

# HEAVEN OR HELL; TO WHICH ARE YOU GOING?

## A SERMON

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“Vessels of wrath fitted to destruction.” Romans 9:22

THIS brings us upon a subject very unwelcome to the ears of men. And yet, after all, if we receive the Bible, which we do, as given by inspiration of God, and that all Scripture is profitable, then this part must, as well as other parts, be profitable; and it is a part that certainly must concern us. And if the Lord enable me to speak properly, and scripturally, and as becomes the solemnity of the subject before us, I hope and trust we may find it not altogether unprofitable to notice the several solemn things that are implied in the language of our text. I will endeavor to do so by noticing three doctrines from our text. First, that of our state by nature; secondly, *the doctrine of reprobation*; third, and lastly, *the doctrine of divine sovereignty*. These, I think, are the three things pretty fairly implied in our text.

First, then, “vessels of wrath fitted to destruction.” This is descriptive of what all are by nature. All men through the fall of man, without exception, are vessels of wrath fitted to destruction. We are apt sometimes to think that these words apply only to those that shall be finally lost. They do indeed apply to those that will be finally lost; but at the same time, they are descriptive of the whole human race. Let us look for a moment at the fall of man, or rather at the Word of God, what it says upon it. Go to the 5th of the Romans, and there we have it as clear as anything well can be, that one man sinned, and death reigned by one; and he, as the federal and the natural head of all the human race, did in that one sin involve the whole human race; so that all are held by that one offence as sinners, as dead in trespasses and in sins; as corrupt, unclean, filthy, none that understands, no, not one. So that all by nature are thus vessels of wrath, independent of anything they have ever done; and the newborn baby is as much a vessel of wrath as the man of riper years; there is no difference whatever; all shaped in iniquity, “in sin,” said one, “did my mother conceive me,” and so go astray from the very womb, speaking lies. This is our state by nature. Now the apostle says in his 2nd chapter to the Ephesians, when pointing out what our state by nature is, “And we were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.” There, you see, he clearly implies that all by nature are children of wrath, because all are under sin, all are under the law, and all are under death. Now there are *three* things that fit us for destruction, and those three things, in order for us to escape destruction, must be removed. These three things I will first notice. First, we are fitted for destruction by our ignorance, which is natural to us, and into which sin has brought us.

Secondly, we are fitted to destruction by our natural antipathy to the truth of God; and thirdly and lastly, we are fitted to destruction by our guiltiness. First, then, we are fitted for destruction by our ignorance. Hence you read of "being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them." And you will also find in the Scriptures that those persons who have not that knowledge, I must presently say something concerning that, those who have not that knowledge, that they must be lost, that they are unfit for heaven. Hence it is said that no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand that were redeemed from among men. And again, "The secret of the Lord," or the counsel of the Lord, "is with them that fear him, and he will show them his covenant." Whereas, on the contrary, it is said, "It is a people," and that describes us all by nature, "of no understanding, and therefore he that made them," that is, living and dying in that state, "will show them no favor, and he that formed them will not have mercy upon them." And then, again, that the Lord Jesus Christ shall take vengeance on them that "know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." And then, again, "This people do always err in their hearts, for they have not known my way. Therefore, I swore in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest." So, then, if we have not the knowledge, the saving, vital knowledge of God, we are not fit for heaven; and if we are not fit or prepared for heaven, then we are, by our inability to appreciate God's truth, fitted only for hell. But it is not my intention to dwell this morning merely on the gloomy side of the question; we have no occasion to do so. Now, then, what is that kind of knowledge that we must have to fit us for heaven? We must have that kind of knowledge that shall enable us to appreciate the love of God, and the Christ of God, and the counsel of God, and the glory of God. Without this knowledge, we cannot be saved. There must be that kind of knowledge that shall enable us to appreciate the love of God. And what is that kind of knowledge? Why, a sight and sense of our ignorance, and that we are by nature under sin, and under wrath, and that our just desert is banishment from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power; and this laying hold of the conscience, and we made concerned for our eternal welfare, we begin to look about for a way of escape; and in the Lord's own time Jesus Christ is revealed unto us as the gift of God's love. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes on him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Now where the knowledge is real, such an one will say, Can nothing, then, but Jesus Christ deliver my soul from death? Is this the way that God has shown his love? Here is a gift of infinite value; here is a gift of eternal duration; a Jesus Christ that is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And so, by Jesus Christ you will begin to understand the love of God; you will begin to see that Jesus Christ is the free gift of God; you will begin to see that Jesus Christ is the final gift of God; he is not only the free gift of God, but he is the final gift of God. You nowhere read in the Bible of Jesus Christ being taken away again; he is given once and forever; and so, his salvation is forever, his righteousness is forever, his redemption is eternal, and the conquest that he has wrought is eternal; he has conquered, never again to be conquered. As I have said sometimes, Satan was the conqueror of the world, and Christ has conquered the conqueror of the world, and has taken the reins of government into his own hands. "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Now, my hearer, what is this love to us? Do we appreciate it? Do we esteem it above all other love? Do we see that the love of God is as much above all other love as he himself is above the creature? Do we see that there is no loving-kindness so excellent as his loving-kindness? Do we see that there is no safety anywhere else? It is the beloved of the Lord that shall dwell in safety. And are we brought to understand this love in the freeness of it, as shown in the gift of his dear Son? Are we brought to understand the eternity of this love by the eternity of the gift of this love? Christ Jesus himself, as I have said, the same yesterday, today, and forever?

