

THIS SERMON IS A REGULAR WEEKLY FEATURE

PEOPLE'S PULPIT...



Sermon by CHARLES T. RUSSELL, Pastor Brooklyn Tabernacle.

PREACHING TO THE DEAD.

"For this cause was the Gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but alive according to God in the spirit" (1 Peter iv., 6).

Jamestown, N. Y., August 7.—Pastor Russell of the Brooklyn Tabernacle today addressed a very large meeting of Bible Students in Coleridge Auditorium. The occasion was a General Convention of Bible Students. The audience was estimated at nearly 5,000. Taking for his text the above words, the speaker said:

The Bible, to be understood, must be viewed from its own standpoint. This, as Bible students, we are learning more and more particularly every day. In the past we have read our Bibles "up-side-down." Many read as a duty; others as a sort of charm that would placate Divine Justice and bring us Divine favor. Now we are learning to read the Bible in a common-sense way, and to use our reasoning faculties in connection with its statements and prophecies. As a consequence, while others are failing from the faith—some into infidelity styled Higher Criticism and Evolution; others into fanciful wrestlings of the Word of God—we are coming to appreciate the Bible as the most safe and sane Book in the world. Correspondingly our faith in God increases—faith in his Wisdom, Justice, Love and Power to accomplish all the good purposes which he purposed in himself before the creation of our race. Correspondingly, too, we are coming to appreciate more than ever the value of the great Redeemer and of the great sacrifice for sin which he accomplished at Calvary. We are coming to see the truth of what we once considered poetic license when we sang:

"There's a wideness in God's mercy Like the wideness of the sea."

We are seeing more clearly as the days go by the meaning of the Scripture which declares that eventually the Redeemer "shall see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied." We perceive now that the little handful of saints walking in the Master's footsteps from Pentecost to his Second Advent and sharing in the "First Resurrection" is not the end of Divine Love for our race, but merely its beginning—"A first fruits unto God of his creatures" (James 1, 18). We are now seeing that, according to the Divine purpose, the calling and election of the Church to the spirit nature, to the divine nature, must be completed before the second step in the great Divine Plan of Salvation begins—the recovery of the world from sin and death conditions, to human perfection and Paradise restored.

"Let Dead Bury Their Dead."

No Bible topic requires more careful discrimination in its study than does the subject of death. This is mainly because of the general confusion of mind which came upon Christendom during the long centuries of the Church's comparative darkness, when Bibles (the Lamp of God upon the Christian's path) were scarce, and when few could read the truths of priceless value, that were chained to lecterns. In consequence of this confusion we hear intelligent people talk ignorantly and stupidly respecting death. They make confusion worse confounded by telling us of Adam's spiritual death and discussing "natural" death and "the death that never dies," etc., etc.

To get the Bible view of death we need to brush away such foolish babblings and confine ourselves to Bible language and the rational thought connected therewith. For instance, according to the Bible, there is no "natural death"—it is not natural for man to die. It is according to the Bible arrangement and man's nature that he should live—live eternally, as do the angels. If obedient to the Divine commands. Death, therefore, is the unnatural thing! Do we think of angels as dying, and of heaven as filled with cemeteries? Have they doctors and undertakers there? Surely not! Yet it would be just as proper to speak of natural death amongst the angels as in respect to men.

The term spiritual death so frequently used respecting Adam and his fall is wholly unscriptural. No such expression is found in the Bible; neither such a thought. Adam could not die a spiritual death, because he was not a spirit being. He was an earthly being—not an angel, but a man. As the Scriptures declare of Adam, "Thou madest him a little lower than the angels; and crownest him with glory and honor, and didst set him over the works of thy hands"; "over the beasts of the field, the fish of the sea and the fowl of the air" (Hebrews ii, 7; Psalm viii, 5, 6).

It is, therefore, absurd for us to continue longer to speak of Adam dying a spiritual death, while admitting that he was not a spirit being. It was simply the man Adam that died. His death, however, did include the gradual processes of decay, and affected not only his bones and muscles, but also his brains—his every mental and moral quality. The sentence, "Dying, thou shalt die," took hold of him as an entirety; hence we find, as the Scriptures declare, that there is "none righteous; no, not one"—none mentally, morally or physically right. All have sinned. All come short of the glory of God in which Adam was created.

