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The Link

NORTH ROAD CHAPEL

BIDEFORD

THE BOOK OF JONAH

Part 5

“Then Jonah prayed unto the Lord his God out of the fish’s belly, and said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord, and He heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and Thou heardest my voice. For Thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all Thy billows and Thy waves passed over me. Then I said, I am cast out of Thy sight; yet I will look again toward Thy holy temple. The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever: yet hast Thou brought up my life from corruption, O Lord my God. When my soul fainted within me I remembered the Lord: and my prayer came in unto Thee, into Thine holy temple.”
(Jonah 2:1-7)

Editor’s Note: The following article originated as a sermon, preached by Mr W. H. Molland, in September 1995. It deals with the important subject of the sufferings of the Lord Jesus in His death, which were not only physical, but also spiritual in nature, and involved both His body and soul. This truth was plainly foretold by the Psalmist (cf Psalm 16:10, 88:1-18), exemplified and prophesied by Jonah (cf Jonah 2:1-7), confirmed by Christ (cf Matthew 12:39-41), and taught by His Apostles (Acts 2:22-32). It was incorporated into the earliest church creeds, and was still upheld by some of the Reformers, fifteen centuries later. In more recent times however, this Scriptural doctrine has been variously denigrated, denied, and even denounced as heretical, by mainstream denominations. *“But this I confess unto thee: that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets”* (Acts 24:14). Such was Mr Molland’s concern for the promulgation of this neglected truth, that in the last years of his life, he selected this sermon for print, and it was first published in *The Link* in 2011 – the final article that he prepared and edited personally. It is presented again here, as part of our ‘Book of Jonah’ serialisation.

The Prophet Jonah, unwilling to obey the divine commission to preach to the Ninevites, sought to flee from his responsibilities and from the Lord, by taking ship in the very opposite direction. This was no sort of escape, for the judgments of God soon found him, in the form of a violent storm. Having identified Jonah as the cause of this meteorological phenomenon, the superstitious mariners hurled him overboard, whereupon the tumult instantly ceased. The prophet meanwhile fell into the watery depths, wherein God had sovereignly prepared a great fish to swallow him, and thereby preserve him alive. In this strange and horrible situation the wayward and disobedient prophet is depicted – no longer complaining or questioning His God – but praying. The fish’s belly became his prayer chamber, and was the unlikely location of the profound words recorded in Jonah chapter two.

Confronted with these amazing utterances, let that question be asked that was once posed by an Ethiopian Eunuch: “*of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?*” (Acts 8:34). These words **do** refer to Jonah himself, for he was an historical figure, and this is an authentic account of the extraordinary events that befell him. Yet this experience of Jonah’s signifies far more than appears on the surface. A commentator says: “Jonah prophesied of **Christ**, not so much in words, as by a suffering of his own: yet more openly than if he had proclaimed by speech His death and resurrection. For why was he received into the fish’s belly, and given back the third day, except to signify that Christ would, on the third day, return from the deep of Hell?”

Absolute confirmation of this is given by the Lord Himself in Matthew’s gospel: “*For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth*” (Matthew 12:40). Jonah never prophesied by direct word of the sufferings, death and resurrection of Christ, as many of the other prophets did. Nevertheless, by this terrible ordeal through which he passed, God has shed much light upon the work of the Mediator – such light as words could scarcely convey. God in His sovereignty, by His

Holy Spirit gives, as it were, a dramatized production. Here, some of the detail of the awful experiences of the Lord Jesus in the penal aspect of His work of atonement is set forth; not by vocal expression, but in and by a living character.

It is the common belief, when the Lord said on the cross, “*Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit: and having said thus, He gave up the ghost*” (Luke 23:46), that immediately His spirit went to Heaven, whilst His body was taken down and laid in the grave; there to remain until it was raised on the third day. This is the prevalent interpretation. Presumably then, at the Lord’s resurrection, His spirit came back, in order that His personality as Mediator might be complete again, that at the appointed time He could ascend into Heaven as the man Christ Jesus. Meanwhile, the words of the ancient Creed, “He descended into Hell” are commonly denounced as being heretical and not in accordance with Holy Scripture.

It would be untrue to say that every doctrine expressed in ‘the Creeds’ and ‘Statements of Belief’ is correct. Although in the main, much of the content of those early writings is of great worth, being a bold affirmation of the ‘faith once delivered to the saints’. However, the remarks that follow are not based upon the Apostles’ Creed, the Athanasian Creed, or any other such document, but upon the infallible Word of God. These comments may be out of tune with the majority opinion of those who call themselves ‘evangelical’ or ‘reformed’. This is of no concern. I do not accept the teaching of the Lord’s spirit returning to Heaven at the point of His death on the cross. I contend for His descent into Hell.

