

The intermediate stage after death

Additional study material

A discipleship training to equip Christians for works of service, so that the Body of Christ may be built up (Ephesians 4:11-16).

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REFUTING UNBIBLICAL THEORIES ABOUT THE NATURE OF MAN AND ABOUT THE INTERMEDIATE STAGE BETWEEN DEATH AND RESURRECTION

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A. MAN IS A UNITY, NOT A DUALITY OR A TRINITY

1. The duality of Neo-platonic philosophy

The Bible does not acknowledge the heathen Neo-Platonic (Greek or Hellenist) philosophy of the Alexandrian Plotinus (269), the Syrian Jamblichus (363) and the Athenean Proclus (485) which has its roots in the religions of the East and greatly influenced the Middle Ages. Neo-Platonism poses **an absolute dualism** of the spiritual and the material.

Neo-platonic philosophy teaches that the gap between the spiritual and material world is bridged by the emanation of the godhead into the world or by many half-gods, demons and heroes.

Neo-platonic philosophy teaches that man is a duality: man has a body and man has a soul (or a spirit).

This view distinguishes between the body that is only physical and the soul that is only spiritual and consequently believes that man is able to keep his physical and psychological functions apart. They believe that the functions of his body and the functions of his soul do not influence one another. Man could live one kind of life in his body and another kind of life in his soul. For example, he could live a carnal and immoral life in his body at the same time he lives a religious and moral life in his soul. According to the Bible, this duality is impossible!

Neo-platonic philosophy generally regarded the soul as the higher essential being of man (something good) and the body as the lower part of man (something evil). It teaches that the fall (of Adam and Eve) into sin united the soul to the body¹. The spirit (or soul) has become the prisoner of the body until it is set free from the body at death in order to be united to the spiritual realm.

The consequence of neo-platonic philosophy is that only the soul is regarded as important and the physical body and all physical creation are regarded as unimportant. For example, it is important to go to church and save your soul, but it is not important how you live the rest of your life in your body in this world. A person may indulge in uncontrolled eating, drinking and drug abuse, live in sexual immorality or dedicate himself to killing people in unholy or holy wars without these events having any consequence for his soul! Historically this view of separating the body from the soul has had disastrous influence on the religions in the world, including Christianity!

This division of man into a duality is not biblical!

2. The trinity of the philosophy of Philo

The Bible also does not acknowledge the philosophy of Philo (about 20 B.C. – 45 A.D.). He lived in Alexandria and was a Hellenist Jew in whom Greek philosophy conquered his Jewish religion. He used Greek philosophy to explain Jewish theology and employed the allegorical method of interpretation of the Old Testament.

The philosophy of Philo teaches that the outward physical reality is for the simpleminded; while the inward spiritual reality is for philosophers and that the gap between the material world and God is bridged by ideas, or powers or angels.

The philosophy of Philo teaches that man is a trinity: man has a spirit, a soul and a body.

¹ Hinduism teaches that for no reason at all *the Universal Soul (Brahman)* fell into an uncountable number of individual souls (*atmans*) which give *the illusion* of a created universe with an uncountable number of created beings. Through a process called *karma-samsara* each soul (atman) evolves through millions and millions of existences back to finally dissolving into the Universal Soul (Brahman) again. Through this process of cause and effect, the “works” (karma) of each soul causes it to “migrate” (and be born on earth again)(*samsara*) into another kind of existence. Bad works (bad karma) causes one’s soul to migrate downwards to be born into a lower form of existence (e.g. a poor beggar or handicapped person) and good works (good karma) causes one’s soul to migrate and be born into a higher form of existence (e.g. a rich man or saint, including a snake, monkey or cow). Some Hindus regard all these existences as “illusions”, but the majority experiences these existences as very real.

The philosophic view of Philo makes a distinction between a man's spirit and soul, between his spiritual life and his soulish life. The spirit is the higher part that apprehends divine philosophy and the soul is the lower part that apprehends human philosophy.

This notion is popularised in the West by assigning specific functions to the spirit and separate functions to the soul and to the body. The functions of the spirit are said to be spiritual knowledge of a god and fellowship with that god, conscience, intuition and creativity. The functions of the soul are limited to thinking (the mind), to deciding and choosing (the will) and to feeling the different emotions (the heart). The functions of the body are reduced to the five senses.

This division of man into a trinity is an over-simplification of reality and is not biblical!

3. The unity of the body and the spirit in the Bible

When God created man, he formed man's body from the elements of the earth and blew life (spirit)² into his nostrils, and "man became a living *soul*"³, "man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). Thus, according to the Bible, **man is a unity: man is a living soul, which consists of a body and a spirit.** In the Bible the whole man (the soul or being) with its body and spirit is important! The body is the visible being or essence of man and the spirit (or soul) is the invisible being or essence of man.

Later in the Bible the words 'spirit and soul' became interchangeable. The human body (the physical expression of his soul or being) is much more valuable than material things like food and clothing (Matthew 6:25) and the human spirit (the spiritual expression of his soul or being) is much more worth than gaining the whole world with its possessions and ambitions (Matthew 16:25-26). The body of a Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit and a Christian is called to glorify God with his body (1 Corinthians 6:19-20) and with his spirit or soul (Luke 1:46)!

▪ Explanation of 1 Thessalonians 5:23

This Bible verse may not be misused to prove the philosophy of Philo, the division of man into three parts (i.e. body, soul and spirit). In 1 Thessalonians 5:23 in the Greek text the words: 'you' (plural), 'your spirit' and 'the soul and the body' are not consecutive, but parallel expressions. The literal translation from the Greek original reads:

- "May the God of peace himself/ sanctify/ you (plural) wholly (to the end);
- and/ complete in every part (may be)/ your (plural) spirit;
- and/ the soul (singular) and the body (singular)/ blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ/ may be kept."

The correct translation should read:

- "May the God of peace himself sanctify you (Christians) wholly (through and through);
- and (may) your spirit (the spirit of Christians) in every part (be) complete (intact, undamaged, sound);
- and may the soul and the body (of each Christian) be kept blameless at the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ."

The expression 'spirit' stands for the immaterial being of man and the expression 'soul and body' stands for the whole personality of man.

▪ Explanation of Hebrews 4:12

"The Word of God ... penetrates to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow ... judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." This text does not teach the division of man's nature into three parts. It is precarious to draw any conclusions about the author's psychology from this text. The accumulation of the four terms: soul and spirit, joints and marrow are to be understood as an expression of **the whole mental or spiritual nature of man in all aspects**. God's Word probes the inmost recesses of our spiritual being and brings the subconscious motives to light.

▪ Explanation of Mark 12:30

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." The words *heart* and *soul* and *mind* have each several different meanings in Greek. In general 'the heart'⁴ is the centre of man's existence, the mainspring of all his thoughts, words and deeds (Proverbs 4:23); 'the soul'⁵ is the seat of man's emotional activity; and 'the mind'⁶ is the centre of his intellect, temperament and attitudes. 'The strength'⁷ is the power and energy of all his actions. Also in this text we should not over-analyse. What is meant with these four words together is that Christians should love God with **all the faculties** with which God has endowed him.

▪ Conclusion

Man is not a trinity (Philo) or a duality (Neo-Platonism), but a unity (Bible)!

² Hebrew: ruach

³ Hebrew: nephesh

⁴ Greek: kardia

⁵ Greek: psuchè

⁶ Greek: dianoia

⁷ Greek: ischus

4. The bodies of Enoch and Elijah

The original Hebrew text says: “Enoch walked with God. And he was no more, because God took him away” (Genesis 5:21,24). The Hebrew text refers to **the spirit** (soul) of Enoch that was taken away into heaven (cf. Ecclesiastes 12:3). Our New Testament text is a quotation from the much later Greek translation of the Old Testament and says: “By faith Enoch was taken from this life, *so that he did not experience death*; he could not be found, because God had taken him away” (Hebrews 11:5). The Greek word for ‘taken away’ can also be translated by ‘changed, transformed’. The Greek text refers to **the body** of Enoch that did not experience physical death, but was taken away into heaven. Note: his physical ascension into heaven does not necessarily imply physical resurrection.

Also Elijah went up into heaven in a chariot of fire, horses of fire and a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11). Also his physical ascension into heaven does not necessarily imply physical resurrection.

These descriptions cannot refer to the physical resurrection of Enoch or Elijah, because Jesus Christ is the first to be resurrected from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20)!

5. The spirits of Moses and Elijah

The Bible reveals that the spirits or souls of the dead, normally invisible, can be seen if God so wills. They can take on a *visible form*, just like the angels can take on a visible form (Matthew 22:30).

Historically Moses and Elijah (representing the Law and the Prophets) had such visible forms during the transfiguration of Christ on the mount (Matthew 17:3). Also the spirits of Abraham and Lazarus in heaven could be seen and recognised (Luke 16:23). Finally, in a vision John could see the souls of Christians that had laid down their lives for Christ (Revelation 6:9).

B. THE UNDERWORLD THEORY

1. The underworld theory

The underworld theory is very popular. The followers of this theory believe that when people die their bodies as well as their spirits (souls) descend into a place called ‘the underworld’ (‘Sheol’ in the Hebrew language and ‘Hades’ in the Greek language). They believe that both the righteous and the unrighteous descend to the underworld. This theory has several forms:

- **The first underworld theory: the underworld is a neutral place.**

The first underworld theory teaches that when the righteous and unrighteous die, they decent to the underworld, which is a neutral place: neither a place of rewards nor a place of punishment. People who have died live together in their bodies and spirits (or souls). The underworld is a place somewhere under the earth, a gloomy and dreary place of shadows and forgetfulness, where all the dead are doomed to an existence that is only a hazy reflection of life on earth.

This theory is shared by other religions (Animism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese religion). They believe that people live in the underworld as they live on earth, where people need money, a house, a car, clothing, food and other luxury articles to exist. They believe that their relatives who still live on earth should provide these necessities to them! They view the underworld as a place where there is no useful activity, moral conscience or joy.

This first underworld theory is completely unbiblical!

- **The second underworld theory: the underworld has two sections.**

The second underworld theory teaches that the underworld is not neutral, but divided into two sections: ‘Paradise’ for the righteous and ‘Gehenna’ for the unrighteous. Until the final judgement the righteous would enjoy a certain measure of reward in Paradise, while the unrighteous would suffer a certain measure of punishment in Gehenna.

A first group (Jews) believe that Paradise is only for Jews or even only for Jews who keep the law (the Torah) and that Gehenna (the hell) is reserved for the rest, especially the Gentiles (non-Jews). They believe that the Jews in the underworld would be rescued by the coming Messiah, while the rest would remain in the darkness of hell forever.

A second group (Muslims) believe that only Muslims who keep the law (the Sharia) and have done more good deeds than evil deeds when they are weighed on the scales and especially Muslims who die as martyrs in the ‘holy wars’ (jihad) of Islam would go to Paradise. The rest of the world would go to hell (Jehannam).

A third group (Christians) believe that before the ascension of Jesus Christ believers during the Old Testament period went to Paradise and after the ascension of Christ believers during the New Testament period would go to heaven.

The second underworld theory is completely unbiblical!

2. The biblical teaching concerning the underworld.

The Hebrew word ‘Sheol’ or the Greek word ‘Hades’ do not always have the same meaning in every passage of the Bible. The word describes *three different aspects of death*.

- Sheol or Hades *figuratively* describes the state of death
- Sheol or Hades *literally* describes the place of death where the bodies of all the departed go, i.e. the grave
- Sheol or Hades *literally* describes the place of death where the *spirits (or souls)* of only the wicked departed people go, i.e. hell

The context of each passage in the Bible must decide which meaning is intended. In the context of Luke 16:19-31, the word can only refer to the place called *hell*.

- **(1) 'Sheol' ('Hades') can refer figuratively to the state of death, the state in which the spirit is separated from the body.**

Sheol or Hades is *the state of disembodied existence or the state of the separation of body and spirit (or soul)*. Dying is described as descending into Sheol (1 Samuel 2:6; Job 14:13-14; Job 17:13-14; Psalm 89:49; Hosea 13:14; Acts 2:27,31) and 'death' may be personified (Revelation 6:8; Revelation 20:13). Because the spirits and bodies of both the righteous and the unrighteous are separated at death, no differentiation is made between the righteous and the unrighteous in Sheol (in the sense of the state of death) (Ecclesiastes 3:19-21; Ecclesiastes 9:2-3).

- **The state of death is viewed as a stronghold with gates.**

In the Bible the state of death is frequently conceived as *a place constituting the realm of death*. It is presented as a stronghold with gates, which only Christ can unlock with his keys (Matthew 16:18; Revelation 1:18). This local representation is in all probability based on a generalisation of the idea of the grave (a return to the dust), into which all people descend when they enter the state of death (Ecclesiastes 3:19-21). Since both Christians and non-Christians die, that is, descend into the state of death and their bodies descend into the grave, it can very well be said figuratively that they are without distinction in Sheol or Hades (Ecclesiastes 9:2-3). "The Lord brings *death* and makes alive; he *brings down to Sheol* (into the state of death) and raises up (into the state of life)(1 Samuel 2:6)." This descend into Sheol or Hades as the state of death is found in the following passages in the Bible: Job 14:13-14; Job 17:13-14; Psalm 89:48; Hosea 13:14; Acts 2:27,31.

A few passages in the Bible, like Psalm 16:10, Psalm 30:3, Psalm 49:15 and Psalm 89:48 speak of *souls* as going down into Sheol or as being in Sheol. But it is well known that in Hebrew, the personal pronoun 'my' together with the word 'soul'⁸ is a *figurative expression* equivalent to the personal pronoun 'me'. For example, Psalm 89:48 says, "What man can live and not see death, or save *his soul* from the power of Sheol?" It means "What man can save *himself* from the state or power of death?" Proverbs 23:13-14 says that if you punish a child with the rod, then you will save *his soul* from Sheol, that is, you will either save *him* from an early death (state of death) or from destruction in hell.