From the moment of disobedience and Divine condemnation Adam and his race have been judicially dead and gradually going down, down, down, in degradation and into the tomb.

Speaking of the dying race from the judicial standpoint our Savior called them all dead. He declared that none has even a reckoned life, except such as by faith accepted him as their Life-giver—Savior. His words are, "He that hath the Son hath life; he that hath not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John iii, 36). Speaking to one who believed on him the Savior said, "Let the dead bury their dead"; go thou and preach the Gospel (Matthew viii, 22). From the right standpoint his meaning is evident. Let the dead, the condemned and legally dead world, look out for its own affairs. You become one of my followers and carry my message of life and hope to as many as have ears to hear!

"Dead in Trespasses and Sin."

Thus the whole world of mankind through heredity, through inherited weaknesses, through participation in the sentence that came upon father Adam justly, are all judicially dead in trespasses and in sins—not one of the race is worthy of eternal life upon the only terms and conditions which God can offer—namely, perfection and obedience to the Divine standards.

Jesus preached the Gospel amongst those judicially dead through trespasses and sins. A few had the hearing ear and accepted the good message and gave their hearts to God and accepted the terms of discipleship—to walk in the Master's footsteps in the narrow way faithfully unto death—willingly offering, sacrificially, their little all in the service of God, his Truth, his righteousness, his people. These few, as we have seen, the Savior recognizes as having life—as having "passed from death unto life" (John v, 24); nevertheless their change was only a legal one. Actually, according to the flesh, they were still imperfect, fallen, dying. But by Divine arrangement their new minds, their new wills, were accepted of God in Christ and their flesh ignored as dead, and they were begotten by God of the Holy Spirit as New Creatures and became sons of God. As sons, they were free from all the previous condemnation that came upon them as members of Adam's race—freed through the imputation of the merit of the Redeemer's sacrifice applied on their behalf. Thus they attained the liberty of the sons of God—freedom from sin-condemnation. So we read of them—

"He came unto his own nation—Jews and his own received him not; but to as many as received him, to them gave he power (liberty, privilege) to become sons of God even to them that believe on his name (his greatness as Messiah), who were begotten not of the will of the flesh, nor of man, but of God" (John 1, 13).

A similar procedure has been in progress throughout all this Gospel Age from Pentecost until now amongst the world of mankind judicially dead. It has reached a considerable number; but not many great, however, not many wise, not many rich, not many noble, not many learned, chiefly the poor of this world and the mean things, the ignoble things (1 Corinthians 1, 26-28).

"We Are Saved by Hope."

While speaking of believers begotten of the Holy Spirit and New Creatures in Christ Jesus as having passed from death unto life, the Bible, with equal explicitness, tells us that the resurrection of the mind, the will, of the New Creature, is not the completion of his salvation. He has received a great blessing, a great salvation; but what he now enjoys is merely a fore-taste, an "earnest," or hand-payment of the great blessing which he will receive eventually, if faithful to his Covenant unto death. The fruition of the hopes of the New Creation will be attained in the end of this Age at the Second Coming of the Redeemer, when he comes to set up his Kingdom in power and great glory for the blessing and salvation of the world, when "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess" (Psalm vi, 23). The Scriptures point the New Creature, the Body of Christ, the "saints," the Church, to that illustrious day as the time when they shall experience their glorious change from earthly to heavenly conditions—when in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye the resurrection power will lift them wholly out of earthly conditions to the perfection of the "Divine Nature."

Describing this "First Resurrection" of the saints the Apostle says, "It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians xv, 43, 44). Respecting this glorious consummation of the hopes of the Church, the Apostle declares it to be the end of our faith, the salvation of our souls—"the grace (salvation) that shall be brought unto you at the revelation of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1, 13). For that glorious time the Lord's people are to

wait patiently, realizing that, as New Creatures, they are being tested by the weaknesses and frailties of their old bodies reckoned dead. They are to show their loyalty to God by fighting a good fight against the weaknesses of the flesh, against the allurements of the world and the snares of the Adversary.

This Light Upon Our Text.

