

East London Tabernacle Pulpit.

ETERNITY.

A Sermon to Young Men,

BY

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AT THE EAST LONDON TABERNACLE.

"Eternity."—ISAIAH 57—15.

I have to preach to young men this evening, and here they are in their hundreds. Grand is the opportunity—glorious the privilege—but almost awful the responsibility. Grand the opportunity—for I may never again have so vast a company of young men at one time within sound of my voice. Glorious the privilege—for I have a gospel to proclaim suited to every case, and worthy the acceptance of all. Awful the responsibility—for souls are in the balance, eternity is the theme, and the Lord demands faithfulness towards you, with the threat that if it be wanting, he will require the blood of the slain at my hands. It is this thought that has weighed upon my spirit with a pressure no words can exaggerate or fully describe. At one moment it has so overawed, that terror-stricken I have shrunk from the service, and almost guiltily wished I had never passed my word to preach the sermon; the next moment it has filled me with impatient longings for the time to come. The fire has burned within and roared restlessly to leap forth in words of flame. The "woe" has been unto me if I preach not. And now the hour has come, and I must address myself unto the work. May He "who inhabiteth eternity" and "whose name is Holy" clothe me with the Spirit as with a garment, make me speak as a dying man to a dying multitude, and compel you to listen as if His own voice was rolling through the place. And what shall I speak to you about? I can imagine that to this question there would be a variety of answers. Had I asked some, the response would have been, "let your subject be some of the great political and social problems of the day; handle some of the difficult questions that are shaking society to its centre, and threatening to revolutionize old and long-revered opinions." Had I asked others, the advice would have been "preach the necessity of manly morality, lash vice of every kind, and extol the beauty and happiness of a virtuous life. Brand with infamy all licentiousness, uncleanness, drunkenness, meanness and selfishness, and exhibit the grandeur and loveliness of purity, chasteness, moderation and generosity. Lift up a high standard of home and mercantile life, and urge all to attain it." Perhaps a third might have suggested as a topic the benefit of mental culture and intellectual improvement with a dissertation upon those temptations that particularly assail young men. These might have been, and probably would have been, some of the answers, had I asked the question of man. But higher and more tremendous is my theme, for I asked the question of my God; yea, I cried unto him with tears

“Lord, what shall I preach about to the young men?” The answer that came back thrilled my soul, it was, ETERNITY. Yes, young men, God commands you to-night to listen *to* eternity as *for* eternity. There is something so majestic in the very word that it needs no apology for being introduced, and drowns all opposition. Eternity!! Before that word let all minor subjects bow, and for a season disappear. Eternity! Let its never-ending cycles absorb our every thought and banish things of time. But how shall I speak to you upon such a subject? Where shall I begin? It has no commencement. Where shall I leave off? It has no end. How shall I encircle it in language? It has no frontiers, Eternity!! It is a mountain that has neither base nor summit. It is a chain that hath no ends. Eternity!! Launched upon this subject I feel as one in a tiny skiff without a sail, an oar, a rudder, floating upon an ocean that has no shore, no bottom, no wave, and no tide. Vast though the subject is, its importance is vaster far. Let the solitary note of this warning bell arrest intense attention.

WHAT IS ETERNITY? Perhaps the best definition or description is that given by the mighty puritan, Charnock, in his work on the attributes of God. “Eternity,” saith he, “is a perpetual duration which has neither beginning nor end. Time hath both. Those things we say are in time, that have beginning, grow up by degrees, have succession of parts. Eternity is contrary to time, and is therefore a permanent and immutable state, without any variation. It comprehends in itself all years, all ages, all periods of ages. It never begins! It endures after every duration of time, and never ceaseth. It doth as much outrun time as it went before the beginning of it. Time supposeth something before it, but there can be nothing before eternity; it were not then eternity. Time hath a continual succession; the former time passeth away, and another succeeds, the last year is not this year, nor this year the next. We must conceive of eternity contrary to the notion of time. As the nature of time consists in the succession of parts, so the nature of eternity is an infinite immutable duration. Eternity and time differ as the sea and rivers; the sea never changes place, but the rivers glide along, and are swallowed up in the sea; so is time by eternity.” A simpler, but perhaps more striking definition, was that given by one of the pupils of the Deaf and Dumb institution at Paris, who, in answer to the question, “what is eternity?” replied, “The lifetime of the Almighty.” This is the gage and measure of our text, “The One that inhabiteth eternity.” O, stupendous thought, eternity is vast enough for God to live in! Like Him, it ever was, is, and ever shall be. In trying to realise and define our one word of to-night, the mind reels, imagination travels hopelessly with weary wing, all comparisons fall infinitely short, all illustrations break down upon the threshold. Heap metaphor upon metaphor, and you find yourself yet within time and eternity untouched.

