

THIS SERMON IS A REGULAR WEEKLY FEATURE

PEOPLE'S PULPIT...



Sermon by CHARLES T. RUSSELL, Pastor Brooklyn Tabernacle.

CHRIST'S ASCENSION FROM HADES

"He led forth a multitude of captives and gave gifts unto men" (Ephesians iv, 8).

Allentown, Pa., March 27.—As Christendom celebrates the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, it is appropriate that our hearts and minds should intelligently grasp the significance of the event commemorated. St. Paul laid great stress upon the resurrection of the dead, declaring that if there be no resurrection of the dead all those whom we counted as asleep would never have an awakening, and consequently would be as dead as are brute beasts. Note his emphatic statement to this effect (1 Corinthians xv, 12-18). For here as elsewhere his words contradict the thought that the saintly dead pass immediately to glory and the unsaintly to Purgatory or to eternal torture.

According to the Gospel of Christ, of which St. Paul declares that he was not ashamed, the dead are to be esteemed as though they were asleep—at rest from all the commotion and turmoil and strife, ignorance and superstition and sin and trouble incident to the present reign of sin and death. They have truly entered into rest, whether they were saints or sinners. When the time for their awakening shall have come in the Millennial morning of Christ's reign of righteousness, surrounding conditions will be very different from what they are today, thank God! Then Satan will be bound, the Bible assures us (Revelation xx, 1-3), and the ignorance and superstition, selfishness and crime, which have for centuries marked his reign will gradually draw to a close, for the glorious Messiah-King will not permit them. His reign, on the contrary, will be marked with the true enlightenment of all mankind; and the result will be, as foretold; namely, "Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess to the glory of God" (Isaiah xiv, 23).

Gradually the world will be brought to an Edenic condition, in harmony with the Divine promise. Already, this work may be said to be indeed beginning. Already, by artesian wells and irrigation processes and highways of travel and good roads and intelligent cultivation of fields, the earth begins to bloom and the wilderness and solitary place to be glad, as foretold by Isaiah the prophet (Isaiah xxxv, 1).

Under these blessed conditions "All that are in their graves shall hear the voice of the Son of man and shall come forth" (John v, 28, 29—not all at once, but "Every man in his own order" (1 Corinthians xv, 23). The saintly believers, who alone are fully pleasing to God, will come forth in the First, or chief, or preferable, Resurrection—come forth perfect, on the spirit plane, like unto the angels and like unto their glorified Redeemer, to be his joint-heirs in his Millennial Kingdom and its great work of resurrecting, instructing and ruling and uplifting all the "groaning" families of the earth (Romans viii, 23). Thus will be fulfilled God's promise to the spiritual Seed of Abraham, "In thy Seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Galatians iii, 29). Gradually, after dealing with the living nations to some extent, the sleeping world will be awakened, "Every man in his own order" (1 Corinthians xv, 23).

Our Lord assures us that all except the saintly few will come forth from the tomb that they may have a resurrection—a raising up out of sin and death conditions to righteousness, to the image of God that was lost by Adam; and that eventually, if willing and obedient, they will receive God's gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. But the rebellious under those favorable conditions, we are assured, will be cut off from life entirely in the Second Death (Acts iii, 19-23).

In speaking of the world's resurrection our Redeemer designates it a resurrection by judgments (Rev. Ver. John v, 28, 29). Messiah's righteous judgments will then be abroad in the world. The light of knowledge will be as clear as the noon-day sun. Every good deed and endeavor will receive its reward and every wifely evil deed will receive chastisement, corrections, to the intent that they may learn the advantages of the way of holiness and go up thereon to life eternal, which the willing and obedient may reach by the close of the Millennial Age.

Through the prophet Daniel, the Lord declares that many of the worldly who now sleep in the dust of the earth shall come forth unto shame and lasting contempt. We can readily realize the shame that will be theirs when the light of full knowledge shall prevail and all of their past shall stand revealed, to themselves and to others in its true colors. We can well understand that this will bring contempt to many now highly esteemed amongst men. But we can rejoice in the thought that the Millennial Kingdom then to be in power will deal graciously with all. The stripes of punishment will be tempered with mercy; and gradually by their change of character the contemptible ones will cease to be contemptible. The transforming power of grace and Truth now operating in the Church will be equally forceful then, operating upon the world of

mankind. As perfection is gradually attained the shame of the imperfection will gradually abate, while all of the shameless will be destroyed in the Second Death. Thus we see the Divine Purpose of the resurrection of the dead and our glorious hope, far different from all the fears that were taught us by the misty traditions of men, from the "dark ages." And thus we see the force of the Apostle's words that if there be no resurrection of the dead our hope is vain, our faith is vain (1 Corinthians xv, 14-19).

