

## DISCOURSE

By Elder GEORGE Q. CANNON, Delivered in the Tabernacle, Salt Lake City, Sunday afternoon, December 3rd, 1871.

REPORTED BY DAVID W. EVANS.

I WILL read a portion of the 3rd chapter of Peter's first epistle, commencing at the 18th verse:

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit:

By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison;

Which sometimes were disobedient, when once the long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls, were saved by water.

The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us, (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ:

Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels, and authorities, and powers being made subject unto him.

In the fourth chapter of this epistle the same subject is continued. The apostle says:

Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation, ready to be revealed in the last time.

Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season (if need be) ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations.

When I was called upon to speak, these passages suggested themselves to my mind. Whether the Spirit will lead me to dwell upon them at length I do not know, but there are important principles embodied in these verses which I have read in your hearing, principles which, when rightly understood, change the belief of men in relation to the future, that is, the belief of those who receive the commonly accepted creeds of Christianity. For some reason or other, there is an idea prevalent in the Christian world that mankind, when they lay down their mortal lives, are consigned to a condition or place of happiness or pain, there to remain throughout the endless ages of eternity. There may be a few who do not entertain this belief, but it is the general belief of most of the sects which comprise Christendom. There is an idea prevalent that if men do not receive what may be termed a conversion, or change of heart, if they do not obtain a remission of sins through the blood of Jesus, and they die in this condition, their doom is irrevocably fixed, and that they are consigned to eternal, never-ending misery. I believe that I do not misstate the belief, in this respect, of some of the most prominent sects that comprise the Christian world, so-called. I have conversed with ministers of various denominations in relation to the future of the heathen—those who die without a knowledge of the name of Jesus, and of his character as the Redeemer and Savior of the world. I have asked them what they thought the condition of the heathen would be, and where any definite answer was made, the feelings of such persons would lean to the idea that they would be consigned to hell; with others, either no definite idea was entertained, or, being more tender in their feelings, the answer would be, they did not know what their future condition would be.

There is an expression of the Savior's to Nicodemus, which I think I will read; it is found in the third chapter of John's gospel. "There was a man of the Pharisees," John writes, "named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; the same came to Jesus by night and said unto him, 'Rabbi, we know thou art a teacher come from God, for no man can do these miracles that thou doest except God be with him.'"

Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb and be born?

Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.

Now here is a definite doctrine laid down by the Savior, that unless a man is born again he can not see the king-

dom of God, and unless he is born of the water and of the Spirit he can not enter into the kingdom of God; he can not even see the kingdom without the new birth, and he can not enter that kingdom without being born of the water and of the Spirit. This doctrine is exceedingly positive, it leaves no room for doubt; there is no chance to evade the fact of this doctrine if there is to be any reliance placed upon the words of Jesus. Then, we are forced to the belief that no man can enter into the kingdom of God unless he be born of the water and of the Spirit.

Well, taking these passages into consideration, a large class of people have come to the conclusion that unless a man is born again, or, as they term it, experience a change of heart, he is consigned to endless misery; and there are those who believe that all the heathen who have died in ignorance of the gospel of Jesus Christ are thus punished, and, in fact there are those who profess to have faith in Jesus Christ as the savior of the world, who believe that in hell, that place of torment from which they declare there is no escape, there are infants by scores, and hundreds and thousands, and I may say by millions, enduring inconceivable and endless torment because they have died before receiving the ordinances which they consider necessary to salvation.

I do not thus understand the Scriptures, I do not thus understand the plan of salvation; I do not thus view the character and dealings of God our heavenly Father with his creatures. One of the most prominent attributes which we ascribe to our Father in heaven is mercy. The Scriptures declare most emphatically that he is a God of mercy, and a God of love. Can we, even in our degraded condition, consider a being endowed in the least degree with the attributes of love and mercy, or even of justice, who would consign millions of his creatures to endless torment because they do not believe and obey a doctrine which they never heard? Why such an idea is unworthy of intelligent beings. Suppose that any of us who have families should pass a law or prescribe a rule for their government, and at the time it is passed or prescribed, a portion of our children are not within hearing, and while still in ignorance of it, they unconsciously violate it, and because of this the father punishes them. What would you say of such a father? Would you not say that he was unjust, harsh and cruel? Why, certainly this would be our verdict, if we pronounced any, we could not pronounce otherwise. We would be compelled to come to the conclusion that the father who would act in this manner would neither be kind, just nor wise. And shall it be said of our heavenly Father, who is the fountain of love, mercy and justice, that he will act with less justice than man, and that he will punish, curse and consign to eternal misery, his children because they have failed to obey the laws he has never made known to them? Certainly not; and it is on account of these doctrines, which have been propounded and circulated so widely in Christendom, that skeptics are numbered by hundreds of thousands and it may be said by millions. The feelings of the people recoil, humanity revolts at such monstrous doctrines, and the growth of skepticism and infidelity may be traced to the fact that such hideous principles are advocated by those professing to be servants of the living God and the ministers of Jesus Christ. But do the Scriptures, the words of eternal life, as recorded in the Bible, inculcate such ideas? Certainly not. There is in the plan of salvation, which God our heavenly Father has revealed, perfect love; mercy and justice, and every other attribute which pertains to the character of Deity are perfectly illustrated in the plan of salvation which he has revealed for man's guidance.

The words of Jesus which I have read to you, contain an immutable truth: that except a man be born again he can not see the kingdom of God. It is an immutable truth that, except a man be born of the water and of the Spirit, he can not enter the kingdom of God. These words proceeded from the mouth of Jesus, the Son of God, the author of our salvation, the founder of our religion. He was perfectly acquainted with the laws necessary to be obeyed in order to effect an entrance into his Father's kingdom; and being thus acquainted, he had the right as well as the knowledge necessary to advance and proclaim this doctrine to the children of men.

While we are upon the subject we may as well make a few remarks upon the nature of this new birth of which Jesus speaks. As I have told you, and as you well know, there is a large class in Christendom who believe that this new birth consists of what they term a change of heart; if the heart undergoes a change they say the creature is born again. Now, I do not so understand the Scriptures. I do not think that the change of heart thus referred to, is the new birth to which the Savior refers; on the contrary, it says here in great plainness, that they must be born of the water as well as of the Spirit. Not for the putting away the filth of the flesh, as I read to you in the passage from Peter, but for the answer of a good conscience toward God. Jesus, as you will recollect, on the occasion when John the Baptist, as he was called,

was baptizing in Jordan, went and offered himself to John as a candidate for baptism. John, having received a testimony from the Father that Jesus was his beloved son in whom he was well pleased; knowing also that he, himself, was the forerunner of Jesus spoken of by the Prophets, declined to baptize him, saying, in effect, it is better for me to submit to thee than for thee to submit to me. Jesus replied, "Suffer it to be so now, to fulfill all righteousness." Then John took Jesus and baptized him.

Here we have an example on the part of the Savior of obedience to a certain ordinance. Some say that in this ordinance Jesus had water poured upon him, others say he was sprinkled, and a great many of the popular pictures represent him standing in the Jordan with his arms folded across his breast and John the Baptist pouring water on his head; but a careful perusal of the writings of those who have described this event will leave but one conclusion on the unprejudiced mind, and that is that Jesus went down into the water and was baptized by John, and came up out of the water; and that if pouring or sprinkling had been the method of administering the ordinance of baptism, there would have been no necessity for John and the people of Jerusalem and the regions round about, to have gone the distance that intervened between the river Jordan and Jerusalem to attend to it, and in fact there are other passages in the Scriptures which go to prove that immersion was the method of baptism, and that John so administered the ordinance. In one passage of Scripture it is said that John was baptizing at a place near Enon, because there was much water there, showing that an abundance of water was necessary for its correct administration. This was the ordinance that Jesus submitted to. He was the Son of God, the lamb slain from before the foundation of the world; he was spotless and sinless in the sight of his Father, yet he considered it necessary to attend to this ordinance that he might fulfill all righteousness; and it is a remarkable fact that we have no account in the Scriptures of Jesus acting in his ministry until he had attended to this ordinance.

This, as I understand the Scriptures, and as the Latter-day Saints testify, was the new birth. He went down into one element, was buried in that element, and, emerging therefrom, was born again, in other words was born of the water. Can you imagine a new birth more perfectly represented than by this act which I have described, performed by John upon Jesus? After this birth of the water had taken place, the birth of the Spirit followed, for as soon as he came up out of the water, the Holy Ghost, in the likeness of a dove, descended upon him, and a voice was heard from heaven, testifying that he was the beloved son in whom the Father was well pleased. Jesus was enveloped in that spiritual element, and was born of the Spirit as he had been born of the water. Thus, in his own case, he illustrated, by his obedience and humility to the will of his Father, the doctrine which he taught to Nicodemus, and which he declared was necessary to prepare not only him but all the children of men to enter into the kingdom of God. Paul, also, in one place, speaks of being buried with Christ in baptism in the likeness of his burial, in the likeness also of his resurrection; the burial in the liquid grave being symbolical of the death and burial of the Son of God, and the coming forth therefrom of his resurrection.

This doctrine is clearly laid down in the Scriptures. You will find it if you trace the preaching and the labors of the Apostles and the men who were immediately connected with the Lord in his ministrations to the people. You will find that in every instance where the records are complete, these ordinances were attended to—the people, if they believed in Jesus Christ and repented of their sins, were baptized, in order that they might be born of the water; and after attending to this ordinance, they were then baptized of the Spirit, or, in other words, had hands laid upon them for the gift of the Holy Ghost. They were enveloped in and born of that Spirit, and became legal heirs of and entitled to an entrance into the Kingdom of God. There is not an instance of any other kind found on record in the Scriptures. We often quote the teachings of Peter, himself, on the Day of Pentecost, to prove this, and in passing along, I may as well briefly allude to it.

On the Day of Pentecost, after the Jews had been convinced of the fact that Jesus the Nazarene, who had been crucified as a malefactor, was indeed the very Messiah of whom the Prophets had spoken; when they were convinced of this and also of the fact that the men who stood and preached in their midst, and through whom they had seen the power of God manifested, were his apostles, they cried: "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" They felt that they were sinners; probably, for aught we know, they had consented in their feelings to the death of this holy being, and they gave vent to their anxiety in the expression I have already quoted. Now it is to be presumed that on that occasion Peter declared the gospel in its fullness and purity, as it existed in the mind of God, and as it had been revealed to him by Jesus. We can not presume that he taught something he was not warranted in teaching, something that was not the gospel, for the occasion was one of the most important, probably, that the church witnessed in that generation. It was, as far as we know, the first proclamation of the gospel after the death of Jesus,

and it was certainly the first time the power of God was manifested to such a wonderful extent. Peter, then, standing up, inspired not only with the greatness of the occasion, but with the sublimity of the manifestations that had been poured out by God, by the fact that he, for the first time, was declaring the gospel in the ears of the assembled Jews at Jerusalem who had crucified Jesus, also by the Spirit and power of his great office, we can not doubt that he declared the gospel in simplicity and plainness, and he said, in reply to their very important question, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, for the remission of your sins, and ye shall receive the Holy Ghost."

Now here were the two births of which I have spoken. They already believed that Jesus was the Christ, and they were told to repent, and be baptized for the remission of their sins; not, I repeat again, for the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but for the remission of their sins, that they might be born of the water, that they might become suitable candidates to receive the birth of the Holy Spirit. Peter continued: "And ye shall receive the Holy Ghost, for the promise is unto you and to your children, and all them that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." And they went and were baptized, and we are told that three thousand were added to the church on that occasion. This is only an example of what the Apostles afterwards taught. I do not intend, this afternoon, to quote the numerous instances that occur in the Scriptures where this doctrine was taught, where it was obeyed by those unto whom it was taught, and the blessings that followed obedience; but I call attention to the fact that this doctrine was set forth by the Apostles even as Jesus taught it and even as Jesus obeyed it, and that they administered the ordinances as the Lord had taught them.

It may be said, How is it possible for the millions that exist on the face of the earth to obey this doctrine? This question is very frequently asked us, because the Latter-day Saints dwell very considerably upon this part of the gospel, and upon the necessity of these ordinances being obeyed. The question, very naturally, immediately rises in the minds of men, if it be necessary that all men and women should be born of the water and of the Spirit, then what is to become of the millions who have died and have not had the opportunity? I recollect, on one occasion, when quite a youth, speaking upon this principle of baptism, and dwelling, at some length, upon the necessity of people yielding obedience to it. After I had got through, a gentleman walked up to me, and said he had been very much interested in my remarks, but one difficulty had suggested itself to his mind, and he would like to have me explain. Said he, you doubtless recollect when Jesus was crucified there were two thieves with him, one of whom upbraided and railed at him. This called forth a rebuke from the other thief, who, turning to Jesus, said, "Lord, remember me when thou comest unto thy Kingdom." Jesus replied on this wise: "This day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Now, said the gentleman, "if your doctrine be correct, that a man must be born of the water and of the Spirit before he can enter the kingdom of God, I would like to know how that thief entered that kingdom." Well, looking at it from his standpoint, it was a very plausible question, and it looked as though his position was incontrovertible. But did Jesus enter into the kingdom of God when he was crucified? Did he, when he was crucified, enter upon the glory he afterwards attained unto, and did the thief accompany him? I know that many Christian ministers, so-called, believe this, I know they teach it. In reading the newspapers I frequently see accounts of the execution of vile criminals, whose entire lives have been spent in the commission of revolting crimes. Christian ministers, so-called, attend these criminals while incarcerated in jail, and to the gallows; they pray with them and endeavor to awaken them to a sense of their lost condition, and frequently they are successful, for many influences are brought to bear on the minds of malefactors at such times and their hearts are softened at the near prospect of death. Then, when these ministers accompany them to the scaffold they will pray with them there, and they assure them that through the merits and death of Jesus they will be ushered into the kingdom of heaven as soon as they are executed. This is the invariable assurance given to criminals who will listen to them, by ministers of this description. They believe that the thief on the cross was ushered into the immediate presence of God, there to dwell eternally in peace and felicity. This was the view entertained by this gentleman I have mentioned.

If you will turn and read the account of the resurrection of Jesus, you will find an explanation of this that probably many have not thought of. You recollect that after the death of Jesus, and after he had been placed in the sepulchre, there was great anxiety on the part of the Apostles and those who had been familiar with Jesus, as to his body. They looked for his resurrection, they expected him to come forth, but they were filled with doubt and anxiety, for they had the idea that he would return king of Israel, that the set time had come for the establishment of God's kingdom on the earth never more to be thrown down. Among others who was very anxious about this, was Mary, one of the