

“The Dead Know Not Anything”

“Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death: ... By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison.”

—I Peter 3:18,19

THE TRUTH OF GOD’S

Word cannot be properly understood and appreciated except by taking into account its entire testimony on a given subject. This is well illustrated by its several statements concerning the condition and whereabouts of Jesus during the interim between his death and his resurrection, in contrast to various theories and traditions which have been proposed by human wisdom.

In an Old Testament prophecy concerning Jesus, quoted by the Apostle Peter, and applied by him to the death and resurrection of the Master, Jesus is said to have been in “hell.” (Ps. 16:10; Acts 2:27-32) A surface reading of our opening text makes it appear that he went somewhere to preach to “spirits in prison,” which seems to corroborate the tradition that hell is a place. Did Jesus, in fact, go to this place called “hell” upon his death?

To answer this, we first must understand the scriptural definition of “hell.” The Bible hell, quite simply, is the condition of death. In the Old and New Testament, *sheol* and *hades* are the respective Hebrew and Greek words translated “hell,” and which describe a condition of complete unconsciousness—“the dead know not anything.” (Eccles. 9:5,10) As Jesus died a ransom, or substitute, for father Adam and his race, thus taking the sinner’s place, it therefore was necessary that he go into this condition of death, the Bible hell.—I Tim. 2:5,6; I Pet. 1:18,19

“He made his grave with the wicked,” declared the prophet concerning Jesus. (Isa. 53:9) It is in harmony with this basic fact of Biblical truth that we must seek an understanding of whatever else the sacred Word has to say concerning the whereabouts of Jesus between the time of his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead the third day thereafter. This we must also do independently of the traditions of men.

In order to understand clearly how it was possible for Jesus to preach to “spirits in prison” at a time when other Scriptures show that he was unconscious in death, it is necessary first of all to determine who the “spirits” were to whom he preached. It is this information that Peter gives us in the words following our opening text, “Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah.”—I Pet. 3:20

In his second epistle, Peter furnishes us with even more definite identification of the “spirits,” saying, “If God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment; And

spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly.”—II Pet. 2:4,5

From the foregoing quotation it will be seen that the “spirits” to whom Jesus preached were a certain group of angels who had been disobedient to God at the time of the flood. The Apostle Jude also mentions these same beings, similarly referring to them as angels, and describing their special sin as being that they “kept not their first estate.” Jude also explains, even as Peter does, that these angels are now imprisoned in “chains of darkness,” waiting for the “judgment of the great day.”—Jude 6

These “spirits in prison,” then, are not the “spirits” or “apparitions” of human beings who have died, but are spirit creatures of an angelic nature of existence. This is an important truth ever to keep in mind with regard to our subject.

We are well aware that on God’s earthly plane of creation, which is visible and understandable to us, there are various levels of existence, from the lowest form of single-cell life up to man, who in his perfection was the king of this material, earthly domain. The Scriptures show that this same variety in the divine creation extends to a higher realm, far beyond that which is visible to us, and that above man, the highest of God’s earthly creatures, there is a spirit world. In this spirit world, even as in the natural, there are various orders of beings, such as angels, principalities and powers.—Rom. 8:38

Concerning man, the psalmist declares, “Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels.” (Ps. 8:5) When Jesus came to earth to die as man’s

Redeemer, he was “made flesh,” and as a man he died. (John 1:14) However, when resurrected he was highly exalted, “Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come.” (Eph. 1:21) Thus do the Scriptures point out a clear line of demarcation between the earthly and the spirit planes of existence.

The Bible indicates that at the present time there are both holy and unholy angels, although when created all these spirit creatures were in harmony with God and served him in various capacities. Of those angels which remained in harmony with the Creator the apostle says that they are now “ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation.”—Heb. 1:14

A few verses earlier we read, “Of the angels he saith, Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire.” (vs. 7; Ps. 104:4) Concerning the angelic care provided to Christians, Jesus said, “Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.”—Matt. 18:10

EARTHLY AND HEAVENLY “ANGELS”

The student of the Scriptures should not be confused by the fact that in the Bible the term “angel” is sometimes applied to human beings. The word actually denotes a servant, or messenger, and it is always necessary to determine from the context whether or not the passage in which it is used has reference to human messengers or to heavenly, spirit messengers.

On the other hand, many Scriptures clearly indicate that there are spirit creatures called angels. For example, the night that Jesus was born an angel announced his birth to the shepherds. That it was a spirit being who performed this service is evident from the words: "Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." (Luke 2:10-14) Likewise, it was a spirit being that announced to Mary that she was to be the mother of Jesus, and it was a spirit being that ministered to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus referred to heavenly beings when he said that he could ask of his Father and more than twelve legions of angels would be provided to assist and protect him.—Luke 1:26-38; 22:43; Matt 26:53

As we have already seen, however, not all of these angelic creatures remained loyal to Jehovah, their Creator, some of them having been disobedient. These unfaithful ones, by common usage, have come to be designated "fallen angels." The Scriptures previously quoted show that as a punishment for their rebellion they are now held, or imprisoned, in "chains of darkness," awaiting judgment.

