

# Hell And Its Torments

A Sermon on Hell delivered at Louvain University, Belgium, in approximately 1574 and being one of 5 sermons given by the Saint on “The Four Last Things”—Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell.

*by*

St. Robert Bellarmine

(1542-1621)

Bishop, Confessor and  
Doctor of the Universal Church

*“ . . . the Orient from on high [the Messiah, Our Lord] hath visited us: to enlighten them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death: to direct our feet into the way of peace.”* —Luke 1:78-79

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## HELL AND ITS TORMENTS

My dear people, when I consider the beginnings and progress of the Christian religion and recall to memory the signs and prodigies of our Liberator, there are two things which seem to me most wondrous and well-nigh incredible. The first is that some people are found who refuse to embrace our Most Holy Faith. The second is that they who have taken up that faith dare to commit sin.

Our Faith has been foretold by so many predictions of the prophets; it has been taken up by so great a consensus of peoples; it has been based upon so great a number of miracles, and nourished by so much hope. It has been increased by charity, strengthened by antiquity, confirmed by the succession of bishops and, ultimately, fortified by the very authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Yet who would not be amazed that, since the preaching of our faith, some people are yet to be found to whom the Catholic doctrine of Christ has been the less proved, and who have not feared to subscribe their names to the authors of new sects and to the Master

of Errors? In like manner, a person may hear that the belief has prevailed among some people that eternal punishments have been decreed on those who violate the law of God, yet would not he be astonished that the very people who have believed this nevertheless sin against God with the utmost ease and audacity?

Now if it were a matter of caution that, by the edict of a king, at a certain hour no one should set foot outside the city gates, under penalty of death by hanging, who would be found to be so negligent and heedless of his own safety that, at the forbidden hour, and in the presence of many witnesses, he would venture to set his foot outside the gate? And if perchance for some reason he were to do this, would he not afterward be afraid, not only of the witnesses but also almost of the very gate itself—as if it were somehow conscious that a crime had been committed? Now all Christians have been persuaded that the Almighty and most Excellent God has decreed by an irrevocable sentence that he who departs this life guilty of having [grievously]<sup>1</sup> violated God's law is bound over as a convict to eternal chains and is tortured without end by unspeakable torments [if he does not sincerely

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1. Saint Robert Bellarmine gave this sermon before a congregation largely consisting of Catholic university people; therefore, he had no need to qualify his remarks with the obvious provisos of Catholic theology given here in brackets. —*Editor.*

repent of his sins before death].<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, we see daily that many people, under no compulsion, unasked, and often even uninvited, offend God with their own initiative, free will and pleasure of mind. Indeed, they even seek occasions of sin, rejoicing when they find them and grieving when they do not. What shall we say is the cause of this?

My dear people, there seem to me to be three principal causes of this: lack of consideration, ignorance and self-love, the last of which the Greeks more suitably and significantly call *philautia*. Now lack of consideration is not the least cause; on the contrary, it is perhaps the primary reason why the peril of everlasting torture which is hanging over us all does not call us back from sinning. For a great many people do not lack faith, but they greatly lack an attentive and diligent consideration of those things which Faith proposes and teaches. For this reason, I have considered that I shall be doing a work most pleasing to God and useful to yourselves if today, as I promised in my last sermon, I call to your memories and place before your very eyes how horrible, how atrocious and how abiding are the tortures which God has prepared for wicked and impious people. But before I begin to speak about the torments of Hell, refutations must be made

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1. See page 2 for footnote.

based upon the other two factors which I mentioned a moment ago.

To begin with, because we are ignorant of the gravity and magnitude of sin, we can scarcely be led to believe that the tortures of Hell are such as Holy Scripture threatens upon nefarious men. St. Augustine affirms this in these words: "Now eternal punishment seems hard and unjust to human senses for the reason that in this [our] infirmity of dying senses there is lacking that sense of the highest and purest wisdom, [that] whereby it can be felt what a great outrage was committed in that first prevarication." If we truly understood the gravity of the fault, we would scarcely entertain any doubt as to the bitterness of the penalty. Would you like me to say in a word about how great is the gravity of sin? My dear people, it is so immense that our minds can in no way grasp it, for it overcomes the faculties of the human mind and conquers all the intelligence of mortal beings. For if it be fitting to measure the magnitude of an offense by the dignity and nobility of him who is offended, then certainly sin, which wounds infinite dignity and nobility, will be an immense and infinite evil.

How perilous and how grave is the disease of sin you shall know from the excellence and dignity of the Doctor Himself and of the medicines which are necessary to cure it. For when

we hear of someone who is so ill that he is not content with the doctors of his own locality, but summons the most learned physicians from every direction and from the most distant places, and has need of the most exquisite medicines prepared at the greatest expense, then we who are not doctors would say that this person is laboring under some most grave kind of ailment. What, then, ought we to think of the disease of sin, which the wisdom, the genius, the power and the faculties of all men and all angels could never have healed? And clearly that disease would have led the whole human race to destruction had not Wisdom descended from the very bosom of God the Father, and prepared a most exquisite medicine from the very Blood of His own most dignified Body.

Truly, my dear people, if we had no other argument than this to demonstrate the gravity of sin, this argument is such as plainly to persuade all men that any fault whatsoever committed against God is a crime so gigantic that, regarding the penalty due that fault, we may with utmost justice say: "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man the tortures and torments which God hath prepared for those who offend Him." For why would God, who is Wisdom Itself, have wished to become man, to be led to the Cross and to die in order to destroy the reign of sin, if it were

not to triumph over the power and dominion [of Satan] and to become Himself the extermination of sin? If, therefore, we were to think at times on these things, we would not be so easily inclined toward sinning, and we would have quite a different opinion of the tortures of Hell. But now let us return to the remaining cause of our torpor.

My dear people, it is wondrous what a persuasive force lies in love, damnable self-love. For it is, as it were, persuasion itself. It is mighty by nature, and such a smooth-tongued match-maker that, through its suggestion, nearly all people easily believe that they will pay either no penalties at all, or brief and meager ones, even though they live unrighteously and wickedly. Now this was the origin of that famous opinion of certain philosophers who, as Aristotle relates, attributed excellent deeds to themselves and desired to be believed and regarded by others as being the authors of these deeds; while, on the other hand, they assigned to a certain external cause all fault of crimes and outrages which they sometimes committed. Thus, if they acted well, they wished to be rewarded and, if badly, they wished to pay no penalty.

From the same root, in turn, arose those errors of even Christian writers which St. Augustine recounts and refutes in Book Twelve of *The City of God*. For some people had believed that no



penalties await Catholics, even those who lead corrupt lives. Still others had, by their own verdict, dispensed from eternal punishment not only Catholics but heretics as well, since the latter had once been Catholics! Yet others had asserted that no one, whether Catholic or heretic, who has been initiated by the Sacrament of Baptism can be brought to everlasting torture. Others, going further yet, had thought that all men, whether Christian, Jew or pagan, are to be saved at the Last Judgment, either through their own merits or the advocacy and suffrages of others. There had even been people who promised the hope of pardon and the obtaining of eternal salvation not only to men, but to the devils in Hell! What else but accursed self-love gave all these people such a misdirected sense of compassion and caused them to take such a paltry view of the tortures of Hell? These things being so, it ought not to amaze us if this same self-love has nowadays brought it about in some people that only sluggishly and with difficulty can they comprehend that the peril of eternal and unendurable tortures is hanging over them. Indeed, these people foolishly reason with themselves and say: "Surely, God would never have redeemed me at so great a price and endured so many things here on earth for my sake, if on account of a single blasphemy or some other crime, He had it in mind to bind me over to an everlasting dungeon!"

Truly, my dear people, we must counter this false and pernicious opinion and show upon what a weak foundation it rests. Let us say that our king comes to love some obscure common man, adorns him with public offices and finally places him in command of the beautiful and fully-equipped citadel of his own empire. Now let us say that this person conspires with enemies against his own king and allows the citadel committed to his care to come into their hands. If it should happen by some issue of events that this man were captured and brought into his king's presence, what do you suppose the king would do with him? Would the fact that the king once dearly loved that traitor deter him from pronouncing upon him the penalties due to traitors? Indeed, the penalties would be atrocious, and so much the more so as the benefices previously conferred upon him had been greater. So it is with us. Even though God has loved us with a mighty love and has sent His Son to us and willed that He suffer and endure so many things for our liberation, yet despite this, He will still punish us with eternal tortures if we desert to the camp of the enemy and betray the citadels of our souls to demons.

Is there anyone who has not read or heard the history of the patriarch Joseph? He was sold by his brothers into bondage, and when he was led into Egypt, he was bought by the chief of