Are we thus brought? If so, then we are delivered from that ignorance we are in by nature; and now, whereas once we were fitted only to destruction by our ignorance, now we know the love of God, now we understand, for the Lord says, "He that will observe these things, even he shall understand the loving-kindness of the Lord." And what will be the result? Why, the result will be that your heart and affections will be drawn out to him, and you will say, as does the apostle, "We love him, because he first loved us." Look back at the time when you were ignorant of the gift of this love; when you were ignorant of the freeness, and finality, and eternity of this love; when it had no attractions for you; when you were governed by the powers of darkness, and the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience, walking according to the course of this world, and caring nothing for the love of God. But now you love him because he has loved you. You are not now a vessel of wrath; you are now a vessel of mercy. You were a vessel of wrath, but the Lord convinced you of your state, and now you are enabled to appreciate his loving-kindness. In your former state you could not come into his presence, because you could not understand or appreciate his love. In your former state you could not enjoy heaven itself because you could not appreciate nor understand his loving-kindness. Then, again, it must be the kind of knowledge that shall enable you to appreciate the Lord Jesus Christ. That is a beautiful test of faith which the apostle Peter lays before us and let us, as long as we live, keep close to our Bible; let us keep close to the Book of God; let us keep close to the rules and laws that are there laid down. And I should like to see some of you keep a little closer to them than you do. How some of you can read the word of God from time to time and see the ordinance of baptism followed by the Savior himself, commanded to his apostles, and his apostles ministering it, and primitive Christians obeying it, and the Lord saying, "If you love me, keep my commandments;" and yet this commandment you set at nothing. And then follows another solemn, and at the same time delightful command, commemorative of his wondrous death: "Take this: this is my blood in the new testament" the blood of the everlasting covenant, the covenant ordered in all things and sure, "Do this in remembrance of me." "If you love me, keep my commandments and yet how many of you for years have set this commandment also at nothing, and you care nothing for it! It has often grieved me. I love you sincerely and have a union of soul to you (I speak now to those of you that are good people), and yet how long have you made light of and set these commandments at nothing! My brethren, these things ought not to be so. "He that has my commandments, he that keeps my words, he it is that loves me," Let us; then, keep close to the book of the blessed God. Let us, then, notice that test, after this digressive remark or two, which I could not forbear making, both in love to the word of God, and to the people of God. Observe, then, the test which the apostle Peter gives us of our power to appreciate Christ, the test he gives us, I should say, of the reality of our faith. He says, "Unto you that believe he is precious." Now, if we are delivered from our former ignorance, unto us Jesus Christ will be precious. You will not be able to find a malady, go where you may, for which his precious blood is not a remedy. If dead, his blood is the life; if unclean, his blood washes us clean; if wounded, his blood heals us; if we are overcome, his atonement steps in and gives us the victory; if we are in a pit wherein there is no water, his atonement comes down and brings us up out of that pit, and sets our feet upon the rock of truth, and puts a new song into our mouth, even praise unto our God; and if we be afar off, his precious blood brings us near; and if we are cast down, his precious atonement can raise us up: and if we are gloomy and miserable, his atonement can make us joyful. And, in a word, there is no malady, there is no evil for which his atonement is not a remedy. My hearer, is this your religion? and can you thus appreciate the Savior, as the apostle Peter indicates? "Unto you that believe," that is, with a saving faith, not with an ignorant faith, but a faith associated with an enlightened understanding, a faith of which God is the author, for "all your children shall