Put simply: if Christ’s spirit went immediately to Heaven at His death, then He died the death of a saint – for this is what happens to the spirit of every Christian at death – their spirit is immediately in glory. But **Christ did not die the death of the saint. He died the death of the sinner.** He did not die the death of the justified believer – He died the death of the unjust transgressor. His was the death of the accursed. Where do the souls of the accursed go at death? To Heaven? Indeed

they do not! They go to Hell. That is the teaching of Holy Scripture. Christ in His vicarious office, being the legal Surety for all His people, died the death of the sinner. For all His people's sins were imputed to Him; He was charged with them all and so became officially guilty. The death of the Saviour was not just physical: He knew death in its **entirety**. He must taste this for every man for whom He stood Surety (cf Hebrews 2:9). Physical death, yes, but also spiritual and eternal death. This is what was involved in the Divine Sentence against the sinner: "*the soul that sinneth, it shall die*" (Ezekiel 18:4). Christ, standing in the sinner's place at the bar of Divine Justice, died as a sinner, **not** as a saint. He was made sin (cf 2 Corinthians 5:21), He was made a curse (cf Galatians 3:13). How could He taste of the Second Death (which was the Divine Sentence upon the sinner) if at death His soul went immediately to Heaven? No, it is clear "He descended into Hell". "*He hath poured out His soul unto death*" (Isaiah 53:12) – this is not physical death; it is the pangs of eternal death.

David, in prophetic language concerning Christ, wrote in the Psalms: "*For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption*" (Psalm 16:10). There are those who will immediately contradict and say that 'Hell' here means 'the grave'. Such an explanation is nonsensical, for the **soul** never goes into the grave – only the **body**. The soul of the sinner is immediately in Hell at death; contrariwise the soul of the saint is instantly in Heaven. Christ Himself was absolutely clear on this point in the account of the Rich Man and Lazarus (cf Luke 16:19-31). Linguistically, it is claimed, the underlying Greek and Hebrew words translated "Hell" mean 'the place of departed souls'. But it cannot be interpreted as 'the grave', since the soul cannot be buried or laid in the ground.

Further confirmation of this comes in the Acts of the Apostles: "*Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by Him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know:*

Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that He should be holden of it. For David speaketh concerning Him, I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for He is on my right hand, that I should not be moved: Therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope: Because Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer Thine Holy One to see corruption” (Acts 2:22-27). ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ is the one in focus – a man approved of God – there is no doubt about the subject of these words. He was delivered by the determinate counsel of God. Note the precise details given: men took Him by wicked hands, and crucified Him. Thus Jesus actually and literally died. But remember – He died the death of the accursed. Him “*God hath raised up, having loosed the **pains of death**”* (v. 24). What pain does a dead body suffer? None. What pain does a soul endure in Heaven? None. How then could it be said of Christ that He was loosed from the ‘**pains of death**’ if His spirit was in Heaven when He died and was buried? Verse 27 makes it as clear as words can possibly express: God did not leave the soul of the Redeemer in **Hell**. Neither did He suffer the body of His Holy One to see corruption in the grave. His flesh rested there in the tomb in hope as Scripture states. After three days and three nights of His mortal remains lying in the sepulchre, God raised Him from the dead, and brought His soul and spirit out of Hell. For in that realm, He had spoiled those principalities and powers, making a show of them openly (cf Colossians 2:15) and destroyed him who had the power of death (cf Hebrews 2:14).

This theme might appear to be a long way removed from the second chapter of Jonah’s prophecy; but in fact, this is the very meaning of those words. Go back again to those verses and see wherein the comparison lies. In the case of Jonah, it was God who had determined that he should be cast into the deep. The sailors who performed the deed were but the instruments of God’s wrath. By Jonah being cast into the sea, the others

on board were saved, and the storm ceased. Comparing this with Acts 2:23, God **determined** the death of His Incarnate Son; the men who actually slew Him were merely the instruments; and through His death many are made righteous. The parallels cannot be denied. As this chapter is more closely examined, so is shown the error of modern teaching concerning the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord, and His location during the intervening three days and nights.

“Thou hadst cast me into the deep... floods compassed me about: all Thy billows and Thy waves passed over me”. These words were verily true of Jonah as he was cast into the sea, yet they have infinitely greater application to Christ, as God caused Him to be plunged into death and judgment. Scripture speaks prophetically concerning Him: *“Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me”* (Psalm 42:7). *“The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head”* (Jonah 2:5). The words pertaining to the two men are almost identical. Just as natural waves and billows swept over and engulfed Jonah, precisely so did the waves and billows of God’s wrath inundate the blessed Saviour.

The prophet further said: *“I am cast out of Thy sight”* (v. 4). Jonah realised that God’s judgment was upon Him **because** of his sin; He was now removed from God’s presence. This immediately connects with the words of Christ contained in Psalm 22:1, *“My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?”* – the plaintive cry of the Saviour when upon the cross (cf Matthew 27:46). Why did this unimaginable situation occur? Because Christ had become the Surety; His people’s sins were upon Him, He was charged with them, and He was made sin. God, being ‘of purer eyes than to behold evil’ (cf Habakkuk 1:13) withdrew from the Sin-bearer. The Lord was abandoned, because God is Holy. So like Jonah, Christ was cast out of His sight – forsaken.

*“The waters compassed me about, even to the **soul**”* (v. 5). The sufferings of the Lord go far deeper than merely the physical aspects. Isaiah 53 states that He poured out His soul unto death, and speaks of the ‘travail of His soul’. This is spiritual in nature. The death of the soul means Hell, not Heaven. This is death in its entirety; the death that Christ died. Hence the travail and anguish of which the Scriptures speak. The same verse in Jonah also says: *“the weeds were wrapped about my head”*. As the prophet plummeted into the raging sea, so was he entangled in the swirling seaweed. There was nothing he could do – it was inevitable that such a thing would happen, for he was in that environment. What do ‘weeds’ imply in Scripture? They always denote the curse, the result of sin (cf Genesis 3:18). It was into this environment that the Saviour came in His great work of atonement. Then it was that all the sins of His people entwined around Him, as God laid on Him *“the iniquity of us all”* (Isaiah 53:6).

“I went down to the bottoms of the mountains” (v.6). Here are described caves and dark caverns – the abode of the lost. *“The earth with her bars was about me”*. A state of complete incarceration, shut in, in the darkness. *“He hath ... brought me into darkness, but not into light”* (Lamentations 3:2) – all doors barred, and no possible escape. In the prophetic language of the Psalms, Christ says *“the sorrows of Hell compassed Me”* (Psalm 18:5). He knew full well that at death His spirit would not soar into Heaven, but rather must descend into Hell, and know the pain and horror of the second death. This is the meaning of His cry, *“Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit”* (Luke 23:46). The Lord knew that He was going into the realm of darkness. The weeds of sin were literally wrapped about Him; there was no escaping; the wrath of Divine Justice would be unleashed against Him; it was pangs of eternal death to which He was about to be exposed. So He prays – not that He might be saved from this hour – but rather, as His soul is about to be poured out in this aspect of death, He addresses His Father with the words *“into Thy hands I commend My spirit”*.

When Jonah's soul fainted, then he prayed: "*When my soul fainted within me I remembered the Lord: and my prayer came in unto Thee*" (v. 7). Likewise also the Lord, as He hung upon the cross, knowing that within moments He would breathe His last, that the fires of Hell would engulf Him, and the powers of darkness bring all their destructive forces to bear, He turns to His Father and says, 'I commend My spirit to Thy care'. 'I am absolutely alone in this vast spiritual engagement; My Holy soul is being poured out unto death; Father, I commit it to Thee'. This is the only consistent way in which to interpret these words.

Consider the conclusion of Jonah's dreadful experience. "*Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights*"; "*And the Lord spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land*" (Jonah 1:17, 2:10). Jonah was not left in the sea; rather the fish swam to shore and deposited the prophet on dry ground, never again to experience the waves and billows. No longer were the weeds about him – they were left in the fish. The darkness and barred security of that beast was now past and gone forever. Jonah was safe on dry land. How reads the verse in Matthew's gospel? "*For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth*" (Matthew 12:40). In like manner Christ was brought forth again, never more to experience the billows of wrath, never more to be scorned by wicked men, or opposed by the Great Adversary. For in His engagement, He had triumphed gloriously. He was the Mighty Victor over sin and death and Hell. He was holding the keys of Death and Hell, on dry land indeed – on 'resurrection ground'. What is more, the weeds of His people's sin were forever gone, for He had "*put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself*" (Hebrews 9:26), and obtained eternal expiation and forgiveness.