- **The state of death as a gloomy place.**

God's revelation concerning the state of man between his death and the resurrection was still incomplete in the Old Testament. Some people viewed the state of death, especially the state of the body decaying in the grave, as a gloomy place. In Job 7:9-10, Job 10:19-22, Job 16:22 and Job 17:7-16, Job expresses his view of death. Sheol as the state of death is described as "a place of no return (to this present earth)", "the land of gloom and deep shadow", and "the land of deep shadow and disorder". It is described as "the place where the dead person lies in darkness", as "a close relationship with the worms and decay" and as "a place where the dead are locked up behind gates, to which the dead person together with his plans, desires and hopes descends".

- **Hope in life beyond the state of death in the Old Testament.**

In Job 14:7-11, Job regards Sheol (the state of death) as something "hopeless". Plants and trees die, but *every year* they bud again and produce new shoots! But man dies and *never* again comes to life on this present earth. Man's life is marked with boundaries (limits). In contrast to plants and trees he has *but one chance of living* on this present earth!

Then, in Job 14:12-17 Job expresses a wishful thought. Could it be possible that man has a life-chance beyond death? Would God set a limited time for death and hide him during the state of death until the present heavens have passed away? Would God call him, rouse him from the sleep (of death) and make him rise from Sheol (the state of death)? Then he would wait for God's renewal and have hope!

This is a prophetic thought about life after death which, however, he immediately drops in Job 14:18-19: "As water wears away stones ... so you destroy man's hope."

In Job 16:19-21 and Job 19:25-27 this prophetic thought about life after death is taken up again. Although Job is mortal, he knows that his Redeemer, God, lives. At the end of world-history, God will as it were stand on the dust of this present earth⁹ (or: "on my grave" - to resurrect me?). After Job's skin has been beaten off (i.e. his dead body has been destroyed), he will see God "from" or "more than" his flesh¹⁰ (i.e. he will see God not only in his spirit, but also in his resurrected body?)

This prophetic thought of Job about life after death is stated more clearly in other Old Testament books. There we find joyful expectation in the face of death, just as in the New Testament. For example, Enoch walked with God and was

⁸ Hebrew: nephesh

⁹ Hebrew: ani jada>ti Go<el-i chai, we-acharon al-afar jaqum.

¹⁰ Hebrew: we-achar >or-i niqfu z<ot, u-mi-beshar-i <echzeh Eloha

taken up into God's presence (Genesis 5:22-24). Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11). Enoch and Elijah did not descend into an underworld, but ascended to be with God (Hebrews 11:5)! Psalm 116:15 says, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." The righteous die to be spared from evil, to enter peace and to find rest as they lie in death (Isaiah 57:1-2). At death, the body of man returns to the ground it came from, but the spirit of man returns to God who gave it to man (Ecclesiastes 12:7). The body of the righteous will rest secure and he (i.e. his spirit) will experience fullness of joy in God's presence (Psalm 16:9,11; Psalm 17:15; Psalm 49:15; Psalm 73:24-26; Proverbs 14:32; Isaiah 25:8; Daniel 12:2).

- **Hope in life beyond the state of death in the New Testament.**

God is not the God of the dead, but of the living (Matthew 22:32): the bodies of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob may still be in the realm of the dead, but their spirits are with God! The Old Testament believers longed for a better country - a heavenly country (Hebrews 11:13-16)! The New Testament reveals much more clearly the joyous outlook of Christians and teaches their conscious happiness in the disembodied state. When we are away from the body, then we are at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:1,8; cf. Luke 16:22-25; Luke 23:43; Acts 7:59; Ephesians 3:14-15; Philippians 1:21,23; 1 Thessalonians 5:10; Revelation 6:9,11; 14:13).

The New Testament is very clear about the resurrection and complete transformation of the present body. Christians know (as a very certain hope) that when their earthly house (i.e. their present body) is struck like a tent, they have an eternal home in heaven that is not made by human hands (i.e. their resurrected body). Therefore Christians in the present time still groan, because they do not want to be found naked (i.e. without a resurrected body), but long for (the resurrection of the body), when their dead bodies "will put on in addition" their resurrected bodies (their heavenly homes). Then the mortal will be swallowed up by life (2 Corinthians 5:1-4)!

- **(2) 'Sheol' ('Hades') can refer literally to the grave, the place where the dead bodies go.**

Sheol or Hades is the grave, into which all the dead bodies descend. Jacob said that the news about the death of his son Joseph would cause his grey hairs to descend into Sheol, that is, it would cause his death and descent into the grave (Genesis 42:38; cf. Genesis 37:35; Genesis 44:29; 1 Kings 2:6,9). The bodies of people who rely on themselves and their riches would decay in their graves in spite of their wealth, but the bodies of those who trust in the God of the Bible will be resurrected from the dead and they will be brought into the presence of God (Psalm 49:6-17; cf. Psalm 6:6; Psalm 88:4). But before this resurrection of the body, the dust (elements) of the body will descend into the grave and the spirit will ascend to God (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

- **In the Old Testament Sheol is more often used for the grave than for hell.**

The original meaning of the word Sheol was in all probability the place of destruction and then first in the sense of hell, the place of eternal destruction for the wicked. Only in secondary sense it also referred to the place of destruction of the body, that is, the grave. In the still incomplete Old Testament revelation, the word Sheol is more often used for the grave than for hell, while in the complete New Testament revelation, the corresponding word Hades is more often used for hell than for the grave.

It is not easy to determine whether the word Sheol refers to the state of death or the grave, as the above mentioned passages from Job show (Job 14:13; Job 17:13; Job 21:13). In the following passages, the meaning of grave is more probable. In Genesis 42:38, Jacob says that sorrow for the loss of his son would bring his grey head down to Sheol, that is, to the grave (Also Genesis 37:35; Genesis 44:29; 1 Kings 2:6,9). Psalm 88:3 says that his life draws near Sheol (the grave), that is, he is dying. Psalm 6:5 says that no one remembers the Lord when he is dead and no one praises the Lord from Sheol, that is, from the grave. Psalm 49:6-15 says that the fate of people, who trust in themselves and their wealth, as well as their followers, who approve of what they say, is Sheol (the grave), where in spite of all their wealth their bodies will decay. But the fate of the righteous, of those who trust in God, is that God will save them, that is, resurrect their bodies from the grave and take them into God's presence. However, before the resurrection of the dead, at death "the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

- **People in the state of death in the grave have no influence.**

Ecclesiastes 9:6,10 refers to the state of death, especially of the body, which lies in the grave. It says that in Sheol, that is, in the state of death in the grave, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom. Never again would people in the state of death in the grave have a part in anything that happens under the sun. People in the state of death in the grave have no influence on this present earth whatsoever! As certain as a dead body lying in the grave is cut off from life in this world, so certain is a person in the state of death cut off from all activities in this present world. Acts 2:27,31 teaches that Hades refers to the state of death, especially of the body, which decays in the grave.

