

THIS SERMON IS A REGULAR WEEKLY FEATURE

PEOPLE'S PULPIT...



Sermon by CHARLES T. RUSSELL, Pastor Brooklyn Tabernacle.

The Vengeance of Eternal Fire

"Even as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities about them... are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire" (Jude 7).

Lynn, Mass., August 14.—Pastor Russell of Brooklyn Tabernacle spoke here twice today to large and attentive audiences. We report one of his discourses from the above. He said in part:—

My text is one of the strongest of those which once we erroneously misunderstood to teach the eternal torment of the non-elect. Coming to the text with our minds filled with the wrong impressions respecting the character of the Almighty Creator and respecting his purposes toward humanity it is easy for us to misunderstand the words of St. Jude. So deeply were the erroneous thoughts impressed upon our minds from childhood that, irrational though they were, we considered them fundamental theology. In like manner we wrested to our own confusion and injury many Scriptures, reading into them what they do not say and ignoring what they do say. As, for instance, the messages of Holy Writ to the effect that "all the wicked will God destroy"; that "the wages of sin is death"; that "the soul that sinneth, it shall die"; that there is no eternal life out of Christ. All these and others we warped and twisted away from their beautiful and simple teaching, and made out of them "doctrines of devils" with which we alarmed ourselves and those committed to our instruction.

We thank God that gradually the eyes of our understanding are opening to discern the great Truth that the testing of the Church in the present Age and the testing of the world at large in the coming Age will be as to worthiness for eternal life or worthiness of eternal death—everlasting destruction—the Second Death from which there will be no redemption, no resurrection, no recovery. As St. Peter declares, "Those who enter into it will be, like brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed—annihilated."

Sodom's Guilt and Punishment.
Sodom and surrounding cities were profigate and licentious to the extreme and Divine Justice decreed that their course must not continue, but that they should be made an example of—a lesson to others of the Divine displeasure against all such licentiousness. Accordingly we read that fire and brimstone were rained from heaven to the utter destruction of those cities, the place of which is now marked by the Dead Sea. The Sodomites were obliterated and only their name and history have come down to us. Their utter destruction by eternal fire or heavenly fire rained upon them was a complete destruction. Their experience pictures forth the utter destruction of all whom God will finally reject as unworthy of eternal life. Not that fire and brimstone would be rained upon all, but that utter destruction will come upon all disapproved by the Almighty. Who thinks that St. Jude meant that the fire that destroyed the Sodomites was an eternal one? Whoever thinks that it is still burning as a literal blaze should take a look at the picture of the Dead Sea and note that there are no fires there. The thought is that the fire, which is a symbol of destruction, did its work thoroughly, completely, leaving not a vestige of these condemned to destruction.

The Sodomites all went to hell—to the Bible hell—to the state of death. But they did not go to the hell which was manufactured by our forefathers during the dark ages—a hell of eternal torture. We have Bible testimony on the subject, which we will produce. They are unconscious now like the remainder of the dead, waiting for the resurrection. And the resurrection opportunity will come to them, as well as to all the remainder of Adam's race; because they, as well as all others, are redeemed by the precious blood of Christ—by the sacrifice which he finished at Calvary. This is not speculative. We have the words of the Master himself on the subject. Let us take our information, our wisdom from the proper quarter. Then our doubts and fears will speedily flee away.

Not a Second Chance.
We will produce the Bible testimony showing that the Sodomites will be released and come forth during the mediatorial reign of Messiah to enjoy a share of the blessings then to be poured out upon Israel and the world; and to have an opportunity of coming into harmony with God and gaining eternal life. But we know that straightway somebody will say, No, Pastor Russell, that would be a second chance, and God has nowhere promised a second chance to any. Furthermore it would be belittling to the Divine Government to suppose that God, after giving one fair trial to a man and reaching a decision would conclude to give him another trial, as though Divine Justice were unable to determine the worthiness or unworthiness of the individual for eternal life in one trial or testing.

We fully agree with this sentiment, but call attention to the fact that the Sodomites did not enjoy one trial for life. They and all mankind were "born in sin, shapen in iniquity; in sin did their mothers conceive them."

They were born under the sentence, "Dying thou shalt die." Neither they nor anyone else, therefore, could be placed upon trial for a future life everlasting or death everlasting, until released from the original sentence of death under which all were born. And no release from that death sentence was granted to anybody until the Redeemer came and died, "the Just for the unjust," that "as by a man came death, by a man also might come the resurrection of the dead."
Only those, therefore, who have been born since Jesus' day could be released from the original penalty, or could be placed on trial for life or death eternal. Only the Church, therefore, accepts this proposition. To this agrees the words of the Apostle, "If we sin wilfully after that we have come to a knowledge of the Truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sin (such having enjoyed and misused their share of the original sacrifice)—nothing but a fearful looking forward to judgment (sentence) and fiery indignation, which will devour the adversaries of God—in the Second Death (Hebrews x, 26). The Sodomites, therefore, did not enjoy any chance of eternal life. They knew not "the only name given under heaven or amongst men whereby we must be saved." Not only so, but the majority of mankind since Jesus' day have never heard the Gospel in the true sense of the word hearing. They have never understood, never appreciated, it fully, rightly.

More Tolerable For Sodomites.
It may astonish some to know that Jesus, speaking of the judgment or trial of the world during the coming age, during his Mediatorial Kingdom, declared that that trial would be less severe upon the Sodomites than upon some of those people to whom he preached, who would also have a share in the opportunities of that great epoch—an opportunity, with the Sodomites, of reconciliation to God and the attainment of eternal life. His words were, Woe unto you Chorazin and Bethsaida, for if the mighty works which have been done in you had been done in Sodom and Gomorrah, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Therefore I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment [the world's trial time, the Millennium] than for you (Matthew 11, 22, 23). What more could we ask upon this subject? What higher authority could be invoked than the Great Judge himself?
It will not do to say that Jesus did not refer to the same licentious Sodomites mentioned by St. Jude in our text. It will not do to say that Jesus meant some Sodomites living in his day, because there were none. The Master distinctly tells us that "the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained down fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all" (Luke xvii, 29). When our Lord declares that "it shall be more tolerable for Sodom in the day of judgment than for Capernaum" and the other cities in which he preached, he implies that it will still be tolerable for those people who heard him and who rejected his message.

"Thus It Is Written."
This Gospel Age which began with our Lord's sufferings and trying experiences, and which has continued those experiences with his followers, has for its object the preparation, the qualification, of those who will be the Judges of the world in the coming Age. They must all be developed in the fruits and graces of the Holy Spirit—"meekness, patience, brotherly kindness, love," else that will not be fit to be the Judges of mankind by and by. It is required that all become copies of the Redeemer, God's dear Son. St. Paul tells us this, saying, "Know ye not that the saints shall judge the world?" and that God has foreordained that all of these Judges must be copies of his Son? (Romans viii, 29; I Corinthians xi, 2).

Come back with me to the Old Testament Scriptures and note how the Divine Spirit dictated this matter of the future trial of the Sodomites to one of the prophets and caused it to be written for our instruction. Alas! as Jesus said, we have been "slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken" (Luke xxiv, 25). Through Ezekiel the Prophet, the Lord explains that when the restitution time shall come at the Second Advent of our Lord in the glory of his Kingdom, then the Divine blessing will come upon Israel now cast off. Nor will the blessing of Messiah's Kingdom come upon Israel only! It will extend to all the families of the earth. Through the Prophet the Lord specially emphasized to Israel her two sister nations, Sodom and Samaria. The Lord pointed out that in the day of their pride and prosperity they despised these sister nations as being far beneath them and unworthy of their notice in every way. But in the restitution times (Acts iii, 19) they will be glad to have a share of the Divine favor in conjunction with those nations formerly despised. The Lord declares that it is not be-

cause of the worthiness of any of these that he proposes their restitution, but because of his glorious character, for which his namesake. Let me quote to you this remarkably clear statement of the Divine purposes future; and let us notice that it is emphatically declared that the ones to be restored and blessed are the very ones who perished in the days of Lot. We read,—

"Sodom thy sister hath not done... as thou hast done... Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness was to her... neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and the needy. And they were haughty, and committed abomination before me; therefore I took them away as I saw good. [God did not see good to take them to a hell of eternal torture; but he did see good to destroy them and to make them an example of the destruction of all ultimately displeasing to him after enjoying a knowledge of his grace and an opportunity for eternal life.]

