

PEOPLE'S PULPIT...



Sermon by CHARLES T. RUSSELL, Pastor Brooklyn Tabernacle.

Immortal Worms and Unquenchable Fire

"Where their worm dieth not and their fire is not quenched" (Mark ix, 44).

These words from the lips of our Master, the Great Teacher, have been grievously misunderstood. The teaching of our Protestant childhood was to the effect that only the saintly elect would go to heaven and that others would not only lose heaven, but gain an eternal life in torment. Thus our text was understood to portray what practically the whole world of mankind would be compelled to endure. This hell was pictured to our childhood minds from outside the Bible as heated to a white heat. If we expressed wonder or surprise that any human creature could endure such conditions so long the answer was that God would exercise his omnipotent power to make us fire-proof and pain-sensitive. Some theologians of the Thomas a Kempis school of thought went so far as to picture the poor creatures in their sufferings and to show that the heat would form a kind of an asbestos covering which would shield them from a measure of its intensity. But those deluded theologians proceeded to explain that these outer coverings would crack and shell off every little while, leaving the poor victim freshly tender that his suffering might be the more intense.

Of course, these theologians of the past had their difficulty in dealing with the worms. They could imagine devils who would oversee the torture as being made immune to pain by the chief torturer, the Almighty God. But just how to imagine the worm getting along in so great a heat and how they would in any wise increase the torture of the poor sufferers was to many a perplexity. But patient thoughtfulness along these cruel and devilish lines enabled some to formulate the theory that the worms would be fiery ones, living in fire, delighting in fire—worms that would bore through the incrustations and add still further to the horrible sufferings of the world of mankind.

Was This What Jesus Meant?

Did the Great Teacher intend that such conclusions should be drawn from his language? And did he stop short of the description from reasons of sympathy or modesty or shame? Is this the general teaching of God's Word or has a great and terrible mistake been made? And have we mistaken a figure of speech and treated it as literal? We erred. We misunderstood. The Great Teacher who rebuked his disciples, James and John, when they desired to call fire from heaven upon the City of Samaria, because the people thereof refused to sell them food for the Master—the sympathetic One who said to them, "Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of: the Son of man came not to destroy men's lives, but to save them"—could that Son of man in any wise intend to tell us that our great Heavenly Father had less of the spirit of love and righteousness than the two impetuous disciples? Did he mean to intimate that while the disciples impetuously might have been willing to destroy the earthly life of the Samaritans, the Heavenly Father, of still more demoralized disposition, would treat practically all mankind ten million times worse than that and use Divine Power to all eternity to perpetuate the sufferings of his earthly creatures which his own Word declares were born in sin, shapen in iniquity, in sin did their mothers conceive them?—earthly creatures, too, whose environment was unfavorable and whose adversary, the devil, God neither destroyed nor bound?

Such an interpretation, my dear hearers, is not supposable. We must look for some explanation of the Master's words more consistent with his own character and with the Heavenly Father's character, and more consistent with our conception of what a Just, Loving, Wise and Powerful Creator would do. It does not answer the purpose to say, as so many do, "Bosh, do not discuss such a matter. Nobody now believes such things!" This one Scripture repudiated would shake our confidence in the whole Bible. But rightly explained and understood, it would settle and increase our faith in the Scriptures as the Divine message. This, then, must be our object—not merely to cast from us the devilish interpretation of the dark ages, but to ascertain the true interpretation—to get the true lesson from the words of the Great Teacher. Thousands are drifting off into more or less open infidelity simply because of the irrational interpretation given to this text and two or three others. And these errors have become so fastened in our minds from childhood days that they have become part and parcel of our very lives, so that many of us would have been inclined at one time to dispute the very existence of a God as much as to dispute such slanderous misrepresentations of his glorious character.

Entering Into Life.

Let us go back to Jesus' day and in mind place ourselves with those who heard him utter the words of our text and context. The Teacher had just said, "If thy hand offend thee, cut it off—it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than, having two hands, to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched, where their worm dieth not and their fire is not quenched."

He said the same in the following verses respecting the foot and the eye. Was he speaking literally or figuratively? Does any sane person suppose today that Jesus advised a literal cutting off of a hand or a foot or the plucking out of an eye? Assuredly not. And the person who would follow his counsel in that way would be considered unbalanced in mind. We all recognize what he did mean, namely, that if any who desired to have eternal life found that they had hindrances of appetite or pleasure or what not, as dear to them as an eye, foot, hand, these precious, but disqualifying sins or wrong-doings, should be put away—no matter how precious they were—no matter how highly esteemed. By way of contrast, the Master suggested that if the retaining of these things would hinder them from entering into life they could not afford to retain them—that even if they were to carry the figure further and suppose that in the future life they would be deprived to the extent of being maimed to all eternity, it still would be preferable to them to practice the self-denial now and to enter into life.

Be it noted that the reward here indicated is in the entering into life, and the intimation is that those who fail will not have life at all—that they will fall to attain life; that they will have no eternal life, either in pain or in pleasure. Let us examine our text further and see this.

Gehenna Typed the Second Death.

The word hell in our text is from the Greek word *gehenna*, which, in turn, was a corruption of the Hebrew word *geh-innon*, which signifies valley of death. There are two other words in the New Testament Greek translated hell in our common version. One of these, *tartarus*, has no reference to humanity whatever, but merely signifies our earth's atmosphere—the place where Satan and the fallen angels are restrained in chains of darkness (II Peter ii, 4). The other Greek word rendered hell in the New Testament is *hadēs*, which corresponds exactly to the word rendered hell in the Old Testament, namely *sheol*. And all scholars know that both of these words signify the same thing. They are used interchangeably in the Scriptures to designate the state or condition of death—the tomb. No person, of even slight education, would for a moment attempt to claim that eternal torment is taught by *sheol*, *hadēs* or *tartarus*. The great stress of all who teach eternal torment falls, therefore, upon the word *hell* found in our text—in the original Greek, *gehenna*.

What we have to say respecting it will undoubtedly be news to but few of this congregation. But since this sermon will be reported in more than seven hundred newspapers of the land, our explanation will probably eventually reach ten million people, to whom the Truth on the subject will be new. What we have to say is not new to educated ministers, however, and why, as pastors, they have kept the sheep of their flock in the dark on the subject is for them to explain. They certainly cannot plead ignorance. At very most they can apologize that they hoped that the misunderstanding would do more good than the truth. They seem to forget entirely that this terrible misunderstanding is not only wrecking the faith of thousands, but dishonoring our Creator—blaspheming his holy name, his holy character, by misrepresenting it and the Divine Plan.

A Valley Outside Jerusalem.

I wish that those of you who have modern Bibles with maps at the back would turn to the map of the City of Jerusalem and there notice on the Southwest side of the City, just outside the wall, the Valley of Hinnom. That is the Valley that in brief was called *Geh-innon*; the Greek of which is *gehenna*. All of our Lord's uses of the word *gehenna* stand related to that Valley. For the sake of my large congregation it will be worth while for us to take a glance backward at the history of that Valley during many centuries before Jesus' day.

The first mention of this Valley in the Bible is found in Joshua (xv, 8), where it is given as one of the boundaries of the tribe of Judah, according to the lot sent by Joshua in the division of the land that had come into possession of the Israelites. It is again mentioned similarly in Joshua xviii, 16. The next reference to this Valley is found in II Kings xxiii, 10. There we read of how Josiah, the good King of Judah, instituted a great reform in the nation and abolished idolatry, one of the most heinous forms of the idolatry having been practised in this Valley of Hinnom, which had gotten a new name, namely Topheth. History tells us that the Israelites built in this Topheth, the Valley of Hinnom, a great brass image to the heathen god Moloch. In various places they had groves in which a licentious form of worship was enacted and then they resorted to this Valley of Hinnom to offer

fer sacrifice of a most revolting kind to the heathen deity. Sometimes it was a boy and some times it was a girl that was placed naked in the arms of the great image after it had been fired to a red heat with fuel piled underneath the image and passing through it as a flue. The cries of these infants so horribly sacrificed were drowned by the cheers of the worshippers and various musical instruments.

All of this, indeed everything akin to suffering, was strictly forbidden by the Divine Law given to Israel. And they had been specially warned against this, very form of idolatry (Leviticus xviii, 21; Deuteronomy xviii, 10). It is a gross mistake and slander of the Divine character and Law to suppose that it ever sanctioned torture. And it is a still worse slander upon God to suppose that he would himself do, and that for all eternity, what he condemned in his fallen creatures.

The Lord declares all this through the Prophet Jeremiah (vii, 31-34). Here God particularly forewarned the Israelites that their wrong course would eventuate in the terrible time of trouble which came upon Jerusalem in the year A. D. 70, when it was estimated that over a million died at the siege of Jerusalem. In fulfillment of this prophecy the Jews cast the dead bodies over the wall of Jerusalem into this very Valley. Thus we read, "Behold, the day is come, saith the Lord, that it shall no more be called Topheth, nor the Valley of the son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter; for they shall bury in Topheth till there be no place. And the carcasses of this people shall be meat for the fowls of the heaven, and for the beasts of the earth."

After the reformation made by King Josiah the Valley of Hinnom was desecrated to the intent that it might never afterward be considered fit for any kind of religious worship, sacrifice or ceremony. It became the valley of defilement. It was used at certain times, for the burning of the offal and rubbish of the city. It became the dumping place of dead cats and dogs, etc. If any of these fell upon the ledges of the rock, no one thought worth while to interfere, and the maggots and worms destroyed them. Fires also were lighted occasionally to burn the combustible rubbish, and brimstone was added so that the fumes might destroy any malarial tendency, in the interest of the health of the city.

The Lesson Jesus Taught.

We have before our minds now the gehenna fire which no one ever attempted to quench, but which was designed to consume utterly everything cast into it. We have in mind also the worms of which he spake—worms which were permitted to feed on the carcasses undisturbed until the carcasses were consumed and the worms themselves died. Another item here should be noticed, namely, that a saying amongst the Jews was, Whosoever commits such a misdemeanor will be in danger of going from bad to worse until he will be brought before the tribunal of the Sanhedrin, a culprit. Jesus took the same line of proverb and declared that anyone violating the Golden Rule to the extent of calling his brother a fool would be in danger eventually of such a digestion from righteousness as to bring him under sentence of the greater tribunal of Messiah's Kingdom, and, "Whosoever shall say unto his brother, Thou art a fool, shall be in danger of gehenna fire" (Matthew v, 22).

What the Great Teacher meant was that the earthly Jerusalem was a picture or type of the heavenly Jerusalem, which represented the Divine Government or Kingdom—the New Jerusalem which, by and by, will come down to earth—when God's will shall be done on earth as it is done in heaven. As gehenna lay outside of the wall of Jerusalem, so our Lord intimated there would be an antitypical gehenna outside the New Jerusalem. As the trash and offal of the typical city were consumed in the Valley of Hinnom, so the offal and trash of humanity who will refuse all of God's favors, mercies, blessings and opportunities, will be treated as disgraced wretches and be consumed, destroyed, in the antitypical gehenna—which is the Second Death. Concerning this antitypical gehenna, the Second Death, we are definitely informed of the characters which will there be destroyed utterly, as Peter says, "as natural brute beasts."

We have a description of this symbolic New Jerusalem or Divine Kingdom (Revelation xxi), composed primarily of the Church, and secondarily of all from the world who, during Messiah's reign, will enter in through its gates and enjoy the blessings of Divine favor and life eternal. And then we read, verse 8, "But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the Second Death." Note that this lake of fire and brimstone into which all the offspring of humanity will be cast is a symbol, and the meaning of the symbol is plainly stated in the words, "Which is the Second Death." The first death passed upon all mankind on account of Adam's disobedience. Our Lord Jesus was appointed the Savior of Adam and his race and gave his life a ransom for all, to rescue all from death, to give to each and every member of Adam's race one full, fair opportunity for a test of loyalty to God and righteousness and to secure life eternal in the New Jerusalem. Contrariwise all who will reject that full opportunity will die the Second Death, from which there will be no redemption, no resurrection, no recovery of any kind.

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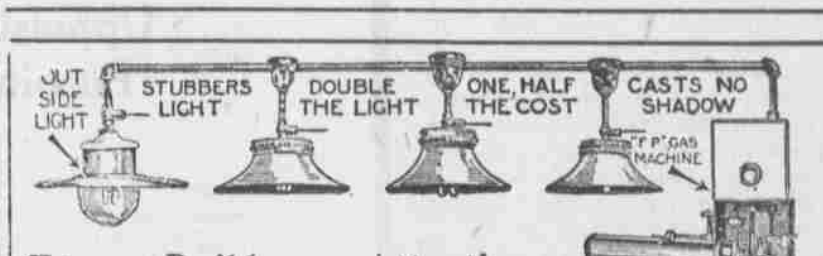
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