- **(3) 'Sheol' ('Hades') can refer literally to hell, the place of eternal damnation.**

Sheol or Hades is the place of eternal punishment. In some Bible passages the parallel between death and Sheol is more depicted as a threat and warning than merely the state of death (Deuteronomy 32:19-22; Psalm 9:18-19; Psalm 49:13-15; Proverbs 5:5; Proverbs 7:21; Proverbs 9:17-18; Proverbs 15:24; Proverbs 23:14). The meaning of 'Sheol' is then closer to 'hell'.

Some interpreters assume that Sheol has two departments: 'Paradise' is the dwelling of the righteous and 'Gehenna' is the destination of the wicked. But nowhere in the Bible can we find the idea of an underworld with two departments.

Instead, the Old Testament speaks of 'Sheol' as the place of punishment of the unrighteous. But the New Testament speaks of 'Paradise' as *heaven* and never as a part of the underworld (2 Corinthians 12:2,4)! The New Testament also identifies 'Hades' as 'hell' (Matthew 11:23-24; Luke 16:23). When the selfish rich man died he found that he had descended into hell, the place of punishment and suffering (Luke 16:23-24). In all cases the spirit (soul) of unrighteous people go to Sheol or Hades (the hell)(Matthew 25:41,46a) and the spirit (soul) of righteous people go to heaven (Matthew 25:34,46b). Therefore the underworld can never be depicted as a place with two departments as the second theory above suggests.

- **Sheol or Hades as the hell.**

For example, Proverbs 15:24 says that the path of life leads upwards for the wise in order to keep him from *going downwards* to Sheol, that is, to hell. The wicked people are threatened with the punishment of descending into Sheol or Hades. In Deuteronomy 32:19-22, God says that his righteous anger against the idolatry of Israel has kindled *a fire that burns* to the realm of Sheol, that is, hell below. Thus, God's anger burns in Sheol in the sense of hell. Psalm 9:17-18 warns that the wicked and all nations who forget God will return to Sheol. They will go to hell, where they in contrast to the righteous people *will be forgotten and be without hope*. Psalm 49:13-15 warns that people who trust in themselves will *not be redeemed* from Sheol. They will go to hell and in contrast to the righteous people will *not be taken into God's presence*. The wicked will stay in hell without redemption, without hope, without God's loving presence (cf. 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 21:8).

- **Sheol or Hades as the dwelling place of Satan and demons.**

Moreover, the term Sheol is synonymous with the term *Abaddon*, which means *destruction* (Job 26:6; Proverbs 15:11; Proverbs 27:20). It is a strong term, applied to the angel of the abyss, which is the place where the devil and evil spirits dwell (Revelation 19:11; cf. Revelation 9:1-5; Revelation 11:7; Revelation 17:8; Revelation 20:1-3). Jesus says that "the eternal fire has been prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41). Therefore, Sheol can never have a neutral character as the first underworld theory above suggests!

Conclusion.

Sheol or Hades is the state of the dead before the resurrection of the bodies. Dependent on the context, it may refer to 'the state of death', which is the state of separation of the body and the spirit (or soul), 'the grave' or 'the hell'. No passage in the Bible teaches that *the spirits (or souls) of all people* actually go to the same place at death! All people, both the righteous and the wicked, descend to *the grave* as to their *bodies* only, but as to their *spirits (or souls)*, they definitely go to different places! The spirits (or souls) of Christians (the righteous) go to heaven (Ecclesiastes 12:7; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23; Hebrews 12:23), while the spirits (or souls) of non-Christians (the unrighteous) go to hell (Matthew 11:23-24; Luke 16:23).

C. THE PURGATORY THEORY

1. The purgatory theory.

- **The Roman Catholic theory about purgatory.**

The purgatory theory is a teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and teaches that the spirits (souls) of the majority of believers (Christians) first need to go to "purgatory", a place where their spirits (souls) are being purged. Purgatory is depicted as a place of fire, anguish, suffering and pain where the spirits (souls) of Christians first need to be purified from all their pardonable sins they committed on earth, before they would be able to enter heaven. According to this theory, purgatory is not a place of punishment, but rather *a place of purification and preparation before entering heaven*.

Only the spirits (souls) of the 'saints', that is, of Christians who have been declared to be absolutely free of sins by the Roman Catholic Church, would go straight to heaven. Such examples are found in Matthew 25:34-40 and Philippians 1:23.

The time needed to spend in purgatory and the intensity of the purifying process is dependent on the amount and gravity of the sins committed on earth before death. This period of time may be shortened and the intensity may be lightened by means of the prayers and good works of believers on earth and especially by the sacrifice of "mass" being performed by the Roman Catholic Church. The Pope has jurisdiction to grant *indulgences*, which can lighten or even terminate the temporal sufferings in purgatory, but in past history the pope even sold letters of indulgence to raise money for building the cathedral in Rome.

The Roman Catholic Church based this theory of purgatory not on the Bible, but on one passage in the apocryphal book called 2 Maccabees 12:39-45 in which after a battle, Judas, the leader of the Maccabees (the Jewish rebels against the Roman oppressor) had the dead buried. The living people prayed for the dead people that the sins they committed may be forgiven completely and Judas took an offering and sent the money to Jerusalem to pay for "a sin offering".

▪ **The apocryphal passage in 2 Maccabees 12:39-45.**

“39 On the next day, as by that time it had become necessary, Judas and his men went to take up the bodies of the fallen and to bring them back to lie with their kinsmen in the sepulchres of their fathers. 40 Then under the tunic of every one of the dead they found sacred tokens (statuettes) of the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. And it became clear to all that this was *why these men had fallen*. 41 So they all blessed the ways of the Lord, the righteous Judge, who reveals the things that are hidden;

42 and they turned to *prayer*, beseeching that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out. And the noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened because of the sin of those who had fallen.

43 He also took up *a collection*, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering.

In doing this he acted very well and honourably, taking account of the resurrection. 44 For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. 45 But if he was looking to *the splendid reward* that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered (acquitted) from their sin.”

However, this passage in the book of Maccabees also teaches things, which even Roman Catholics cannot accept, namely, the possible deliverance from purgatory of soldiers, who had died in the mortal sin of idolatry (verse 40)!

2. The biblical arguments against purgatory.

▪ **All Christians are saints.**

All born-again Christians are *saints* (1 Corinthians 1:2), because a person is ‘justified’ by God’s grace (and not by his own good works) through faith (in Christ’s complete work of salvation)(Ephesians 2:8-9). The position of every believer is “in Christ Jesus”. Jesus Christ has become the believer’s “righteousness” (justification), “holiness” (sanctification) and “salvation”. “Justification” in the Bible means that all the believer’s sins have been forgiven (Psalm 103:3; Romans 3:21-26; Hebrews 8:12). From the time he became a believer, God declares him as completely forgiven and regards and treats him forever as perfectly forgiven. And “sanctification” means that all the believer’s sins after he became a believer are being forgiven and purified, because a true believer confesses his sins and Jesus Christ is faithful and just to forgive him his sins and purify him from *all* unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

▪ **At death all Christians immediately go to heaven.**

The Bible describes the departure of Christians after death in various terms. The wonderful place of *heaven*, to which Christians go after death, is described as *paradise* (Luke 23:43), as *the Father’s house with many rooms* (John 14:2), as *the place of glory* (Psalm 73:24-25), as *a being with Christ* (Philippians 1:23) and as *being at home with the Lord* (2 Corinthians 5:8). According to 2 Corinthians 5:8, “being away from the body” is “being at home with the Lord” and according to Philippians 1:23, “to depart from living in the body” is “to be with Christ”.