This then is the teaching of Jonah chapter two. There was an actual and historical occurrence, in which a man experienced being swallowed by a fish for three days and three nights. But the spiritual significance of these words is an ocean of profundity and vital doctrine. May it be blessed to all who read.

W. H. Molland (1920 – 2012)

HIS SOUL IN HELL

“He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that His soul was not left in Hell, neither His flesh did see corruption. This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses.” (Acts 2:31-32)

The short span of this magazine does not afford the space for a more thorough exposition of such a deep subject – but the following points are briefly presented for our reader’s consideration:

1. CREEDS. The many books, commentaries and articles that deal with this question usually begin with the early church Creeds – particularly the Apostles’ (Fourth Century) and Athanasian (Sixth Century), in both which the doctrine is plainly stated. Various arguments about the sources and validity of these Confessions are raised, the contemporaneous false teachings which they may have been intended to counter, and the manner in which they were interpreted by their original adherents. But this is the wrong starting point. Whatever the benefit of Creeds and Confessions, they are the uninspired works of men. The Christian’s first recourse must ever be: *“to the law and to the testimony: if they [other works] speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them”* (Isaiah 8:20). The Bible itself is very straightforward, and the Apostle Peter’s application of Psalm 16:10 is quite simple to comprehend (cf Acts 2:22-32). Nor is this the only Scriptural basis for the doctrine. The rich typology in the lives of Joseph (cf Genesis 39 – 41) and Jonah (Jonah 1 – 2), the example of the scapegoat (cf Leviticus 16:21-26), and the graphic language of Messianic Psalms (cf Psalms 22, 69, 88) are amongst the many portions that testify to this truth.

A very basic understanding of the Bible is sufficient to know that there are only three realms of existence appointed by God: Earth – the material universe; Heaven – the principal dwelling-place of God, a realm of eternal bliss; and Hell – the place of eternal wrath and punishment,

for devils and sinners alike. There is no intermediate location, no alternative dimension, no Purgatory or Limbo – these are false inventions of Romanism. It is also evident from the Scriptures that at the moment when death puts body and soul asunder upon earth, there is an immediate, conscious existence of the soul in either Hell (for the sinner), or Heaven (for the believer). And this has ever been the case, from the dawn of time, in both the Old Testament era, and the New, as numerous verses prove (cf Ecclesiastes 12:7, Matthew 22:31-32, 2 Kings 2:1, Hebrews 12:22-23, Luke 16:19-31, Revelation 6:9-11).

2. WORDS. Attempts to change the reading of Acts 2:31 invariably involve recourse to the original languages, and the meanings of words. At this point it is frequently claimed that the underlying Greek word ‘hades’, does not mean ‘Hell’ as the Authorised Version translators have interpreted it. Numerous alternative definitions are proffered; some suggest it means instead ‘the underworld’ or ‘a place of departed souls’. This is a terribly dangerous argument for any Christian to adopt – as it either legitimises Greek mythology, or the ‘Purgatory’ of Roman Catholic teaching. Others more cautiously make ‘hades’ to mean ‘the grave’, or ‘the condition of being dead’. This argument is no better. At best it makes the text a vain repetition of the same thing (Christ’s body in the tomb, and His soul in Hell, both implying ‘death in the grave’); or at worst, it suggests that a person’s soul goes with the body to their grave – in denial of the teaching of the life hereafter.

All that an enquiring Bible-reader needs to know about the meaning of the Greek word ‘hades’ can be determined by a process of comparison. It occurs ten times in the New Testament, twice in this passage (cf Acts 2:27, 31). Twice it is used in the Saviour’s condemnation of the unbelieving town of Capernaum, which sinned against such abundance of gospel-light, and rejected Christ (cf Matthew 11:23, Luke 10:15). There, it is used as the opposite of ‘heaven’, and evidently means the place of eternal perdition, which is the penalty of unbelief. The Lord did not threaten the inhabitants of Capernaum merely with ‘departing this

life'. The word 'hades' is also used by Christ in the description of the Rich Man and Lazarus, where it is again the opposite destination to heaven, and the place of fire and torment (cf Luke 16:23-24). There are four further occurrences in Revelation (cf 1:18, 6:8, 20:13, 20:14), which are all in the couplet "*Death and Hell*". If 'hades' means the same as 'death', then these too are unnecessary repetitions. Most significantly of all, the word 'hades' is used in Christ's statement: "*upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of **Hell** shall not prevail against it*" (Matthew 16:18). If 'Hell' (hades) merely denotes 'the state of being dead', or 'the grave', experienced alike by saints and sinners, then this promise is robbed of all its preciousness and meaning. No, 'Hell' evidently conveys the ultimate doom of the lost, with all who belong and are destined there, against which the Church of Christ stands, like a rock of refuge in a plunging torrent. 'Hell' simply means 'Hell' – in all the verses quoted, Acts 2 included.

