin entered into the world by the *devil's daring lie*, "You will not surely die!" (Genesis 3:4) At the end of six thousand years, the great enemy of mankind is still using his old weapon, and trying to persuade men that they may live and die in sin — and yet at some distant period may be finally saved. Let us not be ignorant of his devices. Let us walk steadily in the old paths. Let us hold fast the old truth, and believe that as the happiness of the saved is eternal — so also is the misery of the lost.

"There is nothing that Satan desires more than that we would believe that he does not exist, and that there is no such a place as Hell, and no such things as eternal torments. He whispers all this into our ears, and he rejoices when he hears any deny these things, for then he hopes to make them and others his victims." — *Wordsworth*

(a) Let us be faithful, in the interest of the whole system of the Christian religion.

What was the use of God's Son becoming incarnate, agonizing in Gethsemane, and dying on the cross to make atonement — if men can ultimately be saved without believing on Him? Where is the slightest proof that saving faith in Christ's blood can ever be achieved *after* death? Where is the need of the Holy Spirit, if sinners can enter Heaven without conversion and renewal of heart? Where can we find the smallest evidence that after a person dies in an unregenerate state — that *later* he can still be born again, and have a new heart? If a man, without faith in Christ or sanctification of the Spirit, can escape eternal punishment — then sin is no longer an infinite evil — and there was no need for Christ making atonement.

(b) Let us be faithful, because of *holiness and morality*.

I can imagine nothing so *pleasant to our flesh and blood*, as the deceptive theory that we may live in sin — and yet escape eternal damnation; and that although we are "enslaved by all kinds of evil passions and pleasures" while we are on earth — we will somehow all eventually get to Heaven! Just tell the young man who "squandered his wealth in wild living" that Heaven is available even for those who live and die in sin, and he is never likely to turn from it. Why should he repent and take up the cross — if he can get eventually get to Heaven without repenting?

(c) Finally, let us be faithful, because of the common hopes of all God's people.

Let us distinctly understand that every blow struck at eternal punishment — is an equally heavy blow at the eternity of Heaven's bliss. It is impossible to separate the two things. No ingenious theological definition can divide them. They stand or fall together. The same *language* is used, the same *figures of speech* are employed, when the Bible speaks about either condition. Every attack on the duration of Hell — is also an attack on the duration of Heaven. It is true that if we take away the fear of Hell from sinners — then we also have taken away our own hope!

I turn from this part of my subject with a deep sense of its painfulness. I strongly agree with Robert McCheyne, that "*it is a hard subject to handle lovingly.*" But I turn from it with an equally deep conviction that if we believe the Bible — then we must never give up anything that it contains. *Dear Jesus, deliver us from hard, austere, and unmerciful theology!* If men are not saved — it is because they "refuse to come to Christ." (John 5:40) But we must not be wise above that which is written. No morbid love of *liberality*, so called, must induce us to reject anything that God has revealed about eternity!

Men sometimes talk exclusively about God's *mercy* and *love* and *compassion* — as if He had no other attributes, and leave out His *holiness* and His *purity*, His *justice* and His *wrath*, and His *hatred of sin*. Let us beware of falling into this delusion. It is a growing evil in these last days. Low and inadequate views of the absolute vileness and filthiness of sin, and of the indescribable purity of the eternal God — are fertile sources of error about man's future state! Let us think about the *mighty Being* whom we are subject to, as He Himself declared His character to Moses saying, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin!" But let us not forget the solemn clause that concludes the sentence, "Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished!" (Exodus 34:6, 7) *Unrepented sin is an eternal evil*, and can never cease to be sin; and the One we are subject to is an eternal God!

The words of Psalm 145 are strikingly beautiful, "The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is good to all; He has compassion on all He has made. The Lord upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down. The Lord is righteous in all His ways and loving toward all He has made. The Lord is near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth. The Lord watches over all who love Him." Nothing can exceed the *mercifulness* of this language! But what a striking fact it is that the passage goes on to add the following *solemn conclusion*, "But all the wicked, He will destroy."

III. The *third* thought that I bring to your attention is this: our future state in the unseen world of eternity — depends entirely on what we are in the present!

