

# WESLEY'S DOCTRINE OF THE LAST THINGS<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

**T**WO DANGERS connected with any consideration of the doctrine of the Last Things are isolation and exaggeration. On the one hand, it is fatally easy to isolate this doctrine from the whole Christian belief, which results in a wrong emphasis; on the other hand, by extracting references to the belief from the whole thought of a writer, one can easily give the impression that this belief was overwhelmingly significant, to the exclusion of all else. We shall do well to keep in mind these two dangers as we consider Wesley's views on eschatology.

There is no doubt that eschatology was an important matter to Wesley. 'I want to know one thing', he writes in the Preface to the Sermons, 'the way to heaven: how to land safe on that happy shore' (W. V.2).<sup>2</sup> Again, 'How deeply are you concerned to inquire, "What is the foundation of my hope?" "Whereon do I build my expectation of entering into the Kingdom of heaven?"' (S. 33, III.1.). And we notice that in the first section of the 1780 Hymn-book, in which the main theme is 'Exhorting sinners to return to God', there are four groups of hymns which refer to the 'Last Things'—namely, 'death' 'judgement' 'Heaven' and 'Hell'. This arrangement shows the place Wesley gave to these subjects in the introductory stage of his presentation of religion.

Alongside this must be set the very great emphasis Wesley placed on *present* salvation. He was far from limiting his view of religion to future bliss. At the beginning of *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* he writes: 'By those words "we are saved by faith" we mean, that the moment a man receives that faith . . . he is saved from doubt and fear and sorrow of heart, by a peace that passes all understanding; from the weariness of a wounded spirit, by joy unspeakable: and from his sins, of whatsoever kind they were, from his vicious desires, as well as words and actions, by the love of God and of all mankind then shed abroad in his heart' (W. VIII.10). Notice that there is here no mention of being saved in the future; all applies to this life. This emphasis on the present is admirably set out in the sermon preached before the Humane Society, in which the value of life as an opportunity to see God is much emphasized. This is also expressed in the form that we now describe as 'realized eschatology', in the sermon on Christian Perfection. The Kingdom of Heaven does not mean the Kingdom of Glory 'as if the Son of God had just discovered to us that the least glorified saint in heaven is greater than any man on earth' (S. 40, II.8.). The Kingdom of Heaven is that Kingdom of God on earth, whereunto all true believers in Christ, all real Christians, belong. 'The Kingdom of God is now set up on earth' (ibid. II.13), and again, 'We shall be saved from our sins, not only at death, but in this world' (ibid. II.27).

Nevertheless, Wesley leaves his readers and hearers in no doubt that man has an eternal destiny; it is not simply a matter of making the most of this present life, but much more of living here and now in a way that befits those whose existence is not limited to this world. This is expressed forcibly in the *Earnest Appeal*: 'What art thou, even in thy present state? an everlasting spirit going to God' (W. VIII.18). 'I am a spirit come from God, and returning to God: just hovering over the great gulf: till, a few moments hence, I am no more seen: I drop into an unchangeable eternity' (Intro. to St. S. VI). The wise man, who

builds his house upon the rock, 'Knows the world: the place in which he is to pass a few days or years, not as an inhabitant, but as a stranger and sojourner, on his way to the everlasting habitations' (S. 33, II.2). It is impossible to read Wesley's sermons and tracts without being aware that for him the eternal destiny of man was the ground of the urgency of his writing and speaking. And we are bound to notice how closely this is combined with concern for this present life. Wesley cannot be charged with any false interest in the future state which leaves out of account the responsibilities and privileges of this present life. Indeed, he issues a warning on this very point. 'We may take too much thought for the morrow, so as to neglect the improvement of today. We may so expect perfect love as not to use that which is already shed abroad in our hearts . . . They were so taken up with what they were to receive hereafter, as utterly to neglect what they had already received' (Sermon 42, 'Satan's Devices', I.11).