be taught of the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children.” And the greatness of this peace is certainly by the mediatorial perfection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Bless his holy name! When I look at the variety, as far as with my contracted views I can see into the variety of his atonement, and into the variety of his righteousness, oh, how my soul clings to it! I have often enjoyed those words you sometimes sing,

“And still my soul would cleave to you,  
Though prostrate in the dust.”

Notice, then, poor sinner, those of you that cannot appreciate this loving-kindness, you are at present a vessel of wrath; you are at present fitted only for destruction; but if God should open your eyes, and give you to see what and where you are, and lead you to see his loving-kindness, then you will begin to give evidence that though you are by nature a child of wrath, you are become by grace a child of God, are by grace a believer in Jesus, and are become by grace a heir of God, and joint heir with the Lord Jesus Christ. And those of you that are dead in sin, you cannot appreciate the atonement of Jesus Christ. You never in your avocations, and in your reflections and meditations, you never come to a dead sort of stop, and your soul begins to be somewhat on fire towards God, and you are ready to say secretly in your heart before God, as you contemplate the suitability of Jesus, you clasp your hands to help you express the feelings of your heart, and you say concerning Jesus,

“Yes, you are precious to my soul,  
My transport and my trust;  
Jewels to you are gaudy toys,  
And gold is sordid dust.”

The natural man knows not what these sacred moments are; the natural man knows not what these divine visitations are. Live and die a stranger to this loving-kindness of God in Christ; live and die a stranger to the preciousness of Christ, and you are a vessel fitted to destruction. Where God is you never can come; for if you come into his presence, it cannot be by the doings of the creature, it must be by his loving-kindness; it must be by his dear Son; it must be by Jesus being enthroned in your affections, and every power, rule, or authority put down; and that you have no authority, you allow no authority in your soul for the hope you have in God but the power of the Lord Jesus Christ. Also, we must be so delivered from ignorance as to appreciate the counsel of God. The eternal salvation of an immortal soul is not a random matter; it is not a loose, indefinite, undefinable, floating, conditional, may or may not be matter. No; the counsels of God are definite. “Chosen in Christ before the world was.” Understand you that, and do you appreciate that? “Blessed with all spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus before the world was.” And in this same Christ Jesus in whom the people were originally blessed and chosen, in this same Christ Jesus that same chapter, 1st of Ephesians, shows that it is in the same Christ Jesus “we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who works all things after the counsel of his own will.” Now, my hearer, you cannot go to heaven unless you are brought to understand the counsel of God, and to appreciate the counsel of God. It was a want of this knowledge, a want of this understanding, that shut the Jews of old out of the land. The Lord swore in his wrath that they should not enter into his land. What was the good of taking them there? There they were, in ignorance of his loving-kindness, in ignorance of the meaning of the ceremonial law,