I have said enough upon that which must ever remain incomprehensible and ungrasped after all is said. Let us rather seek to bring the power of this boundless word to bear upon hearts and lives. It is a strange but sad fact that *no subject is less thought about and more ignored than the boundless one of eternity.* This is the case, not only in the world, but in the Church likewise. The powers of the world

to come exercise their full influence over few. To the many eternity is still more the dream than the reality. This may be accounted for by the fact that the things of time surround us—press upon us—trouble us, and force themselves in a thousand ways upon our notice, while the things of eternity, though not less real, have fewer earthly reminders, and more quietly wait for recognition. It is only great grace that can make the future as real to man as the present. A small thing near appears larger than a great thing at a remote distance. A shilling held close to the eye is sufficient to more than cover the circumference of the sun. But although we may thus account for the existence of the fact, its marvel is in no way diminished. There seem ten thousand reasons why, to the saint at least if to no one else, the life eternal should be uppermost in the thoughts. It was for this life, not for the little span of time on earth that we call life, the Lord became incarnate, a man of sorrow, grief's acquaintance, and at last a sacrifice upon the cross. Every incident in that life of suffering and death of ignominy is eloquent upon the theme of eternity, and it is passing strange we can read the story as often as we do, and yet remain earth-bound and time-trammelled. The sighs, tears, and bloody sweat of Gethsemane's winepress are too awful to find their explanation in anything this side the moment when the angel shall declare that "time shall be no more." The darkened sky, the streaming cross, the broken-hearted victim, the rent veil, and the opening graves tell of an atonement too grand to have its blessings limited to the few years we spend on earth, and of a punishment due to sin too great to be compressed into anything less than an eternity. The wounds of Jesus cry to the saint with incarnadined lips "the life to come! the life to come!" The very end, moreover, of conversion is found in eternity. The day in which our hearts were broken and bound up—the day in which a Saviour was revealed and accepted, was a day on which like a pivot eternity was hung. Then was the mightiest change effected that even God knows. A change that filled heaven with joy and struck fresh notes from a myriad golden harps. Then, as far as we were concerned, the bottomless pit was closed and its fires quenched—then was heaven's gate flung open before our eyes and our entrance there secured. Surely from that moment even reason seems to say the future became the one grand object of our thoughts and aspirations. All we can say is "we marvel it is not more so." Yet one more thought that makes the mystery the greater. All those things which are the peculiar privileges of the saint, and which distinguish him from the rest of mankind, are either in eternity or point to it. There is not much on earth to show the benefit of being a Christian. Poverty, sickness, bereavement, trial, these are as much the heritage of the saint as the sinner. Yea, we go further and say that besides the ordinary sufferings which are common to all, the Christian has extras which are special. The earthly badge of saintship is often reproach—coldness—sarcasm—persecution. With thousands it has been death. Well might the Apostle say "if only in this life we have hope we are of all men most miserable." Christ's livery on earth is far from an attractive hue. He keeps the exaltation and reward of his followers for hereafter; that is, after we have done with being *here*. Is it much then to suppose that the Christian will be

a man who whilst sojourning here lives in spirit in his hereafter? Certainly not. A poverty-stricken man who is yet heir to an inheritance could hardly do otherwise than in thought anticipate his future wealth. So much for what *should* be. Let us now ask ourselves, "what is the case? Does eternity rule with imperial sway within our hearts?" We blush at the answer we have to give. O beloved, if it did, would there be the petty selfishness we so often exhibit? Would there be the unchristianlike craving for position, and hankering after this world's honour? Would there be the mean and despicable motives that so often influence our actions? Would there be the repining and murmuring under small trials that there is? Should we be such creatures of circumstances as we are, elated or depressed with every changing scene in the panorama of life? Surely not. A man under the power of the world to come would be as much above these things as the stars are above earth's battle fields. As little influenced by them as an angel in heaven by a snowstorm on earth. No, let us be honest with ourselves and frankly confess that we have never yet yielded ourselves to the power of the word Eternity. Not only is this want apparent in our inward experiences, but it is visible in our dealings with the unsaved.