#### THE ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING THE DOCTRINE

(a) *The immortality of the human spirit.* We have already noticed that Wesley asserted the eternal destiny of man. The metaphysical basis of this is worked out more fully in Sermon 54 on the Eternity of God. Here Wesley considers the application of 'eternal' to creatures and concludes that both material and spiritual creations are eternal *a parte post*—that is, in the sense of an eternity which is to come. Only God is eternal also in sense of *a parte ante*, the eternity which is past. Matter as well as spirits, once created, cannot be destroyed; but it can change its nature, different particles being combined together in different ways. Therefore it is certain that all spirits are clothed with immortality. This necessarily implies that human spirits live for ever, either in everlasting happiness or everlasting misery. This destiny is fixed by the choice of man. Wesley vigorously rejects any suggestion of a Calvinist strain, which would imply that our destiny is fixed otherwise than by our choice:

*No dire decree of thine did seal  
Or fix th' unalterable doom;  
Consign my unborn soul to hell,  
Or damn me from my mother's womb.* (S. 54, 14)

The sphere of choice is this present life. There is no suggestion of a second choice after death; such an idea would be completely contrary to Wesley's main views of immortality, and in any case this is a speculative question with which he does not deal. Wesley further asserts on this point that there can be no neutrality between happiness and misery. The choice which man must make in this life is final and irrevocable; no midway position is possible.

(b) *The death of Christ makes heaven possible.* The faith through which we are saved is 'a faith in Christ—It acknowledges His death as the only sufficient means of redeeming man from death eternal, and His resurrection as the restoration of us all to life and immortality' (S. 1, I.5). Charles Wesley has put this same thought into Hymn 43, v. 2.

*Numbered among thy people, I  
Expect with joy thy face to see;  
Because thou didst for sinners die,  
Jesus, in death remember me.*

(c) *Good and evil angels.* Wesley firmly believed in the existence of angels: some are good, some evil; they are actively engaged in good or evil works (S. 71). Angels are everywhere, but they do not fill all things, as God does. Wesley did not accept the view that everyone has his own angel, nor that people become angels after death. Angels are rather 'the highest order of created things' (S. 72). Bad angels are fallen good angels; Wesley conjectures that possibly one third of good angels fell, but he does not attempt to explain how or why this happened. Evil angels are the cause of many troubles, including illness, and Wesley specifically mentions nervous illness as probably caused by evil angels. What are called accidents are also possibly their work. Souls in the intermediate state after death may be actively engaged in good or evil works, helping the angels; but they do not become angels, who, as we have seen, are regarded as a separate and higher order of creation.

#### LIFE AND DEATH

(a) *Life.* There are two main emphases in Wesley's thought about life, and they are not easy to reconcile. On the one hand, as we have seen when considering present salvation, life is good. In the sermon preached before the Humane Society (S. 99), Wesley emphasizes the intrinsic value of human life, which makes it eminently worth saving from sudden or premature death. Those who restore to life persons who are apparently dead—that is, by the use of artificial respiration in the case of a person rescued from drowning—are not only providing a further opportunity for repentance; they are restoring something which is intrinsically good. The responsibility of a father, the happiness of a home, are good things. Because life is good and worth saving, Christians and men of goodwill are urged to support the Society. In passing, we may note what a good model this is of how the gospel can be preached on these official and sometimes rather formal occasions.

But, on the other hand, life is regarded as a dream, from which at death we awake to the full reality of eternity. This is the full significance of the lines we still sing—

*Our life is a dream, Our time as a stream  
Glides swiftly away.*

*And the fugitive moment refuses to stay.* (H. 45)

This hymn is placed in the group entitled 'Concerning Death' in the 1780 Hymn-book. This view of life is fully expounded in Sermon 121. The real existence of heaven, says Wesley, is bitter to those who are still asleep, that is, living in the flesh. His caustic comment on one who said 'he had no relish for sitting on a cloud all day and singing praises to God', was: 'We may easily believe him, and there is no danger of his being put to that trouble!' Wesley vividly describes the emptiness and vanity of this dream, and urges his hearers to realize that when it is over, all the things they have striven for will appear in reality as insubstantial as events and things experienced in a dream.

