

Part A - Salvation, Part B - Judgment, Part C - The Ages to Come

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A-4: "Second Chance" for Unbelievers?

The previous post explained that those who come to Christ get their names written in the Book of Life, which begs the question, what about those who are not written in the Book of Life at the time of their death? Is it necessary for a person to have received Christ in order to enjoy the blessing of entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven? Of course the answer is yes. But this brings up an issue, not yet fully explained: is the opportunity for this Salvation restricted only to the present earthly life, or can it be received in the Afterlife?

Through no fault of their own, we can understand that many souls are not able to experience the blessing of salvation during their earthly lifetimes - that mystical, magical experience whereby a person is "*born again*", feels the touch divine, enters the Kingdom of Heaven. (John 3:3,7)

Not everyone gets to this advanced stage in their spiritual lives. Many people, in spite of the diligent efforts of dedicated Christians, will not have had any genuine opportunity to receive God's gift of salvation in Christ. In such cases, it cannot be said that they have refused Christ. Common sense tells us that God would give such people their opportunity to receive the Savior, who is the Door to eternal life, in the Afterlife. (John 10:9) And this possibility has been suggested in previous posts and will be explored further here.

The apostle Peter, during his first experience witnessing to a Gentile, exclaimed, "*In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.*" (Acts 10:34- 35) And to prove that Cornelius, the Gentile in this historic

encounter, was indeed “accepted”, God poured out the Holy Spirit upon him and his household.

Peter also made this interesting statement: “*it is He (Christ) who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead.*” (Acts 10:42, also 2Timothy 4:1, 1Peter 4:6) How many other sincere people like Cornelius are there in the world today who “*fear God and work righteousness*” but never have the opportunity to come to Christ during their earthly lives?

If Jesus “*was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead,*” then surely that means a person’s journey towards the Light continues after their physical death. The only drawback would be that the stage in the journey where a person actually receives the One who is the “Light of the world” has to get postponed into the Afterlife.

Indeed, such a working of God’s grace would only be consistent with the attributes of fairness and justice that belong to His own nature. Anything otherwise would seem quite unfair and inconsistent with the nature of the Creator, a Being who is supposed to be both loving and omnipotent.

“*For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.*” (Romans 14:9) To be “Lord of the living” is one thing; many an earthly ruler might claim that status. But to be “Lord of the dead” requires a great sacrifice and something only God can do - go into the realm of the dead and come back.

Unfortunately however, the line of thinking in much of mainstream Christianity negates this “Lord of the dead” dimension - by promoting the concept of no hope for evildoers, or even for those who are simply ignorant; this portrays God as a horribly unforgiving character rather than the benign and loving Being that Scripture reveals Him to be: “*the God of love. . . God is love.*” (2Corinthians 13:11, 1John 4:8, and many others)

Christ portrayed for humankind the full reality of the Godhead. (Colossians 2:9) But there are secondary means, less effective, by which a person can perceive the reality of God. As brought out earlier, there is that peculiar passage in John chapter one: “[The Word who is Christ] was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.”

(John 1:9) The Creation also shows evidence of the reality of God: “His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead.” (Romans 1:20) Based on these considerations, we could infer that a person doesn’t have to be officially “Christian” in order to be guided by the Light of Christ since it “gives light to every man”.

This is similar to what Christ said to His disciples that the Holy Spirit “dwells with you and will be in you.” (John 14:17) Before Christ’s conquest over the forces of Darkness, the Holy Spirit could only dwell with men and women. But since the Resurrection, believers have entered into a new intimacy with God through Christ, who has bestowed on them the gift of possession by the Holy Spirit.

God’s presence was somewhat distant in ages past - as the “*true light which gives light to every man*”, or as the Holy Spirit who could dwell with but not in men’s souls, or as the “*Godhead. . . understood by the things that are made*.” But now His presence has come to dwell in the innermost beings of His creations.

There has always been a certain amount of God’s presence working to influence the hearts and minds of human beings. Many people are not Christians officially, due not to any fault of their own. Perhaps they were hemmed in by their cultural background and/or never had opportunity to hear the Gospel message in a form that they could receive or understand. So if those persons manage to use the bit of Light they have to live a godly life, then why shouldn’t they be granted the special privileges that we as Christians may think should belong only to us?

We may call to mind the parable about the landowner who hired laborers for his vineyard at different times - “*early in the morning. . . the third hour. . . the sixth and ninth hour. . . the eleventh hour*” [6 am, 9 am, 12 noon, 3 pm, 5 pm]. In the story all were paid the same wage, regardless of when they started working and in spite of the objections of the early starters.