3. OBJECTIONS. Against the truth of Christ's suffering in Hell, three verses are frequently quoted:

(i) "*And Jesus said unto him [the penitent thief] Verily I say unto thee today shalt thou be with Me in paradise*" (Luke 23:43). Concerning this verse, the punctuation (removed from this quotation) is not original, but inferred. Let the discerning reader note:

- The word translated 'today' is often used as an intensifier, or for emphasis in the Greek language, much like starting an emphatic sentence with the word 'Now...' in English. Examples of this occur in Hebrews 3:7, 3:15, 4:7, 5:5.
- Christ's words were intended to assure the believing, dying thief, that despite outward appearances and the bodily death of the Saviour, His kingdom was already established, and in existence. The thief asked "*Lord, remember me **when** Thou comest into Thy kingdom*" – as though it were yet to be implemented and realised. But Jesus corrects him. His kingdom was already in existence at that present time, 'today'.

- ‘Paradise’, or Heaven, was not devoid of Deity, either by virtue of Christ’s incarnation and life on earth, nor because of His soul suffering in Hell. The throne of heaven was not vacant. The Lord Jesus could speak as a member of the Trinity of God, and assure the thief that he would immediately be in the Divine presence, when he (the thief) died.
- Heaven is not subject to time like the earth is, but is an eternal realm (Revelation 21:25, 22:5). Though hard to comprehend, we accept this by faith. There is no yesterday, or ‘today’, or tomorrow there. So it is futile to try and explain Christ’s promise in terms of times, and days.

(ii) *“When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, He said, It is finished: and He bowed His head, and gave up the ghost”* (John 19:30). Many commentators jump to the conclusion that Christ’s words mean, all His sufferings were in that moment finished, and therefore no further travail of His soul can be countenanced. This is somewhat presumptuous, and also inconsistent. The previous evening, before wicked hands were ever laid upon Him, the Saviour said in prayer to God: *“I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do”* (John 17:4). This statement is variously explained as being prospective, or having reference only to certain aspects of Christ’s work, or being an expression of faith and confidence in its future completion. All of these arguments could, and should, equally be applied in the case of John 19:30. The resurrection and ascension of Christ were further aspects of His work, also essential to man’s salvation (cf Romans 4:25, 1 Peter 1:3, John 16:7, Hebrews 9:24), that remained ‘unfinished’ at the time of His death on the cross.

(iii) *“And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, He said, Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit: and having said thus, He gave up the ghost”* (Luke 23:46). This verse is frequently taken to mean that Christ was recommending Himself to God, for the purpose of immediate admission into Heaven. However, by comparison with other scriptures, this interpretation is incorrect. In both other instances of the same word (cf Acts 20:32, 1 Timothy 1:18) there is an appeal to God in the face of

imminent departure, absence, or peril. So too in the case of the Saviour. Peter gives a further explanation of the situation: “*He ... committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously: Who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree*” (1 Peter 2:23-24). The consequence of these two details in combination is dreadful to contemplate. Christ commended Himself to the justice of an all-righteous, Holy God, whilst being laden with all the sins of His people. The verdict could only be ‘guilty’, and the sentence could only be ‘Hell’.

4. CONTRADICTIONS. The popular view of the Saviour’s immediate spiritual transition from earth to Heaven at the moment of death, has become so widely accepted, that its contradictions are rarely considered. But by this ordering of events, there are two ‘Ascensions’ created – one from Calvary, and a second from the Mount of Olives – the former of which receives no mention anywhere in Scripture, and is refuted by the Lord Himself, who, at His first re-appearance to Mary Magdalene said: “*Touch Me not; for I am not yet ascended to My Father*” (John 20:17). Strange words indeed, had His soul just come from the Father’s presence in Heaven. The Apostle gives us the true explanation: “*When He ascended up on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that He ascended, what is it but that He also descended first into the lower parts of the earth [or – parts lower than the earth]? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that He might fill all things*” (Ephesians 4:8-10). The wonder and magnitude of Christ’s Ascension, is that He rose not only from earth to Heaven, but, via a forty-day sojourn on earth in His resurrection body, from the very depths of Hell.

