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The Pains of Hell



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From the Writings of St. Anthony Mary Claret

The sensation of pain in Hell is essentially very dreadful. Picture yourself, my soul, on a dark night on the summit of a high mountain. Beneath you is a deep valley, and the earth opens so that with your gaze you can see Hell in the cavity of it. Picture it as a prison situated in the center of the earth, many leagues down, all full of fire, hemmed in so impenetrably that for all eternity not even the smoke can escape. In this prison the damned are packed so tightly one on the other like bricks in a kiln... Consider the quality of the fire in which they burn.

First, the fire is all-extensive and tortures the whole body and the whole soul. A damned person lies in Hell forever in the same spot, which he was assigned by divine justice, without being able to move, as a prisoner in stocks.

The fire, in which he is totally enveloped, as a fish in water, burns around him, on his left, his right, above and below. His head, his breast, his shoulders, his arms, his hands, and his feet are all penetrated with fire, so that he completely resembles a glowing hot piece of iron, which has just been withdrawn from an oven. The roof beneath which the damned person dwells is fire; the food he takes is fire; the drink he tastes is fire; the air he breathes is fire; whatever he sees and touches is all fire....

But this fire is not merely outside him; it also passes within the condemned person. It penetrates his brain, his teeth, his tongue, his throat, his liver, his lungs, his bowels, his belly, his heart, his veins, his nerves, his bones, even to the marrow, and even his blood.

"In Hell," according to St. Gregory the Great, "there will be a fire that cannot be put out, a worm which cannot die, a stench one cannot bear, a darkness one can feel, a scourging by savage hands, with those present despairing of anything good."

A most dreadful fact is that by the divine power this fire goes so far as to work on the very faculties of the soul, burning them and tormenting them. Suppose I were to find myself placed at the oven of a smith so that my whole body was in the open air but for one arm placed in the fire, and that God were to preserve my life for a thousand years in this position. Would this not be an unbearable torture? What, then, would it be like to be completely penetrated and surrounded by fire, which would affect not just an arm, but even all the faculties of the soul?

More Dreadful than Man Can Imagine

Secondly, this fire is far more dreadful than man can imagine. The natural fire that we see during this life has great power to burn and torment. Yet this is not even a shadow of the fire of Hell. There are two reasons why the fire of Hell is more dreadful beyond all comparison than the fire of this life.

Neither can I understand why other priests who believe the selfsame truths as I do, as we all must do, do not preach or exhort their flock so that they might avoid this unbearable eternity of Hell. It is still a source of wonder to me how the laity – those men and women blessed with the Faith – do not give warning to those who need it. If a house were to catch fire in the middle of the night, and if the inhabitants of the same house and the other townsfolk were asleep and did not see the danger, would not the one who first noticed it shout and run along the streets, exclaiming: "Fire! Fire! In that house over there!" Then why should there not be a warning of eternal fire to waken those who are drifting in the sleep of sin in such a way that when they open their eyes they will find themselves burning in the eternal flames of Hell?

It is an essential misfortune of Hell that everything will be without relief, without remedy, without interruption, without end, eternal.

The Kindness of His Mercy

Now I understand in part, O my God, what Hell is. It is a place of extreme pain, of extreme despair. It is where I deserve to be for my sins, where I would have been confined for some years already if your immense mercy had not delivered me. I will keep repeating a thousand times: The Heart of Jesus has loved me, or else I would now be in Hell! The mercy of Jesus has pitied me, for otherwise I would be in Hell! The Blood of Jesus has reconciled me with the heavenly Father, or my dwelling place would be Hell. This shall be the hymn that I want to sing to Thee, my God, for all eternity. Yes, from now on my intention is to repeat these words as many times as there are moments that have passed since that unhappy hour in which I first offended You.

What has been my gratitude to God for his kind mercy that He showed me? He delivered me from Hell. O, immense charity! O, infinite goodness! After a benefit so great, should I not have given Him my whole heart and loved Him with the love of the most ardent Seraphim? Should I not have directed all my actions to Him and in everything sought only His divine pleasure, accepting all contradictions with joy, in order to return to Him my love? Could I do less than that after a kindness that was so great? And yet, what is it that I have done? Oh, ingratitude worthy of another Hell! I cast You aside, O my God! I reacted to Your mercy by committing new sins and offenses. I know that I have done evil, O my God, and I repent with my whole heart. Ah, would that I could shed a sea of tears for such outrageous ingratitude! O Jesus, have mercy on me; for I now resolve to rather suffer a thousand deaths than offend You again.

The Urgency of Hell

It is of faith that Heaven exists for the good and Hell for the wicked. Faith teaches that the pains of Hell are eternal, and it also warns us that one single mortal sin suffices to condemn a soul forever because of the infinite malice by which it offends an infinite God. With these most positive principles in mind, how can I remain indifferent when I see the ease with which sins are committed, sins that occur as frequently as one takes a glass of water, sins and offenses that are perpetrated out of levity or diversion? How can I rest when so many are to be seen living continually in mortal sin and rushing in this blind manner to their eternal destruction? No indeed, I cannot rest, but must need to run and shout a warning to them. If I saw anyone about to fall into a pit or a fire, would I not run up to him and warn him, and do all in my power to help him from falling in? Why should I not do this much to keep sinners from falling into the pit and fires of Hell?

The first reason is the justice of God, which the fire serves as an instrument in order to punish the infinite wrong done to his supreme majesty, which has been despised by a creature. Therefore, justice supplies this element with a burning power, which almost reaches the infinite....

The second reason is the malice of sin. As God knows that the fire of this world is not enough to punish sin, as it deserves, He has given the fire of Hell a power so strong that it can never be comprehended by any human mind. Now, how powerfully does this fire burn?