The reconciling of these two views of life is seen when, at the end of this sermon, Wesley shows the way to prepare for waking from the dream. The way is to connect earth and heaven now, which is possible to man because God has already connected heaven and earth in the incarnation of His Son.

(b) *Death*. Some would say that Wesley was morbidly interested in death. He is certainly not afraid of mentioning it, but whether this is morbid or not depends upon one's point of view. The inevitable fact of death is something about which Wesley reminded his followers, and about which they sang:

*The year rolls round and steals away  
The breath which first it gave:  
Whate'er we do, where'er we be,  
We're travelling to the grave.* (H. 40, 3)

Whether we like to be reminded of it or not, this is about the most certain fact of life! This serious attitude to death is of course occasioned by the firm belief that death marks the end of man's possibility of choice of happiness or misery. The early Methodists were not being morbid when they sang:

*Nothing is worth a thought beneath,  
But how I may escape the death  
That never, never dies.* (H. 42, 5)

They were expressing a living truth, which transformed their funeral services into real occasions of rejoicing. Imagine a congregation today singing this at a funeral:

*Again we lift our voice  
And shout our solemn joys!  
Cause of highest raptures this,  
Raptures that shall never fail,  
See a soul escaped to bliss,  
Keep the Christian festival.* (H. 51. 1)

Perhaps we should agree that Wesley's poetic genius ran away with him in the lines:

*Ah lovely appearance of death!  
What sight upon earth is so fair?  
Not all the gay pageants that breathe  
Can with a dead body compare.* (H. 47. 1)

But there is no doubt that these hymns on death did encourage thought about the bliss into which the deceased had entered, and gave no encouragement for the self-pity of the mourners which is so often evident nowadays. Without being irreverent, perhaps I can wonder what variety of meaning could be put into some lines from a hymn 'On the Death of a Widow':

*The soul hath o'ertaken her mate,  
And caught him again in the sky.* (H. 52, 2)

Some spouses, one suspects, would be profoundly disturbed to think this might really happen, but we must allow Wesley his vivid characterization.

#### AFTER DEATH

The most important statement of Wesley's doctrine of the state immediately following death is the Sermon 'On Faith', dated 17th January 1791 (S. 122);

that is, six weeks before his death, the last of his published sermons. It gives added weight to these words to remember they were written by the venerable preacher so short a time before he himself entered into the great unknown beyond the grave. Holding to the doctrine of the immortality of souls, Wesley also asserts belief in an intermediate state. This he usually terms Hades, although occasionally he terms it Paradise, when he is describing the happy state of the redeemed. After this, following the Resurrection, Heaven and Hell are the permanent states of all mankind. Wesley's doctrine of the intermediate state allows no possibility of change; especially it is not regarded as conceivable that in this state man will 'change direction'. Those who have died in their sins will be actively concerned with bad angels in evil works. 'Those who are with the rich man, in the unhappy division of Hades, will remain there, howling and blaspheming, cursing and looking upwards, till they are cast into the everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels' (S. 122, 4). On the other hand, those who are now in Paradise in Abraham's bosom 'will be continually ripening for heaven, will be perpetually holier and happier, till they are received into the Kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world'. Paradise is thus described as 'the place of human spirits waiting to be made perfect' (ibid. 11). Those who are waiting to be made perfect are regarded as actively engaged in good works, especially in assisting 'their brethren below'. Wesley believed that this abode of departed spirits must be in some place; otherwise these spirits must be omnipresent, which he cannot allow, as this belongs only to God. But he does not conjecture where this place might be, this being unrevealed in Scripture. Paradise, the abode of those who have died in faith, is described as a state in which general affection will not conflict with particular affection—that is, there will be recognition of friends and relatives, for spirits will know each other (S. 122, 11). On the basis that we continue the life we have known here, Wesley says that knowledge and holiness which we have begun to gain here will grow in Paradise, in converse with the saints, and especially with Jesus. 'Every holy temper which we carry with us into Paradise will remain with us for ever' (ibid. 11). This emphasizes the need for growth in goodness in the present life. We shall see later how closely Wesley connected Christian perfection with the hope of future bliss. Wesley concludes his thoughts on Paradise by saying that although we only have a little knowledge, this is nevertheless far more than pagan reason can discover.