The glorious doctrine of penal substitution relies upon Christ, in the sinners’ stead, enduring every part of the penalty that their sin demands – of which Hell is the worst, and greatest. It is essential to the accomplishment of Redemption, and the Christian’s assurance of salvation, that the Lord Jesus has borne the whole sentence of Divine wrath, this included.

R. J. Steward

RELIGIOUS SIGN-SEEKERS

“Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from Thee. But He answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:38-40)

This passage supplies us with three facts, which are both instructive as subjects of speculative inquiry, and practical, as indications of human obligation.

I. THAT THERE IS A TENDENCY IN MAN TO LOOK FOR THE MIRACULOUS IN RELIGION.

“We would see a sign from Thee”. This tendency was strikingly manifest in the Jewish character. *“The Jews require a sign”* (1 Corinthians 1:22). They required a sign in connection with Christ’s mission, not merely because of the marvel-seeking tendency which they had in common with all men, but because all their great teachers in past ages had accompanied instructions with miracles. Moses, Samuel, Elijah, and others – all wrought wonders amongst them. They therefore naturally expected that the Messiah would do that which all the great teachers had done heretofore. We might get illustrations of this tendency in man from all religions; Hinduism, Islam, Catholicism, as well as Judaism, abound with them. But I wish to point to some of its developments amongst **us** – the men of this age, and of this land.

First: **It is seen in the objections of sceptics.** *“Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep...”* etc. (2 Peter 3:4). The spirit of this is: ‘If there be a God, why does He not give a ‘sign’ that will silence all doubt? Why does He not interrupt this everlasting order of things; break the dead silence of the universe? Why does He not write

upon the open heavens, as He wrote of old with visible hand upon the wall of Belshazzar's palace? Their cry is, "*We would see a sign from thee*".

Secondly: **It is seen in the conduct of those who are waiting for some extraordinary power to convert them.** Multitudes of those who hear the Gospel do not yield to the moral influences that are brought to bear upon them; they are expecting that in some mysterious way God will come and change their hearts. They are like the diseased folk on the banks of Bethesda, looking up for some mystic angel to descend and trouble the dead fountain of their being (cf John 5:1-9). Their cry is, "*We would see a sign from thee*".

Thirdly: **It is seen in the visions and aspirations of premillennialism.** There is a class of Christians who are looking for the personal and speedy advent of Christ, to restore the Jews to their own country, establish a temporal empire, and by a series of miracles effect that universal spiritual reformation which the Gospel had failed to accomplish. These millenarians, as they are called, are indeed seeking after a 'sign'. They are a generation whose spirit is thoroughly Judaic, so far as sympathy with the marvellous and material, in this respect, is concerned.

II. THAT THIS TENDENCY IS PROVIDED FOR IN CHRISTIANITY.

The passage suggests two remarks in relation to this point. First: **That in Christianity this tendency is adequately provided for.** Indeed, the history of Christ is a history of 'signs'. His existence itself was a miracle; and mighty wonders fill the narrative of His glorious life. He was the 'Wonderful' (cf Isaiah 9:6). These hearers of Christ could not, in conscience, plead the lack of 'signs' as a reason for their unbelief. The miracles of Moses and the prophets pale their fires before the miracles of Him who was now addressing them. Still, He here condescends to promise them yet one more sign – the crowning one, and that is His resurrection from the dead. "*The sign of the prophet Jonas*". The resurrection of Christ is of itself a sign sufficient for the most incredulous.

Second: **That in Christianity this tendency is finally provided for.** “*There shall no sign be given to it*”. Why would not Jesus give them more signs? Not from the want of power. What He did in the way of miracle was nothing compared with what He **could** do. His miracles were but “*parts of His ways*”, the “*hiding of His power*” (cf Job 26:14, Habakkuk 3:4). By a mere volition He could make the solid earth beneath our feet reel, and bound, and plunge like a frail barque in the tempest; or, He could lift it into another orbit, link it to another system, make it roll round another sun, and give it new heavens. What could He not do in the way of wonder? When one thinks for a moment upon the infinite variety of wonders which Christ might have wrought, we may justly conclude that He had some good reason for restricting this kind of agency, and for saying to His generation, “*No sign shall be given to it*”. We can discover two reasons for this:

1. Because a frequent occurrence of miracles would destroy their intended effect. The power of miracles is not like the power of an army – increased by numbers; their power lies in their rarity, rather than in their abundance. After a given point, they weaken as they multiply. Let a comet sweep the heavens every month, and it shall awaken no more stir in the human population than the rising of the new moon. And:
2. Because the cultivation of this sign-seeking tendency would be detrimental to man’s spiritual improvement. This tendency takes man out of himself, whereas his interest lies within. Our progress requires us to live and work within – to commune with our own hearts – to hold converse with those thought-visitants that are constantly passing through us, and to decipher those pages of eternal truth which are written on the tablet of our consciousness. Our God and heaven are to be found within. But this tendency takes us out of ourselves – out into ceremonies and phenomena. This tendency serves to develop the sensuous rather than the spiritual, and leads us to rely more on events than truths; forms than principles; the transient than the eternal.