Consider now, in the light of the foregoing, the meaning of St. Peter's words used as our text. We perceive how the Gospel message from first to last has been preached to a dead world—to a world under sentence of death—to a world dead in trespasses and in sin and unworthy of Divine notice. The message has not gone forth to every creature yet. The Divine promise is that eventually every eye shall see and every ear shall be unstopped, and then "the knowledge of the Lord shall fill the whole earth" and "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess." But that will be during Messiah's Kingdom of righteousness, which will last for a thousand years for the world's uplifting. That time has not yet come; hence that glorious message which all must hear and those glorious sights which all must see and all confess are not yet revealed. As yet the message can be appreciated only by a comparatively small proportion of our race, "even as many as the Lord our God shall call."

The Redeemer says that they must not only be thus "called of God," but that they must be "drawn" by him, in order to be blessed during this Age. He says, No man can come unto me, except the Father which sent me draw him, and he that cometh unto me (thus drawn) I will in no wise reject (John vi, 44, 37). For these few of the dead world the Gospel in the present time is intended. No others have the ear to hear. But while those who hear are few in comparison to the millions of the world who do not hear, nevertheless they are many in comparison to the still fewer who accept the call under the conditions and limitations of the narrow way of self-sacrifice.

"Many are called, but few chosen" to this high calling of joint-heirship with the Redeemer in his Kingdom.

By and by when all eyes and ears of understanding shall be opened and the blessing of the Lord through Messiah shall be world-wide, it will not be merely a calling to righteousness that will be extended. A command will be enforced by disciplines, "stripes," "corrections in righteousness," to the intent that the "dead" world in general may be blessed and be resurrected—lifted up, up, up, out of sin and death conditions to the human perfection bestowed upon Adam and his race in creation. Only the unwilling and disobedient will die the Second Death, from which there will be no redemption, no recovery.

Live in Flesh and in Spirit.

Those who hear the Gospel and accept its terms of consecration unto death of the flesh and are begotten of the Holy Spirit as New Creatures, "partakers of the divine nature," have so to speak, a dual existence from the time of their begetting of the Spirit. From God's standpoint they are New Creatures begotten to the divine nature, which, if faithful, they will fully obtain in the "First Resurrection." Yet according to all worldly concepts of the matter they are still human beings, very much the same as they were prior to their consecration and Spirit begetting. The world may, indeed, see certain changes more or less radical in their conduct and words, but, like as not, these will appear to the worldly merely as fads, fancies, eccentricities. Perhaps, indeed, as in the case of St. Paul, they may be considered as "besides themselves"—mad. Hence, as the Apostle declares, "The world knoweth us not, even as it knew him not" (1 John iii, 1). The world did not know Jesus to be begotten of the Holy Spirit, the Son of the Highest, etc., nor does the world yet know that he is highly exalted at the Father's Right Hand. So also it is with the followers of Jesus. They similarly have received a Spirit begetting and, similarly, in due time, are to experience the glorious change of the "First Resurrection" and be perfected on the new plane of the divine nature.

Judged of Men—Judged of God.

Note again the Apostle's words respecting these Spirit-begotten followers of Jesus, the "little flock," who walk in his footsteps of self-sacrifice. He says that these will be judged according to men in the flesh, but according to God in the Spirit. Men not knowing us as New Creatures in Christ may think of us and approve or condemn as they would think of and approve or condemn others—according to the flesh. The world will not see that in these New Creatures there is a battle in progress—the New Creature seeking to conquer the flesh and to bring it into subjection to the Divine will, but not always able to do so.

All we can do is to do our best, whether our best shall be as good as or better than that of our fellow-creatures who are not Spirit-begotten, but who may be less depraved by nature—nobler by heredity. Our consolation as New Creatures is that we are not to be judged by human judgment, but by him who called us and drew us to himself, who sanctified us through the blood of the Cross, and who beget us with his own Holy Spirit to his own divine nature. He will judge us according to the spirit—according to our minds, according to our intentions, according to our efforts. To the faithful who at heart are overcomers the Lord eventually will say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant! Enter into the joy of thy Lord. Thou hast been faithful over a few things; I will make thee ruler over many things" (Matthew xxv, 21).

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