Not surprisingly, there is every reason to believe that many souls who were unable to come to Christ during their earthly lives, for whatever reasons, will do so in the Afterlife. This is a hot issue nowadays, for it is a

common belief among Christians that this life provides the only opportunity to receive the Salvation of Christ, and there is no “second chance” after death.

Martin Luther proposed this idea about the possibility that people could turn to God after death in a letter written to Hans von Rechenberg in 1522 in which he concluded, “Who could doubt God’s ability to do that?”

And there was Billy Graham’s statement along similar lines, focusing on the universality of God’s people (quoted [here](#) in a previous post).

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Surprising as it may sound, there is every reason to believe that many souls who were unable to come to Christ during their earthly lives, for whatever reasons, will do so in the Afterlife. This is a hot issue nowadays, for it is a common belief among Christians that this life provides the only opportunity to receive the Salvation of Christ, and there is no “second chance” after death.

But we know that God is “*not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance*”. (2Peter 3:9) The words “any” and “all” would include even those whom we might consider despicable and deserving to be sent into the lowest depths of hell. And indeed, we are aware of such people who have “*come to repentance*”. They came to Christ and had a complete turnaround before they left this life. God was more than happy to receive them. They may need some “rehabilitation” afterwards, but at least they have entered the Kingdom; their heart is pointed in the right direction.

Now the logical deduction here is this: if rogues and criminals on this side of the grave can repent and be accepted into the Kingdom upon hearing the Gospel message, why should not the same opportunity be

extended in the Afterlife to those unbelievers, many of them good people who, through no fault of their own, lacked the knowledge and opportunity to find Christ during their earthly lives? Might they not find acceptance when they cross to the Other Side? Could not Christ appear to them in the Afterlife?

Maybe the Lord will say, “Hey man, you were a kind soul during your lifetime. I know you had a hard time understanding who I was because you never heard about Me in your culture. But in spite of that, you did the best you could, so the door is open; if you want to enter My Kingdom, just walk on in.” For many such people it is not a question of a “second chance”; it’s actually their “first chance”.

They would still have to acknowledge, of course, that, in spite of their good lives, they have fallen “*short of the glory of God*”. (Romans 3:23) That certainly won’t be a difficult realization to come to once they arrive into the presence of the Lord Himself.

At any rate these kinds of judgments/estimations are in God’s hands, and we can’t presume to understand everything about how God looks at these matters. But we do know that He “*looks at the heart*” while “*man looks at the outward appearance*”. (1Samuel 16:7) It behooves us then to be open-minded on this question of a “second chance” for the unsaved, or in most cases, it will be a “first chance”.

By taking on human form, God, through Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary, proved His love for the human race and so ushered in a major upgrade in His relationship with the human race. “*No longer do I call you servants. . . but I have called you friends.*” (John 15:15)

And a major upgrade in our personal destinies. “*He Himself likewise shared in the same [our flesh and blood nature], that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.*” (Hebrews 2:14)

Christ pulled the rug out from under Satan’s dominion and his power to cause death and his power to keep the souls of mankind confined to the region of Hades. (More on this subject in the next post.) Christ came to free Hell’s prisoners so that they could enter the door of salvation and

pursue lives of freedom, abundance, vitality, joy, and love. Or they could continue to go in the other direction too if that's what they wanted.

Another controversial theological question may come to mind. We can understand that, after their death, Christ would welcome those who were good people but had not had opportunity to receive Him during their earthly lives. But what about the not-so-good people? Do their chances for redemption end once they pass through the gates of physical death, or is there opportunity for rehabilitation and redemption in the Afterlife? From a common sense point of view, it would hardly seem consistent with God's nature that he would never forgive and restore the repentant sinner, even in the Afterlife.

And just as our jails and prisons are supposed to be "correctional" institutions that rehabilitate the wayward and criminal, so it would seem logical that those who land in Hell, or some such place, in the next life, that their destiny might reach beyond just receiving punishment for the wrongdoings of their earthly lives.

Free will surely extends into the realm beyond, and if someone chooses to turn away from a rebellious attitude towards God, then might he not be given the opportunity for reconciliation? Would not his rehabilitation from the rebellious attitudes, beliefs, and deeds that caused him to land in Hell in the first place earn that person a second chance?