It was merciful in Jesus to deny more signs. We do not want more outward attractions. We want to be thrown back upon ourselves, and to be self-reliant on eternal truth and God. For this reason, it was expedient for the disciples that Jesus Himself should go away (cf John 16:7). While He was with them, they were dependent upon His person, rather than on His principles. Hence the change for the better which came over them soon after His ascension. Compare Peter's conduct in the hall of Caiaphas on the night when he denied Christ, with his conduct after the day of Pentecost before the Sanhedrim (cf Luke 22:55-62, Acts 4:2-22).

III. THAT DISSATISFACTION WITH THE MIRACULOUS PROVISIONS OF CHRISTIANITY INDICATES A CHARACTER BOTH CORRUPT IN PRINCIPLE AND FEARFUL IN RESPONSIBILITY.

First: **It indicates a character most corrupt in principle.** Christ calls them "*an evil and adulterous generation*".* The fact that they asked for more signs showed their **ingratitude**. What signs He had already given them – signs abundantly sufficient to satisfy every honest inquirer that He was the true Messiah! It showed moreover their **perversion**. All the signs they had witnessed went for nought. Their unbelief arose, not from intellectual causes, but moral; not from the want of more evidence, but for the want of a right disposition of heart to appreciate evidence. This is ever the case. There are many who say they would believe, if they had more evidence. Have they properly weighed what they have? If not, more evidence would be of no service to them. He that is unjust in the least, would be unjust in the much (cf Luke 16:10).

*"The expression must here be explained in accordance with the prevailing Old Testament manner of speaking, according to which everything of an unbelieving and unholy character is regarded as born of unholy love, implying therefore a separation of the soul from the Lord. This spiritual turning away of the soul from the Creator to the creature is represented as adultery, according to a profound mode of viewing the relation existing between the soul and God." H. Olshausen (1796 – 1839)

“If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead” (Luke 16:31).

Secondly: **It indicates a character of fearful responsibility.** *“The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and condemn it”* (Matthew 12:41). In illustration of this observe two things:

1. That men had been convinced with far less evidence than they had. The Ninevites had been convinced by Jonah, and probably the queen of the south had been convinced by the arguments of Solomon. But neither Jonah nor Solomon is to be compared to Christ. Both Jonah and Solomon were imperfect men; but He who preached to them was the perfect Son of God. Both Jonah and Solomon were strangers to the persons they addressed; but He who preached to them was one of their own nation and neighbourhood. Both Jonah and Solomon had but a short connection with the parties they addressed, Jonah preached but one sermon and Solomon had, probably, but one interview with the queen; but Jesus was with them from day to day, preaching the kingdom, and healing all manner of diseases. Both Jonah and Solomon were incapable of corroborating their doctrines by miracle; but Christ’s miracles were so numerous that His biographer, John, tells us that, had they been all recorded, the world would not have contained the books (cf John 21:25). Men had believed with less than a tithe of the evidence and opportunity which they possessed.
2. Those who believed with less evidence would be witnesses against them in the judgment. *“The men of Nineveh”* and *“the queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it.”* Observe the truths here implied: (a.) There is a retributive era to dawn upon humanity; (b.) in that era the generations of all times and lands shall meet; (c.) in the meeting of these generations the relative responsibility of each will be deeply felt.

Ye religious sign-seekers, ponder this passage; let these words of Jesus curb your desire for the marvellous. Why look out for more wonders, when Christianity is crowded with them; and when more would but weaken their power and impede your progress? Since the apostolic era, the order of the universe has not been disturbed by miracle, nor shall it be disturbed again until the blast of doom.

David Thomas (1813 – 1894)

“No sign except this – the sign of the prophet Jonah, the very opposite of that which you seek. You ask it from above. It shall be from below. You ask it from heaven. It shall be from the belly of hell. You ask that it may be glorious. It shall be, according to the carnal judgment, ignominious. It shall be from a dark sea of trouble, and not from a firmament of brightness. It shall be tempest, sorrow, death, burial; not sunshine, victory, enthronement. ... What does God need in the way of human language, figure, action, to signify and describe sin, to typify and foreshadow redemption? Will it be enough that philosophers reason on the nature of virtue and vice; that moralists do their best to settle the foundations of responsibility, and to show the supreme obligations of duty; that poets and polite writers shall adorn the ways of goodness with flowers and sunshine, and darken the paths of vice with the glooms of disaster and despondency? Will these be enough? No. God needs to break through all the laws of taste, and to use language, and bring in figures, and perform typical actions, which are quite shocking to the sophisticated sensibilities of men. He needs a flaming sword at the gate of every earthly paradise to keep men out of it until they are fit to enter! He needs priests, all bloody and smeared, ministering at the altar, without intermission of service, through long ages! He needs a father standing with gleaming knife above the bound body of his son! He needs to cast a prophet away down to the depths of a churning sea, and then into the noisome, gurgling belly of a great fish! Not polite figures these. But sin is not polite. Terrible actions these. Yes – because our redemption is a stupendous thing.”

Alexander Raleigh (1817 – 1880)

EDITORIAL

Several countries of the world are presently in the throes of election processes, with consequences for the administration of secular power, and human government. These are matters that belong to the secret will of a sovereign God, concerning which the Christian has no right to predict, or presume, or involve himself – any more than Christ or His disciples were drawn into the politics of Judea, and the competing parties of Rome, Herod, and the Jews (cf Matthew 22:16-22). The believer should ever ensure that he is not a *“busybody in other men’s matters”*, nor a *“partaker of other men’s sins”* (cf 1 Peter 4:15, 1 Timothy 5:22) – which is why abstinence from these worldly affairs is the only Biblically-consistent approach.

No guarantee of good government. Whilst lending support to a ‘least-worst’ party or candidate might appear sensible or justifiable, it involves the untenable assumption that this is also God’s will – which in the case of earthly rulers, cannot be surmised. Often, the surest way for the Lord to bring His divine judgments to pass, and precipitate the downfall of a nation or empire, is to ‘set up over it the basest of men’ (cf Daniel 4:17). Isaiah chapter three shows this principle, as it ultimately befell Jerusalem, in graphic detail – when no persons of any ability or virtue remained (cf Isaiah 3:2-3), and infantile leaders ruled the people, with disastrous results (vs. 4-5, 12), whose only qualification to govern was their clothes and food (v. 6). This was all appointed punitively by God, to judge prolonged and public sin (vs. 8-9).

No presumption of Christian liberty. Some Christians will lobby politicians, and cast a vote, in the interest (as they see it) of preserving their religious freedom – as though it were an inalienable right, that secular powers are obliged to maintain. This is a very distorted view of a world in which many countries have no such provision, and which has only existed in the United Kingdom for about 300 years. Believers in the Middle East, and parts of East Asia (amongst other places) cannot petition their hostile governments for greater freedoms – so they simply

pursue their Christian walk, all the personal risks and hazards notwithstanding – as has ever been the case for the majority of God’s true people, for the greater part of history. Our expectation should be tribulation (cf John 16:33), which is described as a blessed condition if it comes (cf Luke 6:22). We ought to be less affronted by the prospect of trials, and realise that recent periods of toleration are an exception, which may soon return to normal (cf 1 Peter 4:12).

The constant duty of prayer. The nearest approach of the Christian to the ‘powers that be’ in this world, should be that of intercessory prayer. *“I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour”* (1 Timothy 2:1-3). Rulers are to be prayed **for** (not against), regardless of their party or persuasions, with a particular request in view: peace and quiet for the church, and the continued pursuit of godliness and honesty by its members. It is a solemn matter indeed, if the practical outworking of godliness in the life of a believer is restricted or impeded by law; or if a Christian fears to be honest about his calling, because of prohibitions and penalties. Whatever God’s secret will may be in relation to human authorities, the prayer just described is always valid, always appropriate, always ‘good and acceptable’ in His sight.

As also is this: *“pray ... that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified ... And that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men: for all men have not faith”* (2 Thessalonians 3:1-2). The vast majority of earthly leaders are unbelieving. Indeed, political office is rarely compatible with the tenets of Biblical Christianity. Thus we pray to be spared the consequences of that unreasonableness which arises from unbelief and the denial of God and His Word. It is a hard thing to ask, but we take comfort in the accompanying promise: *“the Lord is faithful, who shall stablish you, and keep you from evil”* (1 Thessalonians 3:3).

[The series of articles ‘Long Shadows’ will resume in the next issue, D.V.]