In Wesley's scheme of thought about the future, resurrection and judgement eventually follow; there will be, he believes, a general resurrection, and a final judgement, which will then finally determine the destiny of man for ever. The resurrection is described in realistic terms as the rising again of these bodies which have been laid in the grave. Wesley argues that the grave cannot give up any other body than that which has been laid in it. Yet the resurrection body will be suited to the life of the spirit. We shall take again a body without weakness or infirmity, for 'if we were to receive again all frailties, I much doubt whether a wise man, were he left to his choice, would willingly take his again: whether he would not choose to let his [body] still lie rotting in the grave rather than be chained again to such a cumbersome clod of earth' (S. 137, II.1). The description of the bliss which follows the resurrection is memorably expressed as 'a mind free from all troubles and guilt in a body free from all

pains and diseases' (ibid. II.1). To those who say this cannot be because it is inconceivable, Wesley replies that the resurrection of the body is no more unbelievable than the first creation of the body in a mother's womb. This may indeed be beyond understanding; yet it happens! And equally the resurrection will happen. The resurrected body is moreover described in some detail. Reference is made to its sprightliness and nimbleness, which qualities one can well imagine Wesley valuing highly. No longer will the spirit be clogged and fettered with our dull, sluggish, inactive bodies. Because the flesh is the chief enemy of the soul, we renounce it at our baptism. We can prepare for the life of the spiritual body by 'cleansing ourselves more and more from earthly fetters'. In this application of the Sermon 137 we are somewhat forcibly reminded that Wesley wrote this in 1732, six years before his Aldergate experience, and more significantly even than this, before he had learned in the Atlantic storm on his way home from Georgia that he was afraid to die, and therefore, he concluded, not at peace with God. The theme of this sermon is therefore fortitude, patience, self-denial—but not faith. Yet it stands in the published sermons as an indication of what Wesley believed about the resurrection, even though it does not represent Wesley's mature thought on the central importance of faith.

Along with the resurrection goes judgement, which was a vivid reality in Wesley's thought. I suppose one of the easiest things in the world is to dilate upon a judgement which one is sure will rightly fall on others, but which one will personally escape. It is undeniable that there are instances in Wesley of the idea that judgement will be welcomed by the redeemed and feared by the sinners. Charles Wesley can write:

*Sinners shall lift their guilty heads,  
and shrink to see a yawning hell, (H. 56, 2)*

and there is possibly an element of smugness in the way believers will look down on a burning world:

*We, while the stars from heaven shall fall,  
And mountains are on mountains hurled,  
Shall stand unmoved amidst them all,  
And smile to see a burning world. (H. 56, 4)*

But there is much more than this in Wesley's view of judgement. It is best expressed when applied to believers personally:

*Lo, on a narrow neck of land,  
'Midst two unbounded seas I stand,  
Secure, insensible!  
A point of time, a moment's space,  
Removes me to that heavenly place,  
Or shuts me up in hell! (S. 54, 5)*

In order that he may stand unmoved at the final judgement, a believer must practise obedience:

*Be this my one great business here,  
With serious industry and fear,  
Eternal bliss to insure;  
Thine utmost counsel to fulfil,  
And suffer all thy righteous will,  
And to the end endure.* (H. 58, 5)