in ignorance of his counsels; and if such had entered the land, all they could have done would have been, and, indeed, as thousands afterwards did so, to set up idolatry in the land, in opposition to God's truth. Just the same now. You receive, as many of our churches do. I would not give a straw for the religion of nine-tenths that are received as members of Christian churches in our day. They come in, what do they bring with them? A sight and sense of their lost, helpless condition? No. What do they bring with them? Such an experience as enables them to appreciate the freeness, the eternity, the immutability of the love of God in Christ? No. What is the kind of experience they bring with them? Such as to enable them to appreciate the Christ of God in what he really is, and the counsels, the unalterable, the glorious, the suited, every way adapted counsels of God? No; they bring no such knowledge with them; I speak not now of those few churches that do stand out for vital godliness. But what do they bring? Why, just a little professed reformation. Peradventure they have been very profane, and it cost them a great deal of money to get drunk, beastly drunk; and it cost them a great deal of money to go to the theatre; and they have gone on in their profligacy till they are tired of it. A reformation is wrought; they find a religious path much more respectable: the irreligious devil is cast out, seven religious devils take his place; and such persons, polished off as they are, are twofold more the children of hell now than they were before they were converted; for they are converted to error, and they have left off serving the devil in their week-day clothes and they now serve him in their Sunday clothes: that's about the difference. My hearers, that is the state of the churches, a great many in London, and a great many about the country. There is but here and there a church, and here and there a minister, that insists upon vital godliness. But as the Lord lives, if we are not delivered, experimentally delivered, from our ignorance, and made to understand the loving-kindness of God, and to appreciate the Christ of God, and the counsels of God, we are nothing else, but vessels fitted for wrath. Let us not delude ourselves; mere outward reformation, which can be accomplished by creature power, and is the duty of the creature, that is one thing; and for the Holy Spirit to take a sinner in hand, and make that sinner see and feel what he is, is quite another thing. Religion, true religion, is something more than mere notion or whim; it unites the soul to Christ, and there is a realization, from time to time, of the preciousness of that Jesus Christ.

Now, then, the man that is delivered from his ignorance is, as a matter of course, delivered from his enmity. There is the testimony of God's eternal love, the immutability of it. Jesus in his love, says the real Christian, that's the God I adore; there's Jesus Christ always the same, and we always as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, terrible to our mightiest foes, as we stand in Christ, as an army with banners. Ah, says the good man, that's the God I adore. Then come the counsels of God; and the counsels of God are the last point, or last part of the truth generally we are reconciled to. I think there are some about the country now that have grace in the heart; but when we come to these high things of God's immutable counsels, there they stagger; but, however, the Lord will have them right by-and-bye. Now, then, unless we have this knowledge and this reconciliation, our enmity slain, and we brought into harmony with new covenant order, the Mediator of the New Testament, and we brought into harmony with the new covenant, unless brought here we must be lost.

But then, as I have said, we are fitted for destruction by ignorance and enmity, and also by guiltiness. Now I am trying to show, as I go along, how the Lord removes the ignorance and the enmity. But then there is the guiltiness. Verily we are guilty. Happy that man that has in his heart that spirit of grace, upon this subject of guiltiness and supplication felt by the psalmist! and that's