"But Now is Christ Risen." The Apostle argues, "If the dead rise not," if that is an impossibility so far as the world in general is concerned, then it is an impossibility so far as Christ is concerned. And "if Christ be not risen," then all hope, all faith, is vain. And his preaching is not only foolish, but worse. (See 1 Corinthians xv, 14). "But now is Christ risen from the dead and become the first fruits of them that slept." The mere awaking from sleep, as in the case of Lazarus, Dorcas and others, is here left out of the question. Nothing is counted as resurrection except the full, complete raising up out of death. Our Lord was the "first that should rise from the dead" (Acts xxvi, 23), in this full sense. And he was a first fruits, or proof, that others still sleeping will come forth by Divine Power to be exercised by him in the resurrection morning—the Millennial morning. The Church will be the next in order—she is to be the Bride-Consort of the Great King and to participate with him in his glorious work of uplifting the race which fell from the Divine image into sin and death through father Adam. The redemption-price has been provided in the death of Jesus; and the time for beginning the great work of "restoration of all things" merely waits until the completion of the election of the saintly Church (Acts iii, 19-21).

Christ Arose From Hades. Preaching on the Day of Pentecost, St. Peter declares that God raised Christ from the dead. Then in proof that this was the Divine intention from the beginning, he quotes from the prophetic Psalm of David, "Thou shalt not leave my soul in hell." The Apostle's quotation (Acts ii, 27) is in the Greek, in which the word *hell* is *hades*. His quotation is from the Hebrew, in which the word *hell* is *sheol*—the only word rendered *hell* throughout the entire Old Testament.

I am not stating this as something new, although I am confident that it is new to many of my hearers and to many of the eighteen millions who will read my discourse in tomorrow morning's papers. For the sake of such, I note the fact that in the morning of our Lord's resurrection, he said to Mary, "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father and your Father; to my God, and your God" (John xx, 17). I remind them further of the language of the so-called Apostles' Creed, which is coming more and more into vogue with all denominations and which declares, "He descended into hell and rose again the third day." In a version of this creed published by the Presbyterian Board of Publication of Philadelphia, a footnote very properly explains that the word *hell* here used is, in the Greek, *hades*, which signifies the state or condition of death.

I consider this a very important matter, which should be made widely known, because of the false conception of *hell* handed down to us through our creeds formulated in the "dark ages," and since a misinterpretation of *sheol* and *hades* has been given to the public mind—the impression that these words signify a place of torture. All this is wholly false, as every Greek and Hebrew scholar knows, and, if cross-questioned, will admit. It is an important question to the public because this misconception of the meaning of the word *hell* is driving hundreds, yea, thousands, away from God and away from the Bible. They correctly reason that the teaching that our Creator foreknew and intended a *hell* of torture for his creatures is beyond conception, beyond belief, and manifestly untrue, as no holy being could be so unjust, unkind, unloving. It is time that all such should see that the fault lies with the creeds and not with the Bible—that the Bible teaches a *hell*, *sheol*, *hades*, into which all go, both good and bad, and from which all will be called forth in the resurrection morning by the great Redeemer.

"Leading Captivity Captive." A better translation reads, "Our Lord ascended on high leading a multitude of captives." These words are a pen picture representing a great King as a Conqueror returning from a victory over an opponent. The victor rode in a chariot at the head of the procession, surrounded by trumpets and acclamations, and behind him followed the evidences, the proofs of his victory—either those whom he had captured and enslaved or, as in this case, those who had been captured and enslaved and whom the Conqueror had set free. The picture is graphic and wonderful, notwithstanding the fact that a

considerable space has intervened between our Lord's triumphant resurrection and ascension and the evidences of his victory, which are following after him. Of the great King of Glory himself, let us remember that after he had suffered by the will of God, "the Just for the unjust," that he might set mankind free from sin and death, he was "highly exalted and given a name above every name." He was made "partaker of the divine nature." He was no longer a man, for "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians xv, 50). True, he still has as one of his many titles, The Son of man, which identifies him with our race and the work which he is in the process of accomplishing for it and which he will finish during his Millennial reign. We are reminded by the Apostle that he was put to death in the flesh and made alive in spirit—a spirit-being. He died as a man this side the veil. He arose a New Creature the other side the veil—a spirit being. He was "sown in corruption, raised in incorruption; sown in dishonor, raised in glory; sown a natural body, raised a spiritual body." As the Church's Head and Fore-runner he passed beyond the veil; and now shortly, as participants with him and as the second battalion of the glorious triumphal procession, will follow "the Church which is his Body," sharers with him in the First Resurrection, his Bride.

Next in processional order following the Bride class, the "very elect" will come the "great company" from every nation, people, kindred and tongue, the honored servants of the heavenly Bridegroom and Bride. "The virgins her companions" (Psalm xlv, 14), will follow after the Bride into the presence of the great King Jehovah. Next in processional order will come the Ancient Worthies from faithful Abel down to John the Baptist, the greatest of the prophets. But these will come forth from the tomb in human perfection and not in the spirit perfection of those preceding (Hebrews xi, 38-40; Matthew xi, 11). In their human perfection similar to that of Adam before his transgression, plus their development in faith and obedience, these will constitute a firstfruits of Israel and of the world of mankind. Under their administration, supervised by the glorified ones beyond the veil, the work of restitution and uplifting the captives of sin and death will progress until, at the close of that thousand years of the reign of righteousness, every human being of loyal character will be completely freed from the bondage of sin and death and imperfection and, with the Ancient Worthies, will march in the grand procession into the presence of Jehovah God.

Thus the great Redeemer and Deliverer will not only present the saintly Church blameless and irreproachable before the Father in love, but likewise will liberate all who will of Adam's race, now asleep and degraded. No wonder the Scriptures declare of the end of his triumphal procession, "He shall see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied" (Isaiah liii, 11).

"And Gave Gifts Unto Men." All the blessings which, in God's providence, are not coming to the Church during this Gospel Age, and all the blessings that in the Millennial Age will flow to natural Israel, "the rebellious also," and all the blessings that will flow through Israel and its New Covenant to all the families of the earth, proceed directly or indirectly from the great victory which our Lord Jesus gained over sin and death. Our text and context, as well as the Psalm from which the quotation is made, bears out this thought. It is because our Lord descended, because he left the heavenly glory, and because, in harmony with the Father's will, our Redeemer left the courts of heavenly glory and humbled himself to become a man, and then "humbled himself to death, and even to the death of the cross," that his exaltation came as a reward of his loyalty to the Father's will.

And in the Divine Plan it is because his resurrection body and glory were a reward, a blessing—his earthly body and nature and rights had not been forfeited through disobedience—that he had the latter with all its privileges to bestow upon Adam's dead and dying race. He gave the merit of that sacrifice, first imputedly, on behalf of all desirous of walking in his steps of self-sacrifice even unto death, that these might be, in the Father's good pleasure, counted as his members and companions on the heavenly plane. To this end the first gifts were bestowed at Pentecost; and all of similar class throughout this age have had opportunity for participation therein. Additionally gifts of helpfulness and instruction and assistance were provided through the apostles, orators, pastors and teachers of the Church—for the qualification of these saintly footstep followers for the work of service in building up the Body of Christ, until the elect Body shall be complete (Ephesians iv, 11-13).

Soon these gifts and blessings and privileges now granted and imputed to the Church will be no longer needed by the class being prepared for the heavenly joint-heirship. Then the gift of the Millennial Kingdom, and through Israel the gift of the New Covenant (Jeremiah xxxi, 31), will be bestowed upon the blood-bought world, granting to them individually the opportunity of recovering from all their delinquency and imperfection. Let us then hail this great Redeemer and Deliverer *Lord of all!* Let us bow our hearts to him now and voluntarily put on the yoke of his service and suffer with him "outside the camp," that we may be accounted worthy of sharing with him in the glorious work of his Millennial Kingdom as his Bride and Joint-heir (Hebrews xiii, 11-13).

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