▪ **No one can add anything to the completed salvation work of Christ.**

At death, Christians immediately go to heaven, because Christ has already paid for *all* their sins!

The purgatory theory *tries to add something to the completed or finished work of salvation of Christ* on the cross (John 19:30). However, Revelation 22:18-19 warns people not to add or take away anything from the teaching of the Bible! Christ is the *complete* justification and sanctification of believers (1 Corinthians 1:30)!

The purgatory theory also *makes the good works and prayers of other Christians a means* to contribute to salvation. It even makes *an excess of good works*, like the sacrifice of mass and the good works of special saints, a means to save other people. However, Ephesians 2:8-9 teaches that no one will be saved by good works! While the Roman Catholic Church claims that the Roman Catholic Church carries the keys of death and Hades, Revelation 1:18 clearly teaches that only Jesus Christ carries those keys!

D. THE SOUL-SLEEP THEORY

1. The soul-sleep theory.

The soul-sleep theory says that after death the spirit (or soul) descends into a state of complete unconsciousness. Only at the resurrection the spirit (or soul) becomes conscious again.

The soul-sleep theory is often combined with the annihilation theory and second chance theory. After death, both the body and spirit (or soul) descend into the grave *into a state of complete non-existence*. Only at the resurrection the spirit (or soul) becomes conscious again and gets a second chance to choose: to repent, to be saved and to receive a complete newly created body or to remain unrepentant and be completely annihilated.

These false teachers base their theory on Bible passages like John 11:11 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13, which speak of dying as *a falling asleep*. They base their theory on passages like Psalm 6:5 and Ecclesiastes 9:10, which speak of the dead as being *unconscious*. They also base their theory on passages like 2 Corinthians 5:10 and Revelation 20:11-15, which according to them say that the destinies of people will be determined only on the final judgement day and not before that.

2. Biblical arguments against the soul-sleep theory.

- **The Bible never teaches that the spirit (or soul) or the body falls asleep!**

The term “falling asleep” is a euphemistic expression of physical death due to the similarity between a dead body and a sleeping person.

- **The Bible teaches that *the spirits (or souls) of dead people are very conscious*.**

The Bible passages that seem to teach that the dead people are unconscious are clearly intended to stress the fact that in the state of death, people *can no more take part in the activities of this present world!* For example, Ecclesiastes 9:5-12 says, “The dead know nothing. ... Never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun (on earth). ... In the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.” Thus, after death, the worker can no longer work, the singer can no longer sing and the king can no longer rule on earth. Thus, the Bible teaches that while the body lies in the grave, *the spirit (or soul) is unconscious of what happens on earth* (cf. Isaiah 63:16)!

However, the Bible also teaches that while the body lies in the grave, *the spirit (or soul) is very conscious of what happens in heaven or in hell!* For example, Luke 16:22-28 says that when the selfish rich man died and was buried, he opened his eyes in hell and experienced the torment and anguish of hell! And Hebrews 12:22-24 and Revelation 6:9-10 say that when Christians die, they enjoy a conscious life in fellowship with God and with all other Christians who have died before them.

- **On the final judgement day, the eternal destinies of people are *not decided, but announced*.**

The eternal destinies of people are dependent on their relationship to Jesus Christ and are decided while they are still here on earth! Jesus says in John 3:18,36, “Whoever does not believe, *stands condemned already*, because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son”. “Whoever rejects the Son *will not see life*, for God’s wrath *remains on him*”. According to Matthew 25 and 2 Thessalonians 1, the *eternal destinies* of all people are determined while they still live on earth before their physical death. According to the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30, the reward or punishment of each person is *determined before* he dies and before the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Therefore there will also not be a second chance to be saved after death! According to Matthew 25:34,41 and 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10, the final judgement is for *the solemn announcement* of God’s sentence and for the revelation of God’s justice and glory in the presence of all angels and all people who ever lived! The surprise, which people express at the final judgement, pertains to the ground on which the judgement rests, rather than to the judgement itself. The ground of the final judgement is God’s grace (Matthew 25:34) and how people related to Christ and his brothers through that grace.

E. THE ANNIHILATION THEORY

1. The annihilation theory.

- **The annihilation theory.**

The annihilation theory teaches that after death, both the body and the spirit (or soul) are annihilated. The body and spirit (or soul) descend into the grave into a state of complete non-existence. At the resurrection, there is not a becoming conscious again, but a complete new creation of the body and the soul!

The annihilation theory teaches that there is *no existence* of the wicked after death and therefore there is also no hell, no place of torment. The wicked are forever annihilated!

The annihilation theory also teaches that there is *no existence* of the righteous after death and therefore there is also no in-between state. At the resurrection a complete new body and new spirit (or soul) is created only for the righteous!

- **Loose or gain immortality theory.**

Some people teach that God created all people *immortal*, but man could loose immortality by disobedience. At the fall into sin, God deprived man of his immortality. God endows the repentant person again with immortality, but destroys the unrepentant sinner.

Other people teach that God created all people *mortal*, but man could gain immortality by obedience. After the fall into sin, man remains mortal. God endows the repentant person with immortality, but destroys the unrepentant sinner.

- **The destruction theory.**

They interpret his *destruction* as destruction either of his consciousness or of his total existence. According to some, the wicked are destroyed after a limited time of conscious suffering for their sins. According to others, the wicked are destroyed immediately after death.

They base their theory on the fact that only God is immortal; that eternal life is *given* to believers; and that unbelievers will be *destroyed*, which they interpret as *reduced to non-existence*.

2. Biblical arguments against the annihilation theory.

- **God is eternally immortal, but Christians receive immortality.**

God possesses immortality. According to 1 Timothy 6:16, God “alone is immortal”, that is, *possesses from eternity immortality or deathlessness*. God cannot die!

God created man immortal. The first people, Adam and Eve, were not created *mortal*. They were created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), and this perfect condition seems to exclude decomposition and mortality. At creation, God had set eternity in the hearts of man (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Both *their bodies and their spirits (or souls)* were created immortal. It was God’s purpose that people live forever in his presence! Before their fall into sin, Adam and Eve did not die and decompose. However, they did not possess immortality in the sense that they could not die. God created man immortal, but with the possibility to become mortal. God posed a condition for maintaining immortality. If they disobeyed God, they would lose their immortality and die (Genesis 2:15-17). Genesis 3 relates how they actually fell victim to death.

At the resurrection of the dead, Christians will receive immortality (they will be transformed into the state of immortality). At the resurrection, the perishable body will be raised *imperishable* (1 Corinthians 15:42,50). This means that at the resurrection, Christians will *receive immortality*, that is, endless existence of a perfect life, in everlasting blessedness and in the presence of God. Then Christians cannot die and will not die anymore! In the Bible, only Christians are called *immortal*. They have received eternal life in Christ and are destined to glorify God forever in spirit (or soul) and body.