Imagine for a moment, dear Christian friends, that you and I grasped, in some measure, the meaning of the word of eternity. That we never looked upon a soul, except in the light of that word. Would not our actions be the very contrast of what they often are? How, in eternity, we shall despise the timidity, and fear of ridicule, that tied our tongues on earth. O, young men, if the inspiration of that word did but fall upon me, I should preach a different sermon to what I am. Could I but see you as so many candidates for Heaven or Hell, what awful earnestness would be mine. Surely, these eyes would be blinded with tears, and forgetting all the false decorum of service, I should entreat you, as if pleading for my own life, "to be reconciled to God." O, Eternity, Eternity, preach to the preacher! But would it not be equally so with you? Think, young man, of your gray-haired father yet unsaved. Think of him in relation to that word eternity, and your reserve will melt, and with all filial reverence, and with filial love of the highest kind, you will plead with him about the future of his soul. Remember that mother so indulgent and so kind, yet unconverted. You almost dread to speak faithfully to her, lest you should wound so gentle a spirit. Is that true kindness? Link with your mother's name the word eternity. Think of her, if you can, as a lost soul, and weeping on her neck, true love will warn her of the wrath to come. Young Christian in the work-shop, yours is no easy task I grant. At the very thought of personally speaking to the godless gang, you see the look of indignant scorn, and the sneer of pity for your being so soft a fool. "Canting hypocrite." "Tabernaclite"—"Brownite"—these are some of the mildest terms which will greet you, with others we dare not mention in public. Speak for Christ, and you know you will become the butt of all—the lapstone for every man in the place to sharpen his sarcastic powers upon. You dread the ordeal, and hesitate to bring such obloquy upon your head.

Friend, I have a word to say to you, it is "Eternity." Yes, let that thunder through your soul, and you will be a giant in your testi-

mony. The poor ignorant scoffing crew of fellow-workmen know not what they do. They will repent it on earth if converted, and they will remember it with horror in Hell, if lost. Speak to them, I charge you, by the powers of eternity. What is a temporary shock to the nerves compared to a lost eternity? McCHEYNE writes in his diary:—"M. G. lies sore upon my conscience. I do no good to that woman. Speak boldly. What matter in eternity the slight awkwardnesses of time."

But if eternity is too much slighted by the saint, what shall I say about its treatment by the world? By the masses it is a tabooed subject, and polite society refrains from mentioning it. It is as harsh and discordant a note to them as Jonah's cry of "yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be destroyed," must have been to the gay revellers who that night were making merry. It accorded ill with the clatter of their goblets, and was a jarring note in their songs. Eternity! Shut the door in its face. It makes a bad match with foot-lights and ballet dancers and ball dresses. Had we but time, we would give you a hundred pictures of how the world ostracises it. See the man in his office, intent on making money. When a youth, he always said he would die rich, and he bids fair to keep his word. For years he has never allowed feelings to cross his path, and now they seldom trouble him at all. £ s. d. has been the trinity he has worshipped for half a life time—particularly the £, and such worship soon makes the soul as cold and hard as the coin he handles. The world calls him a good business man—a few widows term him "next door to a robber," and about a score of orphans curse his name. But what does that matter to him? The law was on his side, if justice was on the other. Go into that office, put your hand upon his shoulder, and if you dare, say "friend, I have come to speak to you about eternity." Slam goes the ledger—open is thrown the office door, and he tells you to take eternity to another market, for he has enough to do to think about time. This is no over-drawn picture. The original is to be found in plenty of houses of business in this great city. Do you see yon gay-looking young man. He abhors, with all his heart, the close-fisted, hard-hearted character I have described. His character is the very reverse. "Gaiety, gaiety," is his god. "The world was made for enjoyment" is his creed. Go to him, as he stands laughing under the lights of that music hall. Just whisper in his ear "*eternity*." Ah! how he starts, as if an adder had stung him. Eternity! Away with it. It makes the gilding look paltry; the lamps seem to burn less brightly. For a moment, under the magic power of that word, the dancers seem dancing "the dance of death" upon the edge of hell. "Eternity," says he, "what could have put that nightmare into my head? It is all nonsense," and he turns upon his heel, and drowns the thought in deeper dissipation. But without multiplying proofs of that, which needs but little proof, I will appeal to the honesty of many present whether I am not right. Friend, would you have come here this evening, had you known eternity was to have been the theme? Whilst I have been speaking, has there not been a struggle going on within—a desperate effort to escape from the majesty of the word, or bid it defiance? In your heart of hearts you grant it, and I ask for nothing more to prove