"Thou also which hast condemned thy sister nations bare thine own shame for thy sins. They are more righteous than thou as Jesus declared. When I shall bring again thy captivity [bring them from the prison-house of death]... then will I bring again the captivity of thy captives in the midst of them; that thou mayest bear thine own shame and mayest be confounded in all that thou hast done, in that thou art a comfort unto them. When thy sisters Sodom and her daughters shall return to their former estate, and Samaria and her daughters return to their former estate, then thou and thy daughters shall return to your former estate... I will remember my Covenant with thee in the days of thy youth and I will establish unto them an everlasting Covenant [the New Law Covenant of which Messiah is the Mediator and which, under his Mediatorial Kingdom shall bless Israel and all who will come into Israel under the glorious terms of that New Covenant] [Jeremiah xxxi, 31].

"Then thou shalt remember thy ways and be ashamed when thou shalt receive thy sisters, thine elder and thy younger; and I will give them unto thee for daughters, but not by thy Covenant [not under your present Law Covenant, but under the New Law Covenant and its better Mediator]... that thou mayest remember and be confounded and never open thy mouth any more, because of thy shame, when I am pacified toward thee for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord God" [Ezekiel xvi, 48-63].

Length and Breadth—Height and Depth.
How wonderful it at first seems to us to find that we really have a good kind, loving God, and not an unmerciful and vengeful one! So grossly were we deceived respecting his character, by the traditions handed down from the past, that we gave him the reverence of fear, rather than that of love and devotion. The clearer light comes to us as a fresh revelation of the meaning of the Apostle's words when he wrote about "lengths and breadths and heights and depths of love of God, which passeth all understanding."

The words of the Lord through the prophet come to our minds, "Fear not their fear, neither be afraid." "Their fear of me is not of me, but is taught by the precepts of man." "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my plans higher than your plans." Oh! Thank God that it is so! To all eternity we shall praise God that he did not allow our forefathers to make him or change his character. Yes, and he is the same yesterday, today and forever. He changes not. The great, wise, just, loving plan for the salvation of mankind which he is now carrying out was the very one "which he purposed in himself before the world was created." This plan of selecting the Church through fiery trials, through the straight gate and narrow way, for nineteen centuries, was what he purposed in advance; for the Apostle says that he foreknew the Church in Christ. Likewise the times of restitution soon to come for the world of mankind he foreknew and predestinated, and made all the arrangements for, just as they are being carried out now. The end will be glorious. His name will shine resplendently when the mists have cleared away, and when the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in his beams, scattering all the darkness and degradation of sin and superstition.

"Then we'll see what God hath wrought! Then we'll praise him, praise him as we ought."

"To You It Is Given."
We are well aware that only the few can see the beauties of this subject as we see them. We are aware that only those to whom "it is given to know" will understand in the sense of fully appreciating the depth of the Divine message. But we are sure that all such will rejoice more and more in the God of our salvation, as they come to appreciate his worthiness of our love and confidence and devotion.
As for those who shall under Divine tests prove themselves sympathetic with iniquity, we are glad that the Divine sentence is that they shall have from the Eternal One a destruction total, complete—one from which there will be no recovery, no redemption, no resurrection. "They shall be as though they had not been." But all the willing and the obedient shall have the blessing of the Lord unto life eternal—either on the spirit plane as members of the Church of the firstborns or on the human plane as members of the saved Israel restored to human perfection.

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