WHERE ARE THE "SPIRITS"?

In a text already quoted the Apostle Peter gives us some very important information as to what constitutes the prison-house of these fallen angels. He says concerning the angels who sinned, that God "cast them down to hell."—II Pet. 2:4

The word "hell" in this verse is not a translation of the Greek word *hades*. The term here used by

the apostle is the Greek word *tartaroo*, and this is the only time it appears in the Bible. *Tartaroo* is derived from the word *tartarus*, a term used in Grecian mythology as the name for a dark abyss or prison. In the text under consideration the entire expression, “cast them down to hell,” is used to translate *tartaroo*. Thus, the word evidently refers both to an act and a place. The fall of the angels who sinned was from honor and dignity into dishonor and condemnation. The thought seems to be that God did not spare the angels who sinned, but degraded them to a position of dishonor and restricted their spiritual powers.

These angels in their original state of holiness were mighty and honorable, and evidently possessed great liberties. In their service of God and of his earthly creation they probably were frequent travelers between the earth and other parts of the Creator’s vast universe. Jude says that these angels “kept not their first estate.” This throws light on the words of Genesis 6:2, which reads, “The [angelic] sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose.” In other words, the sin of these angels was, in part, at least, that of materializing as human beings and indulging in an illegitimate relationship with the daughters of men.

At different times during the historical period covered by the Bible, various ones of the holy messengers, or angels, were sent to earth to deliver messages to the prophets and others. On many of these occasions they were permitted to materialize and appear as human beings. An example of this is furnished in the visit of the three angels to

Abraham prior to the birth of Isaac. (Gen. 18) Such materializations were permissible when sanctioned by the Lord, and when the angels taking part in them did not exceed their privileges. However, the angels that sinned before the flood “kept not their first estate”—that is, they preferred to continue their association with mankind as human beings.

Having limited and degraded their own powers by an illicit relationship with the fallen human race, how fitting it was that their punishment should be that of being cast down, or abased, and at the same time restrained in “chains of darkness.” The thought contained in the use of the word “prison,” as found in our opening text, is that of the restraint of liberty. Thus, these “spirits” have indeed been in “prison,” restrained of much of the normal liberty that was theirs while in full fellowship and harmony with the Creator.

Although the physical “place” of incarceration of the fallen angels is of less importance than the status of their relationship with God, there is scriptural evidence to support the thought that their sphere of influence is limited to the earth, and more or less indirect contact with the human family. In the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry, we find frequent mention of his casting out “devils” or “demons.” Later, the apostles were privileged to render a similar service for different ones. While higher critics try to prove that these cases dealt with by Jesus and the apostles were but examples of insanity or nervous disorders, there is altogether too definite a thought of personality attached to these “devils” to permit any such liberal interpretation.

KING SAUL AND THE WITCH OF ENDOR

In the Old Testament also, we find evidence of the limited activities of these fallen angels or “spirits in prison.” There is, for example, the case of King Saul and the witch of Endor. All witchcraft was forbidden by the Mosaic Law, and punishable by death, yet these ancient spirit mediums persisted in their nefarious practices. (Lev. 19:31; 20:27) Just as spirit mediums today claim ability to communicate with the dead, so evidently the witch of Endor made similar professions. When King Saul, because of his disobedience, lost the favor of God and saw that he was in grave danger of being defeated by his enemies, he appealed to the witch to get in touch with Samuel to see if the dead prophet could do anything for him.

The account of this ancient séance is recorded in I Samuel 28:7-20. Many students of the Bible, in reading this story of Saul’s supposed communication with the dead Prophet Samuel, have concluded that it furnishes excellent scriptural proof that the dead are not really dead at all. The claim is made that those who appear to be dead are actually alive somewhere, and that they can be communicated with under certain conditions, especially by the aid of a spirit medium. All down through the ages, Satan has used this method of deceit in an effort to contradict the plain teachings of the Scriptures that the “wages of sin is death.”—Rom. 6:23

As we examine briefly some of the facts concerning Saul’s visit to the witch, it will be noted that according to Saul’s own words, he was no longer in favor with God. During the encounter he said, “God is departed from me, and answereth me no more, neither by prophets, nor by dreams.” (I Sam. 28:15)

While Samuel was alive he was a faithful servant and prophet, and was never willing to go contrary to God's wishes. Yet here we find Saul, who himself knew that God's favor had left him, asking the witch to obtain a message from this faithful prophet.

If we were to suppose that Samuel was alive, and not really dead, residing either in heaven or some other place, would he have been any less obedient to the Lord than he was while here on the earth? Further, are we supposed to believe that this witch, under condemnation by God's law, had the power to thwart the divine will, and not only produce Samuel, but inveigle a message from him to comfort this rebellious king? In both cases, the answer is most assuredly no! This account is given us in the Bible as a record of an important event in Saul's life demonstrating how far he had fallen from faithfulness to God's law, but with no thought of accrediting the witch's claim of having seen and talked with Samuel.

The methods used by the evil spirits through the medium at Endor were similar to those in use today. These fallen angels caused to pass before the witch's mental vision the familiