

GOD'S PITY FOR THE HEATHEN

– *NOVEMBER 21. – JONAH 3:1-4:11. –*

JONAH'S EXPERIENCE A TYPE OF OUR LORD'S DEATH AND RESURRECTION – "GOD PREPARED A GREAT FISH" – DIVINE ABILITY UNQUESTIONABLE – DIVINE PERMISSION OF EVIL LIMITED – DIVINE COMPASSION ILLUSTRATED – HOW "GOD REPENTED OF THE EVIL" – JONAH'S SELFISH SPIRIT REBUKED – THE MESSIANIC KINGDOM THE HOPE OF THE WORLD.

"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations." – Matthew 28:19.

SKEPTICS have long been inclined to treat as a seaman's yarn the story of Jonah's experiences in the belly of the great fish. Many pulpiteers even laugh at the account of Jonah's experiences as suitable only for the credulous, and not for wise Higher Critics. Nevertheless, the Great Teacher refers to Jonah and his experiences in the belly of the great fish; and those who believe the Scriptures will seek no better ground for their faith in the story than this.

Nor is Jonah's account without a considerable parallel. Some years ago one of the New York journals gave a detailed account, profusely illustrated, showing how a sailor was swallowed by a great sulphur whale, but escaped after several hours, his skin made purplish from the action of the digestive fluids of the whale's stomach. So far as we know, Jonah's case was the only one in which any one spent parts of three days and nights in the belly of a fish. True, the throats of the majority of whales seem too small to admit a man. We remember, however, that they are quite elastic. The great sulphur variety is of enormous size and is said

to have a throat capable of swallowing a skiff, which is much larger than a man.

Besides, the Bible description of the matter tells us specifically that God prepared a great fish. No one who has a proper appreciation of the powers of the Almighty would question for an instant the ability of God to prepare a special fish, either at the moment or, foreknowing Jonah's course, long in advance. The exceptional character of Jonah's experience constituted him a type of our Lord Jesus, who in death was swallowed up of the earth as was Jonah by the fish; and as our Lord was liberated from His prison-house, so was Jonah. – Matthew 12:39,40.

PREACHING TO THE NINEVITES

Today's Study, however, is connected with the Prophet Jonah's preaching to the Ninevites. Nineveh was a great city outside the pale of Judaism and therefore, at that time, outside the lines of Divine favor; for from the giving of the Law Covenant at Mount Sinai until three and a half years after the Cross, God's favors were exclusively confined to the nation of Israel, under the terms of the Law Covenant. At the close of Israel's period of exclusive favor, Cornelius the Centurion was the first Gentile to receive evidence of Divine favor.

In the cases of the Sodomites, the Ninevites and the Amalekites, Divine Justice decreed that their iniquity had come to the full; that for them to live longer would be unwise; and that for them to be cut off in death would not only hinder them from further degradation, but also furnish to mankind a general lesson, to the effect that there is a limit to the Divine permission of evil. The fact that these people were thus condemned and overthrown did not signify that they had ever enjoyed salvation or even an offer of salvation. Like all Adam's children, these people were under the sentence of death – "Dying, thou shalt die." They were merely cut off from further life under present conditions. Their

opportunity for future life by resurrection was not interfered with, for neither they nor others had yet been redeemed.

Hence the future life, secured by the redemptive work of Jesus, was in no sense interfered with by the sentence of death issued against them en masse. Indeed, even the Jews were not saved. The offer of salvation made to them under the Law Covenant did not give them eternal life. As St. Paul declares, "By the deeds of the Law shall no flesh be justified in God's sight." (Rom. 3:20.) If the Jews were justified by the Law, then Christ died in vain. The Law made nothing perfect.

The offer of life given to the Jew was merely to prove to him, and ultimately to all, the impossibility of any one's obtaining life under the Divine Law without Divine assistance – without the Savior and His work at Calvary and, additionally, His work for the world as the Mediator of the New Covenant, during His Messianic Reign of a thousand years. In harmony with this the Apostle declares, "Christ brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel." And again, "There is none other name under Heaven given amongst men whereby we must be saved." And again, "This great salvation began to be preached by our Lord and was confirmed by those who heard Him." – 2 Timothy 1:10; Acts 4:12; Hebrews 2:3.

THE NINEVITES REPENTED

Jonah's preaching was that within forty days God would destroy Nineveh. But the people, impressed by his message, repented of their sinful course and sought Divine forgiveness. The king's proclamation was that "neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; let them not feed, nor drink water; but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God; yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands." The Lord hearkened to the

Ninevites, accepted their repentance, and permitted their national life to continue for a time.

We are, of course, to understand that God knew the end from the beginning – that He knew that the Ninevites would repent, and that He would not blot them out within forty days, in accordance with the Prophet Jonah's preaching. Nineveh did pass away utterly, great city as it was, but not within forty literal days. Possibly the time meant by the Almighty was what is sometimes termed prophetic or symbolical time – a day for a year; 40 days, 40 years.

The lesson shows us how much greater is the compassion of the Almighty than that of His imperfect servants of human kind. God was pleased to have the Ninevites turn from their sins to hearty repentance. He was pleased to grant them an extension of earthly life. But Jonah was displeased. His argument was, "There! God has made a fool of me. He told me that this great city would be destroyed within forty days; and I preached it. God has brought discredit upon me, and I am now to be regarded as a false prophet."

Jonah was more interested in himself and his own reputation than in the Ninevites and their interests. The servants of the Lord must not be so. Self should be lost sight of. As the great Apostle Paul advises, "Love seeketh not her own"; and again, "Even Christ pleased not Himself." – 1 Corinthians 13:5; Romans 15:3.

"GOD REPENTED OF THE EVIL"

In some minds the query arises, How can God repent and change His mind if He knows the end from the beginning? The answer is that the word repent has a wider meaning than is generally appreciated. Humanity uses it only in respect to a change of purpose. But, as modern dictionaries show, the word may mean either a **[R5797 : page 333]** change of action or a

change of purpose, or both. God's purposes do not change. He never repents of them. But He does change His conduct.

Thus Israel, for centuries His favored people, were cut off; and God's dealing toward them changed. But His purposes never changed. He had foreknown and had foretold their rejection of Jesus and His rejection of them, and also had foreseen that later on they would be regathered to their own land and would be forgiven and blessed by Messiah, when He assumed His Messianic Office as King of kings and Lord of lords – "The Prince of the kings of this earth." – Revelation 1:5.

The Lord taught the Prophet Jonah a lesson respecting his sympathy for a gourd, an inanimate thing, and his lack of sympathy for the Ninevites. So it is with many preachers and others. They have sympathy for the flowers, for the birds, for the lower animals, for children and, to some extent, for all mankind under the distresses of the present time. Nevertheless, such people sometimes become angry at the bare suggestion that God does not purpose to roast the Ninevites, the Sodomites, the Amalekites, or anybody else to all eternity; and that His gracious purposes for the world in general will be manifested in giving all an opportunity to attain unto human perfection, a world-wide Eden and everlasting life, if they will hear and obey the great Messiah, whose Head is Jesus and whose members, the elect Church, have been in process of preparation throughout this Gospel Age.

Our Lord declared that the Gospel was to be preached no longer to the Jews only, but to all nations. (Luke 24:45-48; Acts 1:8.) The preaching was not intended to convert all nations, and has not done so. It was intended to gather a saintly few from all nations; and this it will soon have accomplished. – Acts 15:14-18.

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