this prayer. But then for us to read it there (51st Psalm) is one thing, and for the language and feeling to be in the soul is another. "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to your loving-kindness" well, then, that's freely, finally, irreversibly; "according unto the multitude of your tender mercies blot out my transgressions." And there is the answer. "I, even I, am he that blots out your transgression, and will not remember your sin." If you have the prayer in the heart, there is the promise in the word, and by-and-bye your prayer and that promise will meet in the soul, and that will carry you on from the 51st Psalm to the 103rd Psalm, where you will begin to sing, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, who forgives all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity," and you read of being washed in the blood of the Lamb, "and cleanse me," thus, "from my sin. Against you, you only, have I sinned," So it is not a matter of concern between him and his fellow-men, but a matter of concern between him and God, "Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done this evil" Our translators assume that the 51st Psalm was written by David, but we have no evidence to prove that it was; secondly, they assume that David wrote that psalm after the fall recorded of him. Hence in the superscription of the psalm it says, "When Nathan came unto David." That superscription is not of Divine authority; it is mere assumption. The translators assuming this put the word *this* into that verse, "Against you, you only have I sinned, and done *this* evil but the word *this* ought not to be there; it is put there by the translators, assuming those two positions; first, that the psalm was written by David, I will not say it was not, but we have no proof it was; secondly, that it was written by him after his fall, that we have no real proof of; but they, assuming that, put the word *this* into that verse, which ought not to be there. "Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done evil in your sight." "That you might be justified when you speak." You have declared us all to be sinners; you have declared that there is none that does good, no, not one; you have declared that we have all gone out of the way, and that we are all become abominable and filthy; and I for one will confess that it is so. And if no one else will justify God in His testimony concerning men, I will, "That you might be justified when you speak, and be clear when you judge." "Behold," take notice of this, God says it is so, and I know it is so; "Behold," as though he should say, Here is the fall of man; and if we are wrong in the doctrine of the fall, we shall be wrong in everything; almost all the errors that abound originate in two things, a perversion of the doctrine of the fall, and a perversion of the doctrine of Divine sovereignty. "Behold, I was shaped in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." Now, my hearer, happy is the man that is thus humbled down, and led to see that the Lord alone can remove this guiltiness! Oh, how encouraging it is everywhere, all through the Scriptures, where there is this knowledge of our state, where there is this spirit of grace and supplication, mercy is on the way. It was the Holy Spirit that led the psalmist to pray for the mercy that God had for him in store. And so, you shall not seek in vain. Says the Savior, "He that seeks," only the seeking must be real, "he that seeks finds; unto him that knocks it shall be opened; to him that asks it shall be given." Thus, then, if we get rid of our ignorance, and get rid of our enmity, and thus get rid of all our guilt and sin, the whole of it blotted out, atoned for, taken away, we come into a new earth and a new heaven, and we become new creatures, and we walk in a new way, and we sing a new song, and we are brought into the bond of a new covenant, and behold all things are new, and he who is brought into this new state shall inherit all things that this new state contains, "He that overcomes shall inherit all things;" that is, all things belonging to this new state, these new heavens and this new earth. Thus, then, through the ignorance that is in us, incapacitated for heaven; through the enmity that is in us, incapacitated for heaven, fit only for hell; through the sin and guilt that lies upon us we are legally fitted for hell. It is sin's demerit; it is the law's sentence; it is the right of justice; it is the appointment of a sin avenging God.

After thus trying to point out, then, how it is we are all vessels of wrath, and what it is to be delivered therefrom, I come now to *the doctrine of reprobation*. I believe man is a voluntary agent, not a free-willier, mind; there is a difference between the two. Man has no power to choose or refuse pertaining to eternal things, because he is utterly ignorant; but he is a voluntary agent. What a man does, he does willingly. Cain brought himself into a reprobate state of mind, and one sin after another so hardened Cain he became at last prepared to murder his own brother. And the old world went on from sin to sin, till they became prepared to despise everything that belonged to God and godliness; and so, God swept the whole away by the flood. Pharaoh worked himself into a reprobate state of mind, and went on so far that he would, if he could, have destroyed all the people of God. And so, the Pharisees of old, they worked themselves, hardened themselves, sin after sin, sin after sin, till they became so hardened as to blaspheme the Son of God, and to crucify him. They knew that he was a good man. They did not know he was *the God-man*, but they did know he was a good man. And Pilate, the heathen governor, knew that for envy they had delivered him unto him. By reprobation I understand what the Scriptures teach, that when a man goes on in acts of enmity against God, from sin to sin, God often gives up such to a reprobate mind, to vile affections, and they are left in that state until they go as far as they can go; and then, when the iniquity of the Amorites is full, then comes the greater damnation of the reprobate. Therefore, by reprobation I do not understand that God makes men sinful; but that God, in the deeps of his sovereignty, leaves some to go on hardening themselves. And one sin will always prepare you for another; one part of Satan's service will always prepare for another. The deceitfulness of sin. One of old, when the prophet, told him what he should do; he was then a man of some humanity, of some benevolent feeling, of some kindly respect for others; a man that held himself in a sort of comfortable estimation. And when the prophet looked at the circumstances into which that man should be brought, and how God, in the deeps of his sovereignty, would leave him to perpetrate the vilest of deeds, the man couldn't think his heart was so wicked, he couldn't think he should ever be such a monster; and he looked the prophet in the face tremblingly, and said, "Is your servant a dog that he should do such things?" And yet, "wonder, O heavens, and be astonished, O earth," that very monster of iniquity, at which he who was to be king of Syria now trembled, and could not believe it, he became the very monster that the prophet declared he should. Here, then, is the mysterious sovereignty of God in leaving men to work out their greater damnation. I do not hold the doctrine of degrees in heaven, but I certainly read of greater condemnation; I certainly read of greater judgment; I certainly read of the wrath of God coming upon some unto the uttermost. Oh, my hearer, what a fearful thing, after all is sin! what dreadful havoc has it made with the human race! It is infinitely bad, even in its ordinary course and operation; and when a man is given up to it, and becomes altogether a despiser of God's truth, whether a man is given up to a reprobate mind morally, or whether he is given up to a reprobate mind spiritually; in the one case he is lost to all sense of shame; in the other case, his heart is filled with demoniacal enmity against the truth of God. A man may be transformed as an angel of light, and although morally he is not given up to a reprobate mind, he may be spiritually. Who were the murderers of the Savior? Not, peradventure, those who were given up to a reprobate mind morally, but they were spiritually; there was the enmity. The spear was sharper, the sword was the keener, that is all; they did it under a religious mask; the enmity is no less. By reprobation, therefore, I understand this, that God in his sovereignty leaves man as a voluntary agent; man, blindly goes on, and works himself into a reprobate state, and then, "Reprobate silver shall men call them, because the Lord has rejected them." Nevertheless, we must not limit the gospel. Let a man have worked himself as far into a

reprobate state as he may, all the time that man is on this side of the grave there is hope. There is a man given up to a reprobate mind, but that may not be a final state, no. Some of you know that I do not hold with the doctrine that there is such a thing as an unpardonable sin, except those sins that God is not pleased to pardon. I am aware that some do not see with me in this; but if you read my sermon upon it, I read it some time ago, and felt more and more convinced that I was right, it only wants a little care to understand it; there it is. There is no sin unpardonable but that sin that God is not pleased to pardon; that is, there is no sin so great, no sin so bad, but that God can pardon it. And, therefore, while we point out the awfulness of being given up to a reprobate state of mind, and losing all sacredness of feeling, and going down, down, down, until we come to the very threshold of hell, and are involved in the very thickest powers of darkness; yet, on the other hand, we dare not limit the gospel. Supposing I was speaking to a whole congregation given up to this reprobate state, I would preach the gospel in a way to give hope to everyone that felt his state and had a desire towards the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no limit to the power of Jesus Christ's atonement wherever that atonement comes; there is no limit to the power of God's mercy wherever that mercy comes; there is no limit to the power of the eternal Spirit of God wherever that Spirit comes; there is no limit to the power of our God to save; he can save from the lowest hell: "You have brought me up from the lowest hell." He can save from the most awful condition that ever a man could bring himself into. Nevertheless, such persons, thus gone, dying in that state, there certainly is awaiting them a greater damnation; there certainly are awaiting them more terrible tempests of eternal wrath. Oh, my hearer, what shall we say that are delivered, that know the Lord, that love the Lord, that cleave to the Lord, and that mourn under our fallen nature, dread hardness of heart, tremble at the evils and iniquities of our own heart, and pray to the Lord to have mercy upon us? What shall we say that are thus brought out of that state in which we were fitted only for hell, and now prepared to join in the inheritance of those that are sanctified by faith in Christ Jesus?

Thus, then, here is our state by nature, the necessity of being vitally and personally delivered from it. Secondly, here is the reprobate state into which some bring themselves; and yet, wherever the gospel of God comes it can deliver them. The man that has arrived at the lowest depth, as I have said, there is not anything that the gospel is not able to do. Now, I had intended, but your time is gone, to have said something upon the sovereignty of God. I meant to have laid before you the fivefold argument which the apostle presents in this chapter, in order to explain that sovereignty; but your time being gone, I will not do so. I will just have a word, and then close, as I must have another sermon, if not upon this text, at least upon this subject, because I want to clear it all up. Well, then, let me say that in the condemnation of a sinner sovereignty and justice go together, but not mercy. In the salvation of a sinner sovereignty, justice, and mercy go together.