- **The spirit (or soul) certainly survives death.**

God said to Moses, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” (Exodus 3:6) Jesus said, “God is not the God of the dead but of the living” (Matthew 22:32). When Abraham, Isaac and Jacob died, they did *not go out of existence*. Although their bodies are still in the grave and destined to be resurrected, their spirits (or souls) souls definitely exist and are alive! God is the God, not of non-existent spirits (or souls), but of existing and living spirits (or souls)(cf. Revelation 20:4)! Thus, at death, the spirit (or soul) of man does not go out of existence, but survives death and continues to exist.

- **The body will certainly share in the future existence.**

According to Genesis 3:19, at death, the body decays to *dust* (Acts 2:29-31). But dust is not the same as non-existence! John 5:28-29, Acts 24:15 and Revelation 20:12-15 teach clearly that at the second coming of Christ, *the bodies* of people that have turned to dust (the elements of the earth) will *not be recreated, but will be resurrected!* 2 Corinthians 5:1-4 teaches that the dead bodies of Christians will “be over-clothed” with their resurrected bodies. Their mortal bodies will be swallowed up by their immortal bodies!¹¹

1 Corinthians 15:35-42 and Philippians 3:21 limit their teaching about the resurrection to Christians and teach that *whatever belonged to the former physical bodies of Christians* would be transformed so that their resurrected bodies would be like Christ’s glorious body! The resurrection is therefore not a creation of a completely new body, but *a glorious transformation of their original mortal bodies!*

There is nothing in the Bible that suggests that the unbelievers would be resurrected more than a thousand years after the resurrection of the believers! All people will be resurrected at the same time at the second coming of Christ (John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15; Revelation 20:13-14).

- **Immortality or continued existence is not the same as eternal life.**

Eternal life is indeed a gift from God, which is given only to the righteous, that is, to those people who believe in Jesus Christ. But when the wicked do not receive eternal life, it does not mean that they will not continue to exist. According to John 5:28-29 and Acts 24:15, the bodies of both the Christians and the non-Christians will be resurrected. And according to Matthew 25:46, only the Christians will receive *eternal life*, but the non-Christians will receive *eternal punishment*. The Bible clearly teaches that nobody goes out of existence! Both the righteous and the wicked will exist eternally. The righteous will enjoy *eternal* life. The wicked will suffer *eternal* punishment.

¹¹ Greek: και γαρ οι οντες εν τω σικηνει στεναζομεν βαρουμενοι, εφ ω ου θελομεν εκδυσασθαι αλλ. επενδυσασθαι, ινα καταποθη το θνητονυπο της ζωης.

- **Destruction is not the same as annihilation or going out of existence.**

The words *death*, *destruction* and *perish* in connection with man in the Bible do not mean *going out of existence*. According to 1 Corinthians 5:5, the word *destruction* cannot mean *annihilation*, but means *punishment*. It says, “Hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be *destroyed* and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.” The Church delivers a sinner to Satan for the destruction of his sinful nature by for example terrible sicknesses or suffering, in the hope that his spirit (or soul) might be preserved on the day of judgement. Satan can inflict severe damage or punishment only due to man’s sinful nature. But only Christ can annihilate man’s sinful nature by his work of salvation!

According to 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9, *destruction* at the final judgement is exactly the opposite of going out of existence. There the wicked are *punished with an everlasting destruction* or *everlasting punishment*, which is *an everlasting existence away from the presence of the Lord* and from the majestic glory of his power. The vengeance or punishment, which God will inflict (vs. 8), is a banishment from experiencing God’s love, mercy and care, and an expulsion from beholding and marvelling the glorious majesty of Jesus Christ. According to Revelation 20:10 and Revelation 21:8, *the second death* means being thrown into the place where the wicked are being *tormented* with burning sulphur day and night for ever and ever.

F. THE SECOND CHANCE THEORY

1. The second chance theory.

- **The second chance theory teaches that salvation through Christ is still possible after the death of man.**

People who believe this theory say that all the people, who never had a chance to hear the gospel or never properly considered the claims of Christ or who died in infancy, will get a second chance to believe in Jesus Christ after death. They say that no one will be condemned to hell without a proper chance to hear the gospel and believe. Therefore, they conclude that the eternal state of man is not irrevocably fixed between his physical death and the final judgement day.

- **They base their second chance theory on a humanistic understanding of God’s love and justice.**

They refer to verses like John 3:18,36, which according to them teach that only *a deliberate unbelief* is the ground of condemnation.

They refer to 1 Peter 3:19 and 1 Peter 4:6, which according to them, say that Christ in the period between his death and resurrection *preached the gospel to the spirits in prison* (Hades or the underworld), thus giving all people who lived before Christ also a chance to be saved. They interpret “Jesus’ descent to the depths of the earth” (Ephesians 4:9) in the same way. Without taking into account that Christ’s ascension into heaven took place after this descent and that Christ is thus no longer “in the depths of the earth” to preach the gospel to those in the underworld, they conclude that all people who have rejected Christ on earth would get a second chance to accept Christ after death! They completely ignore that Christ’s descent and ascent are unique events in the history of salvation.

They also base their theory on passages like 2 Corinthians 5:10 and Revelation 20:11-15, which according to them say that the destinies of people will be determined *only* at the final judgement and not before.

2. Biblical arguments against the second chance theory.

- **The eternal destinies of people are determined by their faith and life of faith while they are still on earth!**

Things done in the flesh, that is, by their lives while they were still in their bodies on earth, determine the eternal destiny of people. John 3:18-21,36 teach that the eternal destinies of people depend on their personal relationship to Jesus Christ while they are still here on earth! The teaching in John 3 is in the context of Jesus coming into the world and what people do with him here in the present world. Jesus teaches that whoever does not believe in him, stands condemned already! He teaches that whoever rejects him will not see life, because God’s wrath remains on him! Things that occur in the intermediate stage between death and resurrection never determine the destiny of people.

The eternal destinies of people depend on how they have lived here on earth. In Matthew 7:22-23, Matthew 10:32-33 and Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus teaches clearly that doing God’s will on earth, acknowledging Jesus before people on earth and doing deeds of kindness to Christ’s brothers on earth determine the eternal destiny of people! Of course, people are saved, not by their good deeds, but by doing the will of God. The will of God is that they believe in Jesus Christ as their only Saviour and Lord (John 6:29). And their deeds will prove if their faith is genuine or not (James 2:14-22). At the second coming of Jesus Christ his commendation and reward or condemnation and punishment will depend on what people have done with the abilities and opportunities that God had entrusted to each one of them here on earth (Matthew 25:21,30; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 20:11-15). At the final judgement, people will not get a second chance to believe in Jesus Christ, but their eternal destinies will be publicly announced! The eternal destinies of people are determined by their faith and the life of faith they lived while they were still on earth!

The Bible teaches that people, who have not heard the gospel and consequently have not deliberately rejected Christ, will be judged according to the knowledge they possessed and according to their works on earth.