This same view is expressed in his plea for mercy, which is surely more in accord with Christian sentiments than the supposition that believers can be so remote from their world as merely to smile at its final destruction:

*If thy dreadful controversy,  
With all flesh is now begun,  
In thy wrath remember mercy,  
Mercy first and last be shown:  
Plead thy cause with sword and fire,  
Shake us 'till the curse remove,  
'Till thou com'st, the world's desire,  
Conqu'ring all with sov'reign love.* (H. 59, 2)

There is also the idea that judgement is to be welcomed by believers because it brings hope for those fainting beneath the load of sin, and promise of perfection for those 'whose loins are girt' and 'whose lamps are burning bright' (H. 53, 2, 3). While therefore the threat of judgement is not avoided, it can be said that the main emphasis of Wesley is in his doctrine of judgement falls upon the positive side—that is, upon the advantage this final judgement will be to those striving against sin, and also upon the element of mercy which must surely have a foremost place in any Christian consideration of this matter.

#### HEAVEN AND HELL

We can pass quickly over the stereotyped descriptions of heaven which are occasionally found in Wesley's thought—milk-white robes, palms, crowns of glory, endless song, etc. (H. 73). The interesting emphases of Wesley's thought about heaven are centred on relationship—the relationship between Christ and the believer, and between the Church below and the Church above. And this is all expressed in terms which take proper account of the mystery necessarily involved in any speculation about the after-life. Life in heaven is life with Christ—this I suppose would be Wesley's chief ground for asserting belief in a future life:

*Jesus is their great reward,  
Jesus is their endless rest.* (H. 50, 1)

*Followed by their works they go  
Where their head hath gone before.* (H. 50. 2)

*Jesus smiles and says, 'Well done  
'Good and faithful servant thou!  
'Enter and receive thy crown,  
'Reign with me triumphant now.'* (H. 50, 4)

This same emphasis is found in a familiar hymn we use today, 'Jesus the First and Last, On Thee my soul is cast':

*Yet when the work is done,  
The work is but begun:  
Partaker of thy grace,  
I long to see thy face;  
The first I prove below,  
The last I die to know.* (MHB 105, 2;—not in 1780 book)

Along with this emphasis on the fellowship of the believer with Christ, is an equal stress on the fellowship between the Church below and the Church above. This may well be regarded as one of the distinctive contributions of the Wesleys to this doctrine. It is expressed very forcibly in many of the hymns, sometimes in memorable phrases. One we know very well is:

*One family we dwell in him,  
One Church, above, beneath,  
Though now divided by the stream.  
The narrow stream of death.* (MHB 824, 2)

No less memorable, although less familiar, are the lines:

*From a suffering church beneath,  
To a reigning church above.* (H. 51, 4)

In the sermon on 'Human Life a Dream', it is asserted that the wonders of heaven will be increased by fellowship with ministering spirits, and with human friends, with whom temptation has been shared (S. 121, 12). Death is not able to separate those who are united in Christ. Note also Hymn 48, 3 (Rejoice for a brother deceased):

*There all the ship's company meet,  
Who sailed with the Saviour beneath,*

and the verse quoted in Sermon 122, 6:

*Can death's interposing tide,  
Spirits one in Christ divide?*

We may infer this also from what has been noted above about the relationship between loved ones in Paradise, for Paradise is but a preparing for the future joys of heaven.