Well, it seems logical enough that such might very well be the case. But now the question is, do the Scriptures have anything to say along these lines? It might help to consider first those Scriptures that are often used to deny belief in a "second chance" for sinners, or for the ignorant, in the Afterlife.

***"And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment."* (Hebrews 9:27) True, this is the general plan of what course our lives will take now and in the Hereafter: we die physically, and then afterwards our souls face the day of reckoning when we shall be judged by our works and rewarded accordingly.**

From the context, however, we learn that the writer was not trying to explain whether or not there is salvation in the Afterlife. The Book of

Hebrews was written with the intent of explaining to Jewish people how their religious beliefs were to change with the coming of Christ.

And this particular passage deals with the matter of sacrificial worship, where the Jewish priests had to offer sacrifices year after year for the sins of the people. But when Christ died, that was the ultimate and last sacrifice. “*Not that He should offer Himself often. . . but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.*” (Hebrews 9:25-26)

And then the next verse 27 goes on to illustrate that same idea... by way of analogy, using as an example the death experience of all flesh-and-blood humans: we die only once (“*It is appointed for men to die once*”), and likewise, Christ died once (“*Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many*”). (Hebrews 9:27-28, ESV)

The issue comes in the phrase, “*but after this the judgment.*” The issue comes in the phrase, “*but after this the judgment.*” This is true enough; judgment comes after our physical death. But that statement is not saying that souls have no opportunity in the Afterlife to look at their lives, have a change of heart, and turn to the Lord if they so choose.

To do so then in the Afterlife may be later than what is ideal. That is, it’s better to choose to turn to the Lord during this earthly life. But for some who have been raised in cultural blindness, they will surely deserve an opportunity in the Afterlife to reach for the Light extended to them. Why would God reject any soul who sincerely turns to Him? “*For ‘whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved’.*” (Romans 10:13)

It seems a case of reading something into this phrase of Scripture (“*but after the judgment*”) that’s not really there - taking the either/or approach rather than a both/and approach. That is, there is both God’s judgment and God’s mercy at work in the Afterlife.

That gap between Death and Final Judgment will offer unbelieving souls plenty of opportunity for change, re-orientation, and salvation. It may be their last opportunity, and it might have been better to have come to the Lord sooner (during their earthly lives), but the Scripture cannot be construed into proving that there isn’t any hope for non-believers in the

Afterlife.

Regarding this concept of judgment, in the Greek-Roman world of those days, people were generally ignorant about the true nature of divine judgment. God was thought to be rather “human” - arbitrary, somewhat cruel, and not particularly righteous in His judgments, having little or no concern for what was going on in the world. Many of their gods were characterized in this way, and it was the general line of thinking with many of the Greek philosophers. And in the modern age, as in the pagan belief systems, God is generally thought of in similar terms as having little concern for our world.

Modern concepts about God tend to explain Him in more scientific terms as a distant, impersonal being or mechanistic “force”. The modern emphasis on scientific materialism, with its denial of the supernatural, has shoved God out of having any role in the formation of the natural world, and by extension, in the conduct of our personal lives. And this has led to much unbelief and atheism in our times.

A true concept of “judgment”, however, reveals God, not as absent, arbitrary, or impersonal, but as very present, merciful, just, and passionately concerned with us, His creation.

Our God is not some faraway disinterested being. He is a God who is personal, who has a relationship with His creation. He has made Himself known to us through His Word. He has shown us some of what He's like. He is interested in us as individuals. He has made a way for us to live with Him forever, through salvation. Through belief in Jesus, God the Son, we become God's children, which enables us to touch Him personally, to communicate with Him, to hear His voice, to share our hearts with Him. He communes with us, abides in us, and loves us. We commune with Him, abide in Him, and love Him. We have a personal relationship with the Personal God. How incredibly wonderful! — “[A Personal God](#)” by Peter Amsterdam (March 19, 2015)

So this reality of “judgment” should not be viewed as a fearful thing, for it is nothing less than evidence of God's love and justice. We do not live empty, meaningless lives, for we are written in God's memory, in His

"Book of Life". (Daniel 12:1, Revelation 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12) We needn't get disillusioned because some people seem to be getting away with gross injustice and criminal activity, for they will have to pay for it eventually.

And those who have followed after peace, justice, truth, righteousness, and concern for others will be rewarded. In the end everything will be made right in perfect mercy and justice. Because of this reality of future "judgment", our present lives are enhanced with assurance, purpose, and fulfillment.