- All people have knowledge that God exists and is powerful (Romans 1:19-20; Psalm 19:1-6).
- All people have knowledge of God's moral laws (Romans 2:14-15; Psalm 19:7-14).
- No one is completely ignorant. No one can say that he did not know. God will hold everyone accountable (Romans 3:19-20).
- As there are degrees of rewards for believers (1 Corinthians 3:12-15), there will be degrees of punishment for unbelievers (Luke 12:47-48). Those who did not know the exact will of God, will be punished with a few blows, but those who knew the will of God, will be punished with many blows. The God of the Bible is perfectly righteous and fair in his judgement!
- Just as God demands that our mercy must triumph over our judgement (James 2:13), so his mercy will triumph over his judgement. God will be absolutely righteous and merciful as his perfect divine nature demands.

Study "God's judgement" in Delta PLUS course study 3.

▪ **The state of unbelievers after death is already a fixed state.**

Jesus teaches that God punishes the unrighteous immediately after death (Luke 16:19-23). The apostle Peter teaches that God holds the unrighteous for the day of judgement, while continuing their punishment. The unrighteous are held fast or preserved for a definite purpose and for a definite time. After their physical death, their punishment continues and they suffer until the final judgement day (2 Peter 2:9).

After the final judgement day their suffering only becomes worse. Then they will suffer the added shame of God pronouncing their punishment in the presence of all the people who ever lived. They will suffer the agonies of hell not only in their spirit (or soul), but also in their body (Matthew 10:28; Matthew 25:41,46)! They will suffer the agonies of the withdrawal of God's ever-present reality from them forever (2 Thessalonians 1:8-10). The blackest darkness "is continually being reserved forever" for the unrighteous people (Jude 7-13).

▪ **The second chance theory is often an excuse not to proclaim the gospel.**

The second chance theory robs evangelism of its urgency! The gospel must be proclaimed now so that people may believe or not believe (Mark 16:15-16). The gospel will be proclaimed in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations before the second coming (Matthew 24:14)!

▪ **The gospel will definitely not be preached to people after they have died physically!**

The two passages, 1 Peter 3:18-22 and 1 Peter 4:1-6, do not deal with the same subject and may therefore not be used together to construct a second chance theory. Neither of these two passages deal with the subject of preaching the gospel to people after they have died.

Because these passages are often misused, we will explain them in detail.

3. Against the second chance theory based on a particular interpretation of 1 Peter 3:18-22 and 1 Peter 4:1-6.

▪ **Preaching to people in Hades.**

According to the second chance theory, 1 Peter 3:18-22 says that *between his death and resurrection*, the spirit (or soul) of Jesus Christ *descended* into prison, which is viewed as Hades. These people wrongly believe that Ephesians 4:9 teaches the same thing. These people interpret "Hades" as the underworld, the abode of the spirits of people who lived *before* the coming of Jesus. These people forget to connect the *descent* of Jesus with his *ascent* immediately thereafter.

▪ **Preaching the gospel.**

According to the second chance theory, 1 Peter 4:6 says that Jesus preached the gospel to the spirits of people in Hades *after they have died* in order to give them a second chance to be saved.

▪ **The correct interpretation.**

1 Peter 3:18-22 does not speak of Christ's *descent* into the underworld to preach the gospel, but speaks of Christ's triumphant *ascent* to heaven. It does not speak about the preaching of the gospel, but of the proclamation of his victory. It does not speak about the spirits of people who died after the first coming of Jesus Christ, but about the spirits of people who died in the days of Noah.

1 Peter 4:1-6 does not speak of preaching the gospel *to dead people* at any time, but speaks of having preached the gospel *to people when they were still alive on earth, but in the mean time have died*. It is not speaking about preaching the gospel to non-Christians or unbelievers, but to people that have become Christians. They would not need a second chance!

The second chance theory is unbiblical!

4. The correct interpretation of 1 Peter 3:18-22.

The great event described in 1 Peter 3:18-22 is Christ's triumphant ascension to heaven, which itself is the triumphant proclamation of victory over everything in the universe!

Note how the apostles Paul and Peter use the triumphant entry of a Roman general into Rome after one of his victories in their description of the triumphant entry of Jesus Christ into heaven!

- 2 Corinthians 2:14. "But thanks be to God, who always leads us (Christians) in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him." Christians through the ages are as it were in the train of the triumphal procession which was headed by of Jesus Christ at his ascension into heaven!
- Ephesians 4:8,10 (an application of Psalm 68:18). "When he (Christ) ascended on high, he led captives (the Christians he conquered through his completed work of salvation) in his train (chained as it were to his chariot) and gave gifts (salvation and the services of those who proclaim it, such as apostles, etc. in verse 11) to men (to these Christians) and ascended higher than all the heavens in order to fill the universe (with these gifts)".
- Colossians 2:15. "And having disarmed (stripped them of their power) the powers (principalities) and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them (publicly exposed the conquered enemies to disgrace), triumphing over them by the cross."
- 1 Peter 3:19. "through whom (i.e. the Spirit) he (Christ) also went (up triumphantly into heaven, verse 22) and preached (or made a proclamation) to the spirits in prison, who disobeyed long ago ..."

▪ 1 Peter 3:18 speaks of Christ's death and resurrection – his work of atonement and reconciliation.

When Jesus died, only his human nature died. He was "*put to death in the flesh*" means that he was put to death while he still possessed his weakened human body, burdened with the sins of mankind (Romans 1:3). By his death, Jesus laid aside his weak human nature and severed every connection with sin and death. At his death, Jesus committed *his spirit* into the hands of his heavenly Father (Luke 23:46). Thus, when Jesus died, his body was laid in the grave (tomb) and his spirit was in the presence of God the Father. Nowhere in the Bible do we read that the spirit of Jesus descended into Hades, interpreted either as the underworld or as hell!

When Jesus was resurrected, only his human nature was resurrected. He was "*made alive by the Spirit*" means that his human body was made alive or was resurrected by the Holy Spirit (that is, by his divine nature, cf. John 3:17-18). After his resurrection, his whole body was a glorious and completely Holy Spirit controlled body (Romans 1:4; Colossians 2:9)! From that moment onwards Jesus, as to his human nature, would no longer live in the weakness of the human flesh, but in the power of the Holy Spirit. From that moment onwards God's incomparable great power puts Jesus Christ on God's throne above all the powers in the universe (Matthew 28:18; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Ephesians 1:20-23; Philippians 2:9-11; 1 Peter 3:22; Revelation 1:5).

▪ 1 Peter 3:19-20 speaks of Christ's ascension into heaven – his proclamation of complete victory.

- Christ's "going" was a going after his resurrection.

Jesus Christ was resurrected by the power of the Holy Spirit and in this resurrected state by the Holy Spirit he went somewhere and preached something! According to verse 18-19, this "going" of Jesus did not happen before his resurrection, but after his resurrection! Therefore, between his death and resurrection, Jesus did not go somewhere and preach something in his spirit! But after his resurrection, he went somewhere and preached something in his glorious resurrected body!

- Christ's "going" was a going upwards.

According to the context (verse 22), this "going" was not a going down to any place, but a going up to heaven! Therefore, Jesus did not go down to the underworld to the spirits of dead people, but he went up to heaven to the right hand of God!