Heaven is an inexpressibly happy place, not mainly by contrast with the miseries of this life, but rather because the joys found here in Christ will be magnified above:

*Happy while on earth we breathe,  
Mightier bliss ordained to know;  
Trampling down sin, hell and death,  
To the third heaven we go!* (H. 57, 3)

✓ It is perhaps strange to notice that along with this happy view of heaven goes a terrifying and awe-inspiring idea of hell. Hell was a vivid reality to Wesley. He believed that if he or any man died in his sins, the only prospect before him was a literally endless punishment and torment. No thought of whether a righteous God could inflict eternal punishment provides any check to this conviction. It may be, as Wesley himself affirms, that he did not paint the horrors of hell in the same glowing detail as some. For instance, Thomas à Kempis says that misers will have the continual punishment of molten gold being poured down their throats. Wesley certainly insists that we must not go beyond scripture in describing hell. But his view of scripture is essentially literalist, so that he does seriously believe in everlasting fire, in a lake of ever-burning brimstone, and in everlasting torment. If Wesley is not as gruesome as some in his teaching about hell, he is gruesome enough for most moderns. The punishment of sinners is two-fold—punishment of loss, and punishment of feeling. The loss includes having no friends (cp. the view of heaven as a fellowship), no beauty, no light except the flames of hell. With this must be considered loss of potentially more wonderful things than can be known on earth: 'Then they will fully understand the value of what they have vilely cast away' (S. 72, I.3). The penalty of sin is everlasting destruction, but this does not mean even the eventual relief of pain in annihilation. It is a dreadful fate which knows no end, from which there is no relief, either by fainting or sleeping. This view of eternal suffering is expressed in the sermon on the Eternity of God; after millions of years, it will be no nearer its end than it was the moment it began.

The use which is made of this doctrine of hell is partly to encourage sinners to turn to God through fear of damnation, but also to set before them the vivid contrast between the bliss of heaven and the misery of hell. There is in fact not so much emphasis as one might reasonably expect upon fear of hell as a basis of belief. Considering the times in which he lived, Wesley was certainly not an extremist in this doctrine, and beneath all his expressions of doom and dismay lies the insistence on the possibility of faith, repentance and life.

Indeed it is this pointing out the way of salvation in Christ which remains the dominant feature of Wesley's eschatology. As with all his doctrines, this one serves a very urgent and practical end. It is not expounded for the sake of mere speculation, but to give urgency to the appeal for repentance and faith. The way is plain—those who do not repent will with their 'infirmities' (i.e. sins) go straight to hell (S. 40, I.7). Man in his natural state cannot appreciate the significance of eternity; but the remedy is faith, for 'faith places the unseen, the eternal world, continually before his face' (S. 54, I.17).

Part of the way is to begin now in thought to connect earth and heaven, and so to begin to wake out of the dream of life (S. 121, 10). This aspect is emphasized also in the sermon on Satan's Devices. It is necessary to realize that Satan continually tries to turn our eyes from the goal; so 'to walk in the continual sight of our goal, is a needful help in our running the race that is set before us' (S. 42, I.10).

But finally, the most distinctive approach of all is the connexion with Christian perfection, which was the dominating theme of all Wesley's doctrine. Final justification is the only proper end of sanctification in this present life. A favourite phrase of Wesley's was 'that holiness without which no man can see the

Lord'. The requirement for the original justification of a sinner is faith alone. But the requirement for full sanctification and final justification is faith working by love. Sanctification is part of the complete whole of God's salvation, which must end in final justification—that is, in heaven itself. This life is a necessary preparation for that ultimate end. The beginning of the process of salvation is pardon; its end is to see the Lord in glory. Thus Wesley writes: 'God hath joined from the beginning pardon, holiness and heaven' (S. 42, II.4). As usual, Charles Wesley expresses this in memorable words over and over again. From the many possible examples we choose the following, taken from a hymn no longer sung among us:

*Physician of souls unto me,  
Forgiveness and holiness give;  
And then from the body set free,  
And then to the city receive.* (H. 70, 3)

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<sup>1</sup> This paper does not attempt to evaluate or restate Wesley's views; the intention is to set out those views with as little interpretation as possible.

<sup>2</sup> The abbreviations used in the references given in this paper are as follows: S=sermon; St. S.=*Standard Sermons*; H.=hymn (all hymns, except where stated otherwise, are quoted from the 1780 *Hymn Book*); W.=*Wesley's Works* (5th ed.).

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