

JONAH IN THE BELLY OF HELL

The sermon directly below is by Pastor Russell, reported in Bible Students Monthly, Vol. 8, #10.)

“Out of the belly of hell cried I.”—Jonah 2:2. A synopsis of Pastor Russell’s recent sermon on “Jonah,” which has caused quite a sensation, will be read with interest. He said in part:

Some, intent on disproving as much as possible of the Bible, have attempted to make light of Jonah’s experiences, claiming that there was no fish in the world of such capacity as could swallow a man entirely. We are to remember, however, that the Scriptures do not say that it was an ordinary whale that swallowed Jonah, but specifically declare that God “specially prepared” a great fish for the occasion. Nor is that all. We have our Lord’s own testimony to the truthfulness of the matter, and whoever denies either His truthfulness or His intelligence is thereby denying also His Messiahship and repudiating Him as a Savior, because neither a falsifier nor a dupe could possibly be recognized as the great Redeemer and Savior, the Sent of God, the Messiah.

Additionally, our Lord informs us that the Jonah incident was in the nature of a type, especially designed of God to foreshadow the fact that Jesus Himself would be dead for parts of three days and arise from the dead on the third day, even as Jonah was buried alive for parts of three days and on the third day the great fish vomited him on dry land. There is nothing difficult about the narrative to one who has proper faith in God. To those who have not faith, nothing connected with Divine revelation is reasonable, commendable or satisfactory. Let us continue to maintain our stand with those who hold fast to the Word of Life.

The Belly of Hell Described

But what have “the belly of hell” and the poor soul crying from it to do with the story of Jonah? Jonah was in the belly of hell and his cry unto the Lord from there constitutes our text. When a boy I heard this text, and my imagination conjured up what hell was like and especially what the belly of hell, or what I supposed the middle part of it, was like. I had the opportunity of looking into blast furnaces through what is called the glory-hole or peep-hole. There I noted that the center of the fire was at white heat. I tried to imagine people in such a condition in the very middle or belly of hell. I could not imagine how they could survive such an experience a single moment, let alone for all eternity. I sought theological expositions of the matter and learned that some theologians of the hoary past, admitting the destructive effect of fire, claimed that God would specially vitalize all the poor creatures consigned to this torment, so that they would never die, but would keep on suffering forever and forever and forever, untellable tortures. I found that other

theologians explained that those consigned to such a fiery ordeal would gradually become adapted to it and assume an asbestos-like shell which would measurably protect them from the fire. But these theologians went on to explain that, wishing them to suffer horrible tortures, God would scale off the asbestos shell, causing them to suffer still more excruciatingly every time the operation was performed. As a child I tried to imagine that this was the just desert of sinners, and that the Heavenly Father was really kind and loving—that He did not give them worse, though I could not think of anything worse that they could suffer.

“When I was a child, I spake as a child, but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” (1 Cor. 13:11) I asked for the proof that anybody could endure such sufferings and yet live. I asked for the proof that our God is as unsympathetic as any devil could be. My mind rejected as irrational the whole proposition. I said: The God whom I shall worship must be a greater being than myself—greater than any human being, not only in power to execute His will, but also in wisdom to make a wise arrangement for His creatures, and also perfect in justice to do to them, as he would have them do to Him, if he were the creature and they the God. He must also be perfect in love, the noblest feature of any character. I said to myself: Such must be the God who was the Creator of our race, for He has produced in humanity certain degrees of these various qualities and he could not give to man what he does not himself possess, nor can we suppose that he would create man with more justice, wisdom, love and power than he himself possesses. To that great God I bowed my heart and mind and every power that I possess. To him I still bow, and give thanks that by his grace I have come to see his character, his Plan and his Word more clearly than in the past. I thank him that now I can see in what way ultimately Jesus will be the “Light of the world”—not merely the Light of the Church.—John 8:12.

In abandoning the doctrine of eternal torment my disposition was to abandon the Bible also, because I believed that the Bible was the foundation of the irrational theory which had pictured God to my mind as a demon of the worst imaginable type. But, thank God, dear friends, the Lord heard my prayer for light, for knowledge respecting himself. After I made a search of heathen creeds, as well as those of Christendom, and found them all illogical, unreasonable, unsatisfactory, I turned to the Bible again, saying, Perhaps I have not done the Bible justice; perhaps I have unconsciously attributed to the Bible the teachings of the creeds. Perhaps I have read it through colored spectacles. Praying to God for guidance I took up Bible study in a very different way from previously. I began to study the Bible as I should have done at first—without reference to any of the creeds. I began to let God teach me. I ceased to say, It reads, “**Thus,**” but it must mean otherwise. It says, “So and so,” but cannot mean that, but the reverse. In other words I ceased to try to teach God and endeavored to be taught of God through his Word, guided by his Holy Spirit.

International Bible Studies

That was forty-four years ago. Under the Lord's blessing I found the Key to the interpretation of the Scriptures—not because of ability, but, I believe, because it is now due time for the Bible to be understood—in the closing of this Gospel Age and the dawning of the Millennial Day. Having found the Key and used it myself I have spent my best endeavors since to put the Key into the hands of God's consecrated people the world over. I have nothing to boast of, dear friends, but have much to be glad for. First, I am glad on my own account with a joy unspeakable, that now I know my Heavenly Father and can have confidence in him and can have love for him as never before. I am thankful that, to some extent, I have been enabled to convey similar joys, similar blessings, to others of his dear people of all denominations in all parts of the world. The Lord has gradually enlarged my opportunities year by year. I am not building a sect—not making a new denomination—not founding a Church. We have had too much of that sort of thing already. Not only have we Wesley's Church and Calvin's Church, etc., etc., but it has become the custom for each minister to be spoken of as the proprietor of the Church; as for example, the Reverend Dr. A's Church. It has become a custom, too, for the preachers to speak of the people as "My people," "My church." This is all wrong. I wish to have neither part nor lot in it. I have no Church, and wish for none. There is but the one Church—the Church of Christ—"the Church of the Living God"—"the Church of the First Borns, whose names are written in Heaven." That Church includes in its membership every true saint of God who trusts in the merit of Christ and seeks to walk in his footsteps. Whatever earthly systems such may be identified with are without Divine authorization. Their standing in God's sight is merely because of their identification with Christ as "members of his Body."

In God's providence I was led to publish six volumes of "Studies in the Scriptures," or Bible Keys. These were taken up by the Bible and Tract Society, and published at cost price to enable all of God's people everywhere to procure them. They are now published in twenty of the most prominent languages. The first Volume, "The Plan of the Ages," has reached almost to the five million mark. I have received not one cent of royalty. My life is a very simple one. My expenses are small. I accept no salary and take up no collections. Voluntary donations from those who have been blessed by my labors supply my needs and the surplus goes to the Bible and Tract Society for the forwarding of its work—"The Promulgation of Christian Knowledge."

Each earnest Christian, who obtains the assistance of these Bible Keys and enters into the treasures of God's Word and becomes rich himself in spiritual knowledge and in joy and peace of heart, is glad to call the attention of others to these Bible Helps. Thus the International classes of Bible Students of all denominations in all parts of the world are springing up and a blessed light, we believe, is going forth from these, assistful to all who love righteousness and hate iniquity. Although I am the regular Pastor of the New York

City Temple and of the Brooklyn Tabernacle congregation there are several assistants and I am privileged to speak to thinking Christians in various parts of the world, especially in the United States. Only the Lord knows how I thank him for this privilege of service, and for the still larger opportunity afforded me through the columns of some of the principal papers of the United States.

My sermons are handled by a Syndicate, and I am advised that now they appear in several hundred newspapers, aggregating a circulation of several million copies. All these people, of every denomination who do any thinking at all, I am sure have had similar difficulties to those which I experienced—difficulties in comprehending how our Heavenly Father could be a good Father, a good God, a loving Creator and yet provide for his human creatures such terrible destinies as all the creeds of the “dark ages” set forth. There is not a thinking Christian in the world who does not need the correct understanding of the Bible in order to be able to stand in the evil day that is upon us. All need to give heed to St. Paul’s words, “Take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all stand.” (Eph. 6:13) Our day is a blessed one in respect to its wonderful opportunities and privileges, but it is an evil one in the sense of being a time of great trial and testing of faith to Christendom.

Thinking minds are rejecting the doctrine of eternal torment and generally at the same time rejecting the Bible and denying that it is the inspired Word of God. These dear friends are stumbling into infidelity and think that Higher Criticism and Darwin’s Evolution theory are new light. What they need is to see that the true light is in the Bible and that, wearing our grandfathers’ spectacles, we misread the Word of God and wrested it to our own injury and to the loss of our peace of mind and fellowship with the Father and Son.

The Key to the Scriptures

Whoever gets the proper understanding of our text has in his possession the Key to the Bible. If he will use it, passage after passage will open for him and the whole Word of God becomes a new and glorious revelation of Justice, Wisdom, Love and Power Divine.

The Prophet Jonah was in the fish’s belly—he was buried alive. It is this that is referred to in our text. The words, “hell-belly” signify grave-belly or belly-grave. The context shows all this, telling us additionally that sea-weeds were wrapped about the Prophet’s head and that God heard his prayer and delivered him from the hell-belly, or belly-grave, on the third day, by causing the fish to vomit him up. If you have a reference Bible note that in the margin there is a reference to the words of our text, saying, “Hebrew, the grave.” Ah! says one, The translators merely made a mistake and translated it “hell” when they should have translated it “grave.” Yes, I answer, and they made the same mistake in every case in which they used the same word “sheol” throughout the Old

Testament. As it is, “sheol” is translated “grave” more times than it is translated “hell” in our Common Version; but it should be translated “grave” every time. There we have the Key to the Bible. The hell of the Bible, the penalty for sin, is death, the grave, the tomb. It is not an everlasting hell, for several Scriptures declare that “sheol” (hell) shall be destroyed. “I will ransom them from the power of the ‘grave’ (sheol); I will redeem them from death; O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave (sheol, hell), I will be thy destruction.” (Hosea 13:14) St. Paul quotes this prophecy in conjunction with his great discourse on the resurrection, “O death, where is thy sting? O grave (hades) where is thy victory?”—1 Cor. 15:55.

Christ Died For Our Sins

We see, dear friends, what our dear Redeemer suffered on our behalf to release us from the penalty of sin. He did not go to eternal torment for our sins. He did go into sheol, into hades, into the grave. “Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures.” (1 Cor. 15:3) Thus God has provided for the resurrection of the dead—all mankind, “both of the just and of the unjust.” The just are the Church, the saints. The unjust include all others. The blood of Jesus will avail for the release of every member of the race from the great penalty of death. Now it operates under a special call to the saintly few who are invited to become joint-heirs with the Redeemer in his great Kingdom which shortly is to bless all the families of the earth—not only those then living, but also all who have gone down to the tomb. The general resurrection will not be an instantaneous one, as in the case of the saints. It will be a gradual one in two senses:

(1) All will not come forth at once, but as the Apostle declares, “Every man in his own order,” company or band.—1 Cor. 15:23.

(2) It will be gradual in the sense that the awakening from the tomb will be but the beginning of the resurrection of the world. During the thousand years of Christ’s reign all who will give heed to his instructions and assistance may rise gradually—up, up, up—and by the close of the Millennium they will reach the full perfection and image of God, lost by Father Adam through disobedience. The unwilling, those rebellious after the light has fully come upon them, will be destroyed in the Second Death, from which there will be no recovery. They will perish as the brute beasts.

A Methodist Brother Defends Pastor Russell

Editor of *Age-Herald*, Birmingham, Ala.

“I note there is strenuous opposition to the ‘Scripture Studies’ as promulgated by Pastor Russell, of Brooklyn, N.Y., and that this opposition has become so pronounced that the Pastor’s Union on various occasions has given verbal expression to their views on the subject, and that recently a movement was started throughout the country to muzzle the press, and stop the publication of his sermons in the newspapers. It is evident from this that we have reached a crisis in the religious world hitherto unknown since the Dark Ages, and which I thought impossible in this enlightened age. To hinder free thought, free speech, free investigation and the publication of religious truth, is the most daring venture I have ever known ministers of the Gospel to make.

“Rather than to take the step of stopping the mouth of one of God’s humble servants who is earnestly setting forth his views on the Bible, I would suffer my arm severed from my body—yea, my head. Remember what Jesus said about offending one of His little ones who believes on Him: ‘And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in Me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and he were cast into the sea.’ (Mark 9:42) Why do they not meet Mr. Russell in the forum and from the pulpits combat his teaching by the Scripture? Are they not able to meet him? Does he not support every argument and every thought presented by Scripture? Again, why do they not rest their case in the hands of God like the wise Gamaliel did, in the days of the Apostles, when Peter and others were on trial? Gamaliel rose up in the council and said: ‘Refrain from these men, and let them alone, for if this work be of men, it will come to naught, but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it, for you fight against God.’ In some places Mr. Russell’s books have been collected and burned in the streets, with the result that his books multiplied many fold in those places. God will take a hand in the right as sure as we live. Beware! I warn them that the more thoughtful among them may not bring condemnation upon themselves.

“There is already widespread discontent. Somehow our people are feeling after God and looking around for spiritual food more substantial than they have been feeding upon. Let them look. Let them search for Truth wherever it may be found. Our people are intelligent and able to think for themselves and will do it. All can read and have Bibles and other books explaining the Bible, or can get them if desired. When leaders of churches unite to force people to accept or reject creeds according to their views by restraining the liberty of speech and the liberty of the press, to prevent the publication of doctrines of the Bible according to other men’s views, they have departed from the rational ideas of dealing with the subject, and we cannot hold with them.”

“S. A. ELLIS.”