that eternity is the most distasteful subject to the natural man.

Let us now notice further, that whether it be ignored or not *its importance remains the same*. You and I must deal with it, whether we will or no. After all cavelling and shirking, the stupendous fact remains the same. There is an eternity and we have to live it. Oh! if banishing it from the thoughts removed it as a fact, there might be some wisdom in the world's action; but what words can describe the worse than Bedlam madness to ignore that which only quietly waits to prove itself. Methinks I see a young man dying who all his life has "left eternity to look after itself," as he used to say. Time with him is ebbing fast. Death stands by the hour-glass with outstretched hand, watching the few last grains of sand as they run away. The last comes. It falls through. With it goes the soul. Time to him is over, a simple thing of the past to be remembered. Eternity silently receives the spirit. Hark! did you hear that cry, "O eternity, release me! I never believed in thee, never thought of thee, banished thee from all my reckonings and conversation. Let me go this once and all shall be changed." Then from the vast abyss comes the answer. "Thou shouldst have thought of this before, 'tis now too late, thou art mine." O friends, he of all fools is the greatest fool who ignores a fact he must at last acknowledge. Laugh at eternity, but you laugh not away its reality. Turn your face from it and it will but leap upon your back. Say it is an unpleasant subject to think about, it will be a more unpleasant thing to endure. Let this thought be branded upon the minds of all. *We must meet eternity.*

In eternity there will be some marvellous revelations. Hidden things will there be disclosed, and secret things made known. This thought has a very bright side to it and may well cheer the weary child of God. You know not yet, dear friend, what good you may have been the means of doing. The seed you have scattered has apparently all been carried away by the passing birds, and no golden harvest has ever greeted your eye. Wait, and in eternity you shall know what you know not now. There are some bright revelations for you that will double your heaven. Pastors who died with broken hearts, discouraged because they saw no fruit, shall find sheaves of golden corn many and great. They who thought their lives had been barren shall be greeted by their children in the Lord, and astonished cry "who hath begotten me these? I thought I had become desolate." Teachers shall find there were more conversions through their words than they ever dared to imagine. Tract distributors shall discover that out of the highways some have been compelled to come in. Little acts of kindness long forgotten shall be found to be remembered. Cups of cold water shall receive their reward, and visits to the sick be acknowledged as visits to Christ. O workers for Jesus, there are some bright surprises for you in eternity. But to the ungodly, how terrifying the thought. Ah, sirs, there shall be some revelations made that shall burn like molten brass. What will the smooth-tongued religionist do when the secrets of his *true* life are disclosed. Where shall he hide his head as before the open scoffers it is proved he was as vile as they, only venerated over with a profession of godliness. Eternity will soon rip the veneer off, and "hast thou become as one of us" ring in his ears.

What revelations will be in store for the licentious debauchee as those crowd around him who, although unknown to him on earth, were ruined by his example, and curse him for it in eternity! What will be the feelings of the gay libertine as he meets those who were started on a path of shame and sin through his seduction, and who hiss in his ear that they trace their damnation to the threshold of his house? The theme is too sad to be pursued. All I can say, and God knows I say it from the heart, is "the Lord in his mercy spare all present from such revelations of eternity. Time presses, so I pass on to the next thought, and I entreat your attention for it is all important.

The nature of your eternity will be decided at the cross. It is not the number or the heinousness of your sins that will condemn to hell, nor the beauty or strictness of your morality that will bring to heaven. Eternity will be decided by your relation to a crucified Jesus. Reject Him and you are lost, let your morality be ever so high. Accept him and you are saved, though your sins have been black as perdition itself. One day, as Christ was walking, there met him two men of the country of the Gergessenes; they were both possessed with devils. Wild were their looks, fierce were their actions. For years they had been the terror of all who were obliged to pass near the grave-yard, among the tombs of which they roamed and shrieked. The moment they beheld our Lord the devils within them made them shout "what have we to do with thee, Jesus." Ah, poor maniacs, they had more to do with him than ever they imagined. He was their only hope, although they knew it not. The language of the sinner is ever the same. What have I to do with a crucified Christ? he boldly asks. I answer "everything." Eternity depends on what you do with Christ. Heaven, if you trust him; hell for ever if you die rejecting him. Oh! what tremendous importance does this give to the story of the cross. Mark the man as he listens to it; alas, how unmoved does he appear! Would to God he could but see the interest displayed by others who know the awful issue at stake. Heaven watches him with anxious eye. Did but a tear roll down his cheek—did but the publican's prayer break forth from his lips—did but his heart whisper "blessed Jesus, I take thee as my substitute, my Saviour," all the angelic hosts would be jubilant with song, for they would know that to that soul eternity would be bright. Hell watches him also, prompts pride, unbelief and scorn. See, he turns upon his heel, and mutters "what have I to do with thee." Ah! listen to that shout of fiendish joy, as hell prepares itself to receive the soul. "Lost! Lost! Lost!" peals through the pit. Friends, as it is a solemn fact that your eternity will be decided by your acceptance or rejection of Calvary's atonement, I ask you which shall it be? I fear to-night will decide the eternity of some. There will be separations at the cross, and divergence of paths from this evening. The history of the two dying thieves will be repeated. Some of you, who like them, have been boon companions in sin, have, like them, this evening been brought near to a crucified Christ. There they separated, and there will you. Some of you will, I believe, "look and live," and the trembling scales shall be turned unto eternal life. Others, I fear, like the companion thief will damn themselves with an "if." "If thou be the Son of God," They went as far as

the cross together. One was one side of it, the other on the other. They never came nearer—they never met again—they never will. O young men, if you forget every other word I have spoken, if you make the sermon as a whole the subject of your pleasantry and laughter, remember this, you *are playing with your eternity when you trifle with the cross.*

And now my time is gone, and I must leave you; yet I feel loth to do so. Eternity still weighs upon my spirit and says "have you no more arguments to plead, no more invites and entreaties. Try once more, and for the sake of my never-ending ages let them not go just yet." But what can I say? If Eternity arouse you not, how can I hope to say anything about it that can arrest you. Yet stay! I have one more arrow left in the quiver—God guide its flight. What *would not the lost give if they had your opportunity?* If it be not too bold a flight of imagination, conceive for a moment of one more opportunity of hearing the gospel being granted to the lost in hell. The bolts of the prison-house are drawn, and swift they fly to hear the message. This place is crowded in every part—pews, galleries, aisles, platform, everywhere the strange congregation eddies. What eagerness to catch every word, what dreadful silence as I speak of the one hope left them, the one opportunity granted! No listlessness, no inattention there. Eternity I need not speak about. They have already begun to know its meaning. The hope of salvation is what, with an anxiety intensified by a knowledge of hell, they long to hear. But this can never be. The lost have heard the last invite and warning they ever will. Opportunities of grace are for ever over. But, young men, remember this, what is for ever denied to the damned is yours to-night. The invite is yours—the warning is yours—the opportunity is yours. What will you do with it, despise it? Then may God have mercy on you, for sure one drop of gall in the cup of perdition will be the remembrance of this evening's service. I can say nothing more. O Eternity! Eternity! Eternity! Thou palace of the saved, thou prison-house of the lost! I have spoken about thee to this company, now preach unto them thyself. Let thy voice be heard after mine is silenced. When this congregation disperses and melts away to a thousand different homes, follow every unit that has made the whole, and utter in his ear thine own dread name. When night falls and sleep steals over the eyelids of the sinner, even then speak to him in his dreams. Wake him with a start, and make him in the midnight hour hear thy solemn voice. Preach to every heart until ticking clock and chiming hour shall only seem to say Eternity—Eternity. Toll, toll thy solemn bell until each hearer of to-night has fled to Christ and found salvation there. I have done. May God begin. Eternity is never done.

This Sermon is reprinted by request. It was preached nearly twenty years ago.