

No Probation after Death

Ellet J. Waggoner

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A friend asks the SIGNS to give an exposition of 1 Pet. 3:18, 19; 4:6. He says that he has met a man who bases his belief in the immortality of the soul, on these two texts, the argument being that the dead spoken of are those that died previous to the promise to Abraham; that before Abraham's time there was no promise of the redeemer, and that to those who lived before that time, Christ went and announced the good news of salvation. The brother is not troubled on his own account, but wishes to know how to present the case to another.

In the first place, a man's opinion is no consequence whatever, unless he can offer some evidence in its support. When the objector says that there was no promise of the Messiah, until the time of Abraham, he must show proof, or else his theory is not worthy of consideration. That the Messiah was promised before our first parents were driven from the Garden of Eden is susceptible of the clearest proof. Thus: —

1. It was the devil himself who tempted Eve. With Gen. 3:13 and 2 Corinthians 11:3, compare Rev. 12:9, which says that the serpent is the devil and Satan, and that it is he that deceives the whole world. There can be no controversy over the statement that it was the devil under the guise of a serpent, who caused our first parents to fall.

2. In the garden God said to the serpent, the devil, "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15). Here is the statement that the seed of the woman should destroy Satan; and when we read (Heb. 2:9, 14) that Jesus died in order that "he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil," we know that Jesus Christ is the "seed" mentioned in Gen. 3:15. So then, notwithstanding what may be said to the contrary, we know that the Messiah was promised before the days of Abraham. More evidence could be given if it were needed.

But, it being true that the promised Messiah was known from the time of the fall, the supposition that Christ, between his crucifixion and his resurrection, went to preach the gospel to those who lived before the time of Abraham, or before the flood, amounts to nothing. There is absolutely no ground for the position that the people before Abraham were not on probation; therefore the only loophole for those who will have it that Christ, after his crucifixion, went and preached to some dead persons, is the more common position that certain ones, especially of the antediluvians, "did not have a fair chance," and that justice required that after death they should have the chance of which they were deprived during their life-time. This is the position taken by Canon Farrar, and by all who, with him, adopt the theory of a probation after death. But this view is unscriptural and wicked, as we shall show.

It is wicked, because it presents God as a tyrant, changeable, and careless of the welfare of his subjects, instead of the God of infinite mercy, love and justice, and with

whom is “no variableness, neither shadow of turning.” Take notice. If it were true that immediately after his crucifixion Christ went and preached to some who had lived before the flood, there could be no other reason for it, than the one usually given, namely, that they had not had “a fair chance,”—opportunity to hear and repent. Then we have presented to us the spectacle of God visiting his terrible wrath, as in the flood, upon men whom he had not given a chance to repent! No earthly tyrant was ever accused of greater cruelty and injustice than this. And then they would have us believe that the unchangeable God, as if to atone for his error, sent his Son to announce a pardon to those who had once been the subjects of his ill-advised wrath! We marvel how any who profess to love and reverence God; can countenance a theory that so degrades his character. It cannot be denied that the picture here presented is the legitimate and only result of the objector’s position on 1 Pet. 3:18-20. This alone is more than enough to stamp that position as erroneous.

That position is also wicked because it is unscriptural. The word of God says: “The dead praise not the Lord, neither any that go down into silence” (Ps. 115:17). Then even supposing that God had unjustly cut off some of the antediluvians, it would have been a hopeless mission for Christ to go to the grave to preach to them, for it would have been an impossibility for them to repent and give glory to God. More than this, allowing that Christ could and did go to the grave to preach to them, it would have been impossible for them to take any action whatever, for the inspired word says, “there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave” (Eccl. 9:10). It would have been impossible for them to hear the message, for, while the living may know many things, “the dead know not anything” (Eccl. 9:5). Of man it is said that “his breath goes forth, he returns to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish” (Ps. 146:4). And the grave is called, a “land of forgetfulness” (Ps. 88:11, 12), “a land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness” (Job 10:22).

Moreover, that position would have it that Christ did not really die, and that is not only unscriptural, but subversive of the whole plan of salvation. “Christ died for the godly” (Rom. 5:6). He was “put to death” in order “He that might bring us to God” (1 Pet. 3:18). If, therefore, the divine Son of God did not die, then there is no salvation for sinners. But Christ did die; “poured out his soul unto death” (Isa. 53:12), and his soul, thus poured out unto death, was as “an offering for sin” (Isa. 53:10), and consequently there is hope for sinners.

Now let us read 1 Pet. 3:18-20, and see just what it does teach. The apostle after the exhortation to meekness under unjust accusation says: —

“For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit; by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.”

Examine this text, and you will find the following simple statements: —

1. Christ, the just one, suffered for the sins of the unjust.
2. He did this that he might bring us to God.
3. He was put to death in the flesh.
4. He was made alive by the Spirit.
5. This Spirit was the same by which he went and preached to the spirits in prison.
6. This preaching was “when the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah.”

It is the Spirit that convinces of sin (John 16:8), and the Spirit was striving with men in the days of Noah. Gen. 6:3. So they did have a “chance,” but it was only while their days continued—in their case one hundred and twenty years. We see, then, that the preaching, spoken of in 1 Pet. 3:18, was done, not by Christ in person, but by the Holy Spirit; not in the Christian era, but before the flood; not to disembodied, conscious spirits confined in some part of Hades, but to living men in the flesh, who were in the bondage of sin. See Rom. 7:14, Gal. 4:3.

But what shall we do with 1 Pet. 4:6? Just believe it. Let us read it, together with the two preceding verses: “Wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you; who shall give account to him that is ready to judge the quick and the dead. For this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.”

This has been done many times in our experience. We have often heard the gospel preached to men that are dead. But they were not dead at the time the gospel was preached to them, and the Bible nowhere says that the gospel was ever preached to men who were dead when the preaching was done. Peter, however, says that it was preached to them that are dead, and that statement effectually shuts off the infidel argument for a second probation, that some men have “never had a chance.” The reason why the gospel was preached to them is that both living and dead must be judged, and God is just. “It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the Judgment” (Heb. 9:27) - not another probation. Before death comes, all have an opportunity to repent, so that if the Judgment finds them void of righteousness, they will be speechless.

This is the simple truth concerning the oft-perverted words of Peter. They are easily understood, and give no warrant whatever for the idea of a life in the grave.