

Preaching to "Spirits in Prison" – "To the Dead"

1 Peter 3:18-19: "Because Christ also suffered for our sins once, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God being put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; for which he went and preached unto the spirits in prison, that aforetime were disobedient, when the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is eight souls were saved through water."

1 Peter 4:5-6: "Who [former companions in sin] shall give an account to him that is ready to judge the living and the dead. For unto this end was the gospel preached even to the dead, that they might be judged indeed according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit."

Some believe these passages to teach that the lost have the gospel preached to their spirits after death, giving them a second chance at salvation if they are willing to accept it – which at first glance appears plausible. But Hebrews 9:27 seems to leave no room for such, saying that "it is appointed unto man once to die, but after this the judgment" (King James Version). And the apostle Paul's declaration in 2 Corinthians 5:10 is explicitly that "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each may receive [for] the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (New King James Version). Moreover, we know of no other passage that seems to hint of a chance to change status after death. And our Lord's account of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-30) seems definitely to rule out such. So, if we look for an explanation that does not involve contradiction within the scriptures, it will have to be that the preaching under consideration was done to those dead when the above was written but still alive in the flesh at the time said preaching was done – which we believe in not farfetched.

If such was not the case with reference to those who lived during the days of Noah while the ark was being prepared, why did Christ single them out and not preach to others in Hades who had been

disobedient prior to his own death for sins? Would he not have to have done such in order not to be a respecter of persons?

Also, would Christ have had to do the preaching in person in order to fulfill the description of having gone and preached to the antediluvians of Noah's day whose spirits had likely been imprisoned in the Tartarus section of Hades since their death? In Ephesians 2:17-18 it is said that "he came and preached peace to you that were far off, and peace to them that were nigh: for through him we both have access in one spirit unto the Father." His "coming" was not in person but through the Holy Spirit who inspired his apostles to preach of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5). Furthermore, that was before Christ, a member of the Godhead, "became flesh" (John 1:14), so that what he did then he did "in the spirit" (in or by his spirit) and not "in the flesh." And that just about makes all the pieces fall together quite beautifully, doesn't it? -- accounting even for mentioning the disobedient or the days while the ark was in preparation instead of all the disobedient dead prior to the death of Christ.

As for the other "dead" spoken of in 1 Peter 4:6, who had had the "gospel" ("the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth." Romans 1:16) preached to them, there is no good reason for not believing they were also still living when they heard it. And, of course, its acceptance would have prepared them for acceptance by Christ when he judges "the living and the dead" (v. 5) . But it also subjected them to another "judgment" – the condemnation of sinful men, "speaking evil" of them because they did not continue with them in abominable living, as in the case of Peter's readers (vs. 3-4). So Peter could, and did write saying: " To this end [that is, it would result in this, and the Lord knew it would] was the gospel preached even to the dead, that [though] they might be judged [condemned] according to [the standard of] God in the spirit."

In the words of Guy N. Woods' summary of this passage and its context in his commentary on Peter, John and Jude (Gospel Advocate Company 1954): "That which was preached was the 'gospel,' God's power to save (Rom. 1:16); and the preaching

thereof was to 'the dead,' dead and in the spirit land when Peter wrote, but alive in the world when the gospel was preached to them. As a result of having heard this preaching, they obeyed the gospel and became Christians; but they had since died, and were thus dead when the epistle was written. While they lived they too were subject to evil speaking which Peter's readers were then suffering; and they, although judged and condemned by 'men in the flesh' because of their faithfulness and fidelity to the cause. Lived according to God in the spirit, i.e., in the higher and nobler life of the spirit."

He added: "Such we conceive to be the meaning of what is doubtless one of the most controversial and difficult passages in the Bible." And, if such is not its meaning, I confess to being at a loss to present a more likely one.