The life that we live on the earth is short and soon gone! "We spend our years as a tale that is told." "What is your life? You are a *mist* that appears for a little while — and then vanishes!" (Psalm 90:9; James 4:14) The life that is before us when we leave this world, is an endless eternity, a *sea without a bottom*, and an *ocean without a shore*. "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day." (2 Peter 3:8) In that world, there will be no more *time*. But as short as our life is here, and as endless as it will be in eternity — the life we now live will have a tremendous impact on eternity. Our lot after death depends, humanly speaking — on what we are while we are alive. It is written, God "will give to each person according to what he has done. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality — He will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil — there will be wrath and anger!" (Romans 2:6-8)

We must never forget, that every one of us, while we live, are in a state of *probation*. We are constantly *sowing seeds* which will spring up and bear fruit, every day and every hour in our lives. There are *eternal consequences* resulting from all our thoughts and words and actions, of which we pay too little attention to. "Men will have to give account on the Day of Judgment, for *every careless word* they have spoken." (Matthew 12:36) Our *thoughts* are all numbered; our *actions* are weighed. No wonder that Paul says, "The one who sows to please his sinful nature — from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit — from the Spirit will reap eternal life." (Galatians 6:8) In a word, what we sow in life — we will reap after death, and reap throughout all eternity!

There is no greater delusion than the common idea that it is possible to live wickedly — and yet rise again gloriously; to be without Christ in this world — and yet to be a saint in the next. When that great preacher George Whitefield revived the doctrine of conversion, in the last century, it is reported that one of his listeners came to him after a sermon and said, "It is all quite true, sir. I hope I will be converted and born again one day — but not until after I am dead." I fear there are many like him. I fear the false doctrine of the Roman Catholic *Purgatory* has many secret friends even within the confines Protestantism today! However sinfully and carelessly men may go on while they live, they secretly cling to the hope that they will be found among the saints when they die. They seem to embrace the idea that there is some *cleansing, purifying* effect produced by death, and that, whatever they may be in this life, they will be found "suitable for the inheritance of the saints" in the life to come. *But it is all a delusion!*

"The Scripture never represents the state of future misery, as a state of cleansing and purification, or anything analogous to a state of trial, where men may conform and qualify themselves for some better state of existence — but always as a state of retribution, punishment, and righteous vengeance, in which God's *justice* (a perfection of which some men seem to render no account) vindicates the power of His majesty, His government, and His love — by punishing those who have despised.

The Bible clearly teaches, that what we are when we die, whether converted or unconverted, whether believers or unbelievers, whether godly or ungodly — so we will be when we rise again at the sound of the last trumpet. There is no repentance in the *grave* — there is no conversion after the last breath is drawn. Now is the time to believe in Christ, and to lay hold of eternal life. Now is the time to turn from darkness to light, and to make our calling and election sure. The night comes, when no man can work. *As the tree falls — there it will lie.* If we leave this world refusing to repent and believe — then we will rise in the same condition on resurrection morning, and find that it would have been "better for us if we had never been born!"

"This life is the time of our preparation for our future state. Our souls will continue forever what we make them in this world. Such a taste and disposition of mind as a man carries with him out of this life — he will retain in the next. It is absolutely true that Heaven perfects those holy and virtuous dispositions, which are *begun* here; but the eternal world alters no man as to his *main state*. He who is filthy — will be filthy still; and he who is unrighteous — will be unrighteous still." — Tillotson

I strongly advise readers of this paper to remember this, and to make a good use of their *time*. Regard it as the stuff of which life is made, and never waste it or throw it away. Your hours and days and weeks and months and years — all have something to say to your eternal condition beyond the grave. What you sow in this life on earth — you are sure to reap in a life to come. As holy Richard Baxter says, it is "now or never!" Whatever we do in religion — must be done now.

Keep this foremost in your mind, whenever you are tempted to do evil. When sinners entice you, and say, "It is only a *little* sin." When Satan whispers in your heart, "Never mind — what is the great harm in it? Everybody does it" — then look *beyond time* to the unseen world, and place *the thought of eternity* in the face of the temptation. There is a great saying by the martyred Reformer, Hooper, when someone urged him to recant before he was burned, saying, "Life is sweet and death is bitter." "True," said Hooper, "quite true! But eternal life is more sweet — and eternal death is more bitter!"

IV. The last thought which I bring to the attention of my readers is this — the Lord Jesus Christ is the great friend to whom we must all look to for help, both for now and eternity.