You have often wondered why some people who are loving, kind, and unselfish suffer, while others who only look out for themselves, dash the dreams of others to get what they want, and trample others in their charge up the ladder of success appear to have it better. While you cannot always see the outcomes, each person will reap in the next life what they sow in this life. Justice will come in the next life.

Judgment will be meted out to those who were unloving and cruel and caused others to suffer; they will have to suffer the consequences of their evil actions until they learn the error of their ways and repent. But when those who lived right pass on, although they may have suffered or gone without on earth, they will be blessed with greater rewards and joy than they ever imagined.

And besides being rewarded in the next life, I bless the loving and unselfish in this life. I bless them spiritually. I bless them with happiness and contentment, peace of mind, and a clear conscience. Meanwhile, some of the wealthiest people in the world are also some of the saddest, loneliest, and most lost, because money can't satisfy the needs of the spirit.

So pursue the blessings of My Spirit—the love, joy, contentment, and feeling of fulfillment that comes only from knowing that you've done your best to lead a godly life. Only then will you truly appreciate that life is fair.

— *Jesus, speaking in prophecy*

Another Scripture often used against the "second chance" concept is Luke 16:26. "Between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here [Kingdom of Heaven] to you [In Hades or Hell] cannot, nor can those from there pass to us." True, no soul could cross

such a chasm. But who made the “gulf”? God did, and He certainly has the power to cross it if He wants to. And according to the apostle Peter’s testimony, that’s exactly what God (in the person of His Son) did after Christ’s death on the Cross and prior to His Resurrection.

We can imagine what a stir that must have caused – the Son of God Himself down there in Hell, as He “preached to the spirits in prison”. No doubt, many of those spirits who “formerly were disobedient. . . in the days of Noah” were repentant by that time and gladly received the Savior. (1Peter 3:19-20)

Peter goes on to explain, “*For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.*” (1Peter 4:6) Or we might say, “For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that, having been judged according to men in the flesh (referring likely to the curse upon Adam by which “*death spread to all men*” - Romans 5:12), yet they might be given the opportunity for salvation and so live according to God in the spirit.”

This extraordinary event is really only an extension of what Jesus taught during His earthly ministry: “*For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will. . . Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live.*” (John 5:21, 25) Clearly, salvation in the spirit world should not be thought of as an unheard-of reality, as if it were something beyond God’s abilities or desire to offer.

(For more information about these key verses - 1Peter 3:19 and 1Peter 4:6 - see [Appendix](#).)

Christ’s sojourn “*in the heart of the earth*”, when “*He went and preached to the spirits in prison,*” offers compelling evidence of God’s intentions and actual measures taken to rescue the souls of former evildoers who were repentant and worthy of the opportunity to receive His gift of heavenly life. (Matthew 12:40, 1Peter 3:19)

The worst death of the lost is a spiritual death, a spiritual suffering in which their spirits will suffer in the world to come. God's Word says Jesus spent three days and nights in the heart of the earth. [Matthew 12:40] It says that there He preached to the spirits in prison—He gave them the gospel, told them the truth! [1Peter 3:18-19] You say, "I thought once you went to hell, you were there forever?"

If it wasn't possible for anyone in the heart of the earth to be saved, why did He take the trouble to preach to them? But they were people who had evidently never heard the truth, people who had never heard the gospel. So Jesus Himself went there and suffered just as they were suffering while He preached to them, that they might be saved.

So that's what Jesus was doing on the cross when He died for us. He not only died in body but He even suffered the feeling that the sinner has in the death of the spirit. Now what this death of the spirit is, we don't really know. Jesus calls it hell, for some, like fire! It's a terrible, terrible thing, whatever it is—some kind of suffering for your sins.

(from “Death or Dawn” by David Brandt Berg)

Christ's aim, surely, was to offer them a place in the Kingdom of God, just as He had offered it to the people living in Israel during His earthly ministry. He came there to offer release from their “*prison*” - after having been confined there for an age, from the time of the Flood to Christ's first coming.

Christ's experience with the “*spirits in prison*” goes along with and is like an extension of the scene where He, on the cross, mercifully promises a repentant thief (on another cross), “*Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.*” (Luke 23:43) And isn't this consistent with how Jesus conducted Himself during His earthly life: consorting frequently with “sinners”, pointing them in the right direction, showing them the path to restoration and eternal life?