It burns so powerfully, O my soul, that, according to the ascetical masters, if a mere spark of it fell on a millstone; it would reduce it in a moment to powder. If it fell on a ball of bronze, it would melt it in an instant as if it were wax. If it landed on a frozen lake, it would make it boil in an instant.

Pause here briefly, my soul, and answer a few questions I will put. First, I ask you: If a special furnace were fired up as was customarily done to torment the holy martyrs, and then men placed before you all kinds of good things that the human heart might want, and added the offer of a prosperous kingdom – if all this were promised you on condition that for just a half-hour you enclose yourself within the furnace, what would you choose?

A Hundred Kingdoms

"Ah!" you would say, "If you offered me a hundred kingdoms I would never be so foolish as to accept your brutal terms, regardless of how grand your offer might be, even if I were sure that God would preserve my life during those moments of suffering."

Second, I ask you: If you already had possession of a great kingdom and were swimming in a sea of wealth so that nothing was wanting to you, and then you were attacked by an enemy, were imprisoned and put in chains and obliged to either renounce your kingdom or else spend a half-hour in a hot furnace, what would you choose? "Ah!" you would say, "I would prefer to spend my whole life in extreme poverty and submit to any other hardship and misfortune, than suffer such a great torment!"

A Prison of Eternal Fire

Now turn your thoughts from the temporal to the eternal. To avoid the torment of a hot furnace, which would last but a half-hour, you would forgo all your property, even things you are most fond of; you would suffer any other temporal loss, however burdensome. Then why do you not think the same way when you are dealing of eternal torments? God threatens you not just with a half-hour in a furnace, but with a prison of eternal fire. To escape it,

should you not forgo whatever He has forbidden, no matter how pleasant it can be for you, and gladly embrace whatever He commands, even if it be extremely unpleasant

A most terrible thing about Hell is its duration. The condemned person loses God and loses Him for all eternity. Now, what is eternity? O my soul, up to now there has not been any angel who has been able to comprehend what eternity is. So how can you comprehend it? Yet, to form some idea of it, consider the following truths:

Eternity never ends. This is the truth that has made even the great saints tremble. The final judgment will come, the world will be destroyed, the earth will swallow up those who are damned, and they will be cast into Hell. Then, with His almighty hand, God will shut them up in that most unhappy prison.

From then on, as many years will pass as there are leaves on the trees and plants on all the earth, as many thousands of years as there are drops of water in all seas and rivers, as many thousands of years as there are atoms in the air, as there are grains of sand on all the shores of all seas. Then, after the passage of this countless number of years, what will eternity be? Up to then there will not even have been a hundredth part of it, nor a thousandth – nothing. It then begins again and will last as long again, even after this has been repeated a thousand times, and a thousand million times again. And then, after so long a period, not even a half will have passed, not even a hundredth part nor a thousandth, not even any part of eternity. For all this time there is no interruption in the burnings of those who are damned, and it begins all over again.

Oh, a deep mystery indeed! A terror above all terrors! O eternity! Who can comprehend thee?

The Tears of Cain

Suppose that, in the case of unhappy Cain, weeping in Hell, he shed in every thousand years just one tear. Now, O my soul, recollect your thoughts and suppose this case: For six thousand years at least Cain has been in Hell and shed only six tears, which God miraculously preserves. How many years would pass for his tears to fill all the valleys of the earth and flood all the cities and towns and villages and cover all the mountains so as to flood the whole earth? We understand the distance from the earth to the sun is thirty-four million leagues. How many years would be necessary for Cain's tears to fill that immense space? From the earth to the firmament is, let us suppose, a distance of a hundred and sixty million leagues.

O God! What number of years might one imagine to be sufficient to fill with these tears this immense space? And yet – O truth so incomprehensible – be sure of it, as that God cannot lie – a time will arrive in which these tears of Cain would be sufficient to flood the world, to reach even the sun, to touch the firmament, and fill all the space between earth and the highest heaven. But that is not all.

If God dried up all these tears to the last drop and Cain began again to weep, he would again fill the same entire space with them and fill it a thousands times and a million times in succession, and after all those countless years, not even half of eternity would have passed, not even a fraction. After all that time burning in Hell, Cain's sufferings will be just beginning.

This eternity is also without relief. It would indeed be a small consolation and of little benefit for the condemned persons to be able to receive a brief respite once every thousand years.

No Relief

Picture in Hell a place where there are three reprobates. The first is plunged in a lake of sulfuric fire, the second is chained to a large rock and is being tormented by two devils, one of whom continually pours molten lead down his throat while the other spills it all over his body, covering him from head to foot. The third reprobate is being tortured by two serpents, one of which wraps around the man's body and cruelly gnaws on it, while the other enters within the body and attacks the heart. Suppose God is moved to pity and grants a short respite.

The first man, after the passage of a thousand years is drawn from the lake and receives the relief of a drink of cool water, and at the end of an hour is cast again into the lake. The second, after a thousand years, is released from his place and allowed to rest, but after an hour is again returned to the same torment. The third, after a thousand years, is delivered from the serpents; but after an hour of relief, is again abused and tormented by them. Ah, how little this consolation would be – to suffer a thousand years and to rest only one hour.

However, Hell does not even have that much relief. One burns always in those dreadful flames and never receives any relief for all eternity. He is forever gnawed and stricken with remorse, and will never have a rest for all eternity. He will suffer always a very ardent thirst and never receive the refreshment of a sip of water for all eternity. He will see himself always abhorred by God and will never enjoy a single tender glance from Him for all eternity. He will find himself forever cursed by heaven and Hell, and will never receive a single gesture of friendship.