The reason why the eternal Son of God came into the world, can never be declared too fully, or proclaimed too loudly. He came to give us *hope* and *peace*, while we live among the "temporary things which are seen;" and *glory* and *blessedness* when we go to the "eternal things, which are unseen." He came to bring "life and immortality to light," and to "free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." (2 Timothy 1:10; Hebrews 2:15) He saw our lost and bankrupt condition, and had compassion on us. And now, blessed be His name, a mortal man may pass through "temporary things" with comfort, and look forward to "eternal things" without fear!

Our Lord Jesus Christ has *purchased* these mighty privileges for us at the cost of His own precious blood. He became our Substitute, and bore our sins in His own body on the cross, and then rose again for our justification. "Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God." "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us" — that we poor sinful creatures might have pardon and justification while we live, and glory and blessedness when we die. (1 Peter 2:24; 3:18; 2 Corinthians 5:21)

And all that our Lord Jesus Christ has purchased for us — He offers freely to everyone who will turn from his sins, come to Him, and believe. "I am the light of the world," He says, "whoever follows Me will never walk in darkness — but will have the light of life." "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink." "Whoever comes to me — I will never drive away." And the *terms* are as *simple* as the offer is *free*, "Believe in the Lord Jesus — and you will be saved." "Whoever believes in Him — shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 8:12; Matthew 11:28; John 7:37; 6:37; Acts 16:31; John 3:16)

He who has Christ — has eternal life. He can look around at the "temporary things," and see change and decay everywhere — and yet have no fear. He has got treasure in Heaven, "where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal." He can look forward to the "eternal things," and feel calm and composed. His Savior has risen, and has gone to prepare a place for him. When he leaves this world — he will have a crown of glory, and be forever with his Lord. He can look down even into the grave, as the wisest Greeks and Romans could never do, and say, "*Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?*" (1 Corinthians 15:55)

Let us all settle it firmly in our minds, that the only way to pass through "what is seen" with comfort, and look forward to "what is unseen" without fear — is to have Christ for our Savior and Friend, to lay hold of Christ by faith, to become one with Christ and Christ in us, and while we live in the flesh to live the life of faith in the Son of God. (Galatians 2:20)

How vast is the difference between the state of him who has true faith in Christ — and the state of him who has none! Blessed indeed is that man or woman, who can say, with truth, "I trust in Jesus — I believe!" When the Catholic Cardinal Beaufort lay on his deathbed, our mighty poet describes King Henry as saying, "He dies — but gives no sign of comfort." When John Knox, the Scotch Reformer, was drawing to his end, and unable to speak, a faithful servant asked him to give some proof that the Gospel he had preached in life gave him comfort in death, by raising his hand. He heard; and raised his hand toward Heaven three times, and then departed. I say again, blessed is he who believes! He alone is rich, independent, and beyond the reach of harm! If you and I have no comfort among temporary things, and no hope for the eternal things — then it is completely our own fault. It is because we "refuse to come to Christ to have life." (John 5:40)

I leave the subject of eternity here, and pray that God may bless it to many souls. In conclusion, I offer to every one who reads this volume some food for thought, and material for **SELF-EXAMINATION**.

(1) First of all, how are you using your *time*? Life is short and very uncertain. You never know what a day may bring forth. Business and pleasure, making money, and spending money, eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage — all, all will soon be over and done with forever. And you — what are you doing for your immortal soul? Are you wasting time, or using it wisely? Are you preparing to meet God?

(2) Secondly, where will *you* be in eternity? It is coming, coming, coming very fast upon us. You are going, going, going very fast into it. But where will you be — on the right hand or on the left, in the Day of Judgment? Are you among the lost or among the saved? Oh, do not rest; do not rest until your soul is secured! Be prepared — leave nothing uncertain. It is a dreadful thing to die unprepared, and fall into the hands of the living God.

(3) Thirdly, do you want to be *safe* now and in eternity? Then seek Christ, and believe in Him. Come to Him just as you are. Seek Him while He may be found, call on Him while He is near. There is still a *throne of grace*. It is not too late. Christ waits

to be gracious — He invites you to come to Him. Before the door is shut and the judgment begins, repent, believe, and be saved.

(4) Lastly, do you want to be *happy*? Cling to Christ and live a life of faith in Him. Remain in Him and live close to Him. Follow Him with heart and soul and mind and strength, and seek to know Him better every day. By doing so, you will have great peace while you pass through the "temporary things," and in the midst of a dying world you "will never die!" (John 11:26) By doing so you will be able to look forward to "eternal things" with unfailing confidence, and to feel and "know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in Heaven, not built by human hands!" (2 Corinthians 5:1)