It would seem altogether reasonable then that Jesus, after His death and in the company of the “*spirits in prison*”, would freely offer the same salvation to those who were ready and repentant. He was not going to wait for Judgment Day in some distant future to deliver salvation. “Now

is" the time, He said "*when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God*" and "*today*" is the day when "*you will be with Me in paradise*". So, all that to say, that unbridgeable "*gulf*" between Heaven and Hell is not unbridgeable for the Lord, and there is no reason to think that He will forever keep imprisoned in Hell anyone who is repentant.

And we should recall Christ's message to John in the Book of Revelation: "*I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death.*" (1:18) Again it is confirmed here that Jesus has the power to cross that "*great gulf*" between Heaven and Hell. He possesses the "*keys*" to unlock those prison doors of Death and Hell (*Hades*) and set free those who are worthy.

Related to the question about those who are ignorant of the Christian faith, this intriguing statement may shed some light: "*Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.*" (Luke 12:10, Matthew 12:32)

Without the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus said "*will testify of Me*", people are apt to misunderstand who He is due to ignorance and the Devil's propaganda; and for that they can be forgiven. (John 16:26) In such cases, the natural conclusion would be that their opportunities for salvation don't have to stop at the grave but can continue in the "*age to come*" when it will be easier to understand who the "*Son of Man*" really is.

The above Scripture about the sacredness of the Holy Spirit implies that a person could be following the Spirit without knowing Christ. Since the Holy Spirit cannot be misrepresented because the Spirit does not have a physical presence or reputation in the earthly realm (as Jesus did), then there can be no possibility of misunderstanding when the Spirit speaks to a person's heart.

And if they follow that Spirit of Truth, then certainly, they will be led on the path towards Christ - for, as Jesus said, the Holy Spirit "*will testify of Me*"; they will be blessed and worthy of Salvation somewhere along the line. And, as Jesus pointed out in the above Scripture, mankind is accountable to the Spirit of Truth, just as much as they are to Christ.

And just as those who follow the Holy Spirit are led to Christ, so it can also work in the other direction; those who come to Christ usually get filled soon afterwards with the Holy Spirit. *“I and My Father are one,”* Jesus said. (John 10:30) This unity of the Godhead means that *“the true worshipers”* who *“worship the Father in spirit and truth”* will also come to worship Christ. (John 4:23) And vice-versa: those who worship Christ will also come to worship God the Father. It could be said that the *“Godhead”* offers three avenues by which a person can appreciate the reality of the Creator - via the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Only in the Son, however, can one find salvation. The Son was here on Earth, God in human form, who endured the throes of death, sin, and Hell. He was the sacrifice that reconciled us to God. And by our acceptance of that, our trust in Him, we are pardoned and spared from the misery of an Afterlife separated from the presence of God. *“[The Father] has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man”* and *“given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him.”* (John 5:27, 17:2)

So, regarding Christ’s sojourn in the Dark Kingdom with the *“spirits in prison”*, surely it is safe to assume that He pursued the same policy He had during His earthly ministry - not *“to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”* (John 3:17)

If it isn’t possible for the departed dead to believe and be saved, why did the Son of God Himself preach to them? Why did He preach the gospel to them... if it wasn’t possible for them to repent and be sorry for their sins and to receive forgiveness, salvation, and to be delivered from their imprisonment?

Why did He preach them the gospel? Just as a matter of information so they could be all the more miserable for the rest of eternity in an everlasting spiritual prison?...

([“Heaven, Hell, and In Between”](#) by David Berg)

So why this tendency in Christian teaching to want to deny the possibility of a *“second chance”*, or *“first chance”* mostly, for the souls of the dead? Could it be the same exclusivity, born of religious pride, that made it difficult for the Early Church to accept Gentile believers into the family of God?

Human nature tends toward selfishness and arrogance; we like to think of ourselves as better than others, the chosen few. By thinking this way, we overlook the fact that God's nature is passionately concerned for those who dwell outside His "family".

Another factor too is that human nature tends to want to categorize the mysteries of God into nice black-and-white terms when in reality there is a lot of "grey". Much as we might like to, it is not possible to put God into a man-made box that comfortably fits in with our limited human understanding.

So, rather than the Afterlife being compartmentalized into rigid barriers and divisions, the reality, by comparison, may be somewhat different and more fluid than we may think. Souls in the Afterlife will be engaged in the process of moving towards their Creator and into domains of greater enlightenment and unselfishness (or they may go the other direction if that's what they want).

The boundaries and regions are there, no doubt, but if souls are making the right decisions in the Afterlife, then should they not be rewarded and granted the right to cross "borders" into regions of greater blessing and privilege? The barriers are there, but they don't have to be thought of as totally insurmountable.