In John 12:32 the resurrection, ascension and enthronement of Jesus is regarded as one "lifting up" to God.

In Revelation 12:5 it is regarded as one "snatching up" to God.

Likewise, in 1 Peter 3:19-22, the event of his resurrection, ascension and enthronement is regarded as one "going up" to God!

- Christ's "going" was a proclamation of victory.

Verse 19 does not say that Christ's "preaching" was a preaching *of the gospel* at all! The original word simply means proclamation. What were the contents of this proclamation? In the original language, "the going" and "the preaching" of Christ belong together. "By going (Greek participle) he proclaimed (main verb) to the spirits in prison" something.

His triumphant going to heaven (his ascension) itself was the proclamation (the preaching). Christ's triumphant ascension to heaven was his proof and proclamation of his final victory. Verse 19 does not speak of the proclamation of the gospel, but speaks of the proclamation of Christ's triumphant ascension into heaven as his final victory!

- **Christ's "going" was a proclamation directed to all careless and disobedient beings.**

Verses 19-20 say that this proclamation of victory is especially directed "to the spirits in prison, who disobeyed God in the time of Noah while the ark was being built". Who are these spirits in prison who disobeyed God? They are the disembodied spirits (or souls) of the people who perished during the flood and who are kept imprisoned in hell. Genesis 6:5 says that they were an evil generation and 2 Peter 2:5 says that Noah was a preacher of righteousness. While Noah took God on his Word and built the ark, these ungodly people must have ridiculed his preaching and warning concerning the coming judgement of the flood. They not only disbelieved his preaching, but also ignored his building of the ark, which was a visible reminder of their coming destruction. They disobeyed God's warning and defied his patience, probably for a hundred years long (1 Peter 3:20; Genesis 5:32; Genesis 6:3; Genesis 7:6). But when the flood came, Noah's faith was vindicated and that wicked generation's unbelief was condemned (Hebrews 11:6).

According to Matthew 24:37-39, Jesus himself teaches that "the people during the days of Noah" symbolise all the careless and disobedient people in the world! Therefore, the ascension of Jesus Christ to heaven is a proclamation of victory over all the careless, disobedient and unrighteous people, whether they lived before or after the first coming of Jesus Christ. At the same time it is an urgent warning to repent. From other passages in the Bible we know that Christ's death, resurrection, ascension and enthronement is the proclamation of victory over all the evil spiritual powers (Ephesians 1:20-22), like the devil and his demons (John 12:31-32; Revelation 12:5-9; Revelation 20:1,3,7), the evil spirits (fallen angels)(Luke 8:31; Colossians 2:15; 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6; Revelation 9:1) and all evil governments in the world (Psalm 2:8-12)! Christ's ascension to heaven and enthronement in heaven is the proclamation of his total triumph!

- **1 Peter 3: 21-22 speaks of Christ's enthronement in heaven.**

According to 2 Corinthians 2:14 and Ephesians 4:8, when Christ ascended to heaven, he led all Christians as *captives* in his triumphal procession. He captured or *won* them by his love and grace expressed in the gospel. The *triumphal procession* symbolises that Christ had conquered sin and death for his people on the cross and in his triumphant ascension to heaven showed the world the Christians, whom he had subdued by the power of his mercy and grace!

According to Colossians 2:15, also the defeated forces of evil are paraded as *prisoners of war in chains* behind Christ the Victor during his triumphant entry into heaven!

According to 1 Peter 3:21-22, after his resurrection, ascension and enthronement, all good angels and evil spirits, all powers in the universe and all governments on earth are willingly or unwillingly put in submission to Christ! Christ is the King of kings and the Lord of lords (Matthew 28:18; Ephesians 1:20-23; Revelation 17:14). According to 1 Corinthians 15:25 and Philippians 2:10-11, all those who do not submit to Christ's triumph in mercy, must one day submit to his triumph in judgement!

5. The correct interpretation of 1 Peter 4:1-6.

The event referred to in 1 Peter 4:1-6 is the preaching of the gospel by the apostles Paul and Peter to people that lived in the five provinces of Asia Minor (Turkey)(1 Peter 1:1) *when they were still alive, but had already died by the time* Peter wrote his letter. It speaks of preaching the gospel to people while they are still alive in their bodies on earth, so that they might be saved and then live a sanctified life while still alive in their bodies! It speaks of the need to live a spiritual life in the present body in spite of the physical death of the present body in the future. 1 Peter 4:6 says, "For this is the reason the gospel was *once for all* (aorist tense) preached to those who are now dead (literally "the dead"), so that they might *once for all* (aorist tense) be judged according to men in regard to *the body*, but live *continually* (present continuous tense) according to God in regard to *the spirit*".

- **1 Peter 4:6 teaches about the purpose of preaching the gospel to people that are alive on earth.**

The real reason for preaching the gospel to people when they are still alive is either to save them or to judge them!

1 Peter 4:3-5 say that people who continue to live in sin and an immoral life-style will be judged! And 1 Peter 4:1-2,6 say that Christians who live the rest of their lives on earth for God (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:15) will be saved! All people, including Christians, will in the future "be judged according to men in the body" (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:10). This means that *their lowly perishable bodies* are already condemned to die physically one day, as happens to all people on earth (Hebrews 9:27). Christians have to die physically, because their present flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 15:50).

However, all people who respond to the gospel will "live for God according to the spirit". This means that with *their regenerated or new spirit* Christians will live for God, serve and worship God, in spite of the fact that many of them will die in the persecutions or due to sickness and disasters. With their inner beings Christians delight in God's Word and in God's ways (John 4:23-24; Romans 7:22,25). In short, all genuine Christians will live sanctified lives!

The gospel was preached to "the dead". The meaning of this sentence is that the people, who had heard and believed the gospel during their lifetimes, had in the mean time died either due to persecution or to natural death. They were already dead at the time Peter wrote his first letter. The fact that they believed in Christ when they were still alive did not

prevent their physical bodies from dying. But their faith in Jesus Christ saved them from the punishment for sin and from eternal death, and it enabled them to live sanctified lives in the midst of persecution!

▪ **Verse 6 does not and cannot teach the second chance theory.**

1 Peter 4:6 cannot mean that the gospel was preached to the spirits of dead people either in the underworld or in hell, because *they still possessed bodies (and lived on earth) when the gospel was preached to them!* Therefore, the only possible interpretation of verse 6 is that the gospel was preached to these people before they were judged according to men in regard to their bodies, that is, before they died physically! This verse cannot be interpreted to mean that the gospel was preached to people after they had died physically, because these spirits would no longer have bodies that could be condemned to die after the gospel was preached to them! The conclusion is that verse 6 does not teach that the gospel is preached to the spirits of dead people in the underworld or in hell.

▪ **Summary.**

There is no evidence in the Bible that people will get a second chance to hear the gospel and be saved *after* their death! The gospel is preached to people only while they are still alive on earth. Their faith or unbelief while they are still alive on the earth will determine their eternal destiny.

Therefore, “Now is the time of God’s favour, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2)! “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news (Mark 1:15)!”