Continue to A-5: Death and Hell

Appendix: Further information about 1Peter 3:19 and 1Peter 4:6

"By whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison." (1Peter 3:19)

Regarding this verse, there is some controversy as to whether the "spirits in prison" from pre-Flood times refer to angels or to human spirits. Apparently, according to Genesis 6:4, angels were allowed to enter the earthly environment in pre-Flood days; these are usually considered to have been evil angels who "left their own abode". (Jude 6)

And then, of course, there were the vast multitudes who perished in the

Flood. For a few reasons, this latter group seems more likely to have been the ones to whom Christ was preaching when he spent “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (Matthew 12:40)

First of all, the Greek word for “spirits” - *pneuma* - is not reserved exclusively for angels. In Hebrews 12, for example, we read about “*the Father of spirits*” and “*the spirits of just men made perfect*”. (12:9,23) So it is quite acceptable to understand these “*spirits in prison*” as those of departed human souls.

Secondly, in Jude 6 we learn that the fallen angels are “*reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day.*” But in verse 18 of 1Peter 3 we read that “*Christ also suffered. . . that He might bring us to God*” - which is followed by verse 19 about Christ preaching to the “*spirits in prison*”. The context suggests then that these must be human souls whom Christ was going to “*bring to God*”; as for the fallen angels, their time to come to God, if it happens at all, is a long way off into a very distant future - “*reserved. . . for the judgment of the great day.*”

And it seems common sense: why would not Jesus preach to human “*spirits in prison*” who were less guilty than the fallen angels and were more deserving of the opportunity to hear the Good News and gain salvation if they were repentant?

So many commentaries on this passage, unfortunately, promote a narrow exclusivism, saying that Christ only went there to proclaim victory over “*the spirits in prison, who were formerly disobedient.*” Sounds rather petty and contrary to God’s nature.

“*For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.*” (1Peter 4:6)

And regarding the above verse, commentaries and study Bibles nowadays tend to advance the idea that the “*those who are dead*” phrase in 1Peter 4:6 refers, not to unbelievers who have died, but rather to believers who have died or will have died before Christ’s Second Coming.

There are, however, some weaknesses to this viewpoint. First of all is the fact that by the time the *Book of 1Peter* appeared, believers were not so concerned anymore that those who had died since Christ's departure might miss out on the Resurrection of the saints. (It seems many believers thought Christ's return was imminent.)

Paul had already assured them in an epistle (written in about A.D. 51) that “*we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. . . the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.*” (1Thessalonians 4:15-17)

The Book of 1Peter appeared somewhat later (A.D. 64-65), and by then that issue was no longer a pressing concern, as it had been for the Thessalonian Church. And there is no indication of such a concern elsewhere in the Book of 1Peter.

Secondly, looking at the context, the preceding verse 5 states that the Lord will “*judge the living and the dead*” - which is followed by the additional information in verse 6 that “*for this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead.*” This easily leads us to conclude that, in order to be fair to those who had died before Christ's coming (or without having heard the Gospel), then the Good News had be proclaimed to them also (in the spirit realm).

It wasn't meant for the “*dead in Christ*”. Why do they need to hear it again in the Afterlife if they had already received Christ during their earthly lives? The Good News is meant, not for a select few, but for all mankind, whether living or dead, that they might “*live according to God in the spirit*” if they will receive it.

Much of the above information on 1Peter 4:6 was gleaned from a well-researched essay “[Who are 'The Dead' and When was the Gospel Preached to Them?: The Interpretation of 1 Pet 4.6](#)” by David G. Horrell. In his essay Horrell makes this interesting statement:

And other verses in 1 Peter, which emphasise the impartiality of God's judgment, show optimism about the possibility of the Gentiles' conversion, or reveal a marked reticence about specifying

the fate of those who are currently unbelievers, also add to the picture within which the 'already dead' [those who have died not knowing Christ] interpretation of 4.6 may make sense.

The apostle Peter's words manifest this outgoing concern for unbelievers. By contrast, the Apocryphal (non-Biblical) works of other writers in those days tend to display a narrow exclusivism and contempt for unbelievers. And the same may be said for those Bible interpretations which tend to convey the same type of narrow exclusivism – too much favoritism towards those who are already in Christ and a contempt for those who are not.

Although the Lord has a special love and care for His people, the Scriptures also portray Him as a God who is passionately concerned about those who don't know Him, both in this life and in the next.

[**\[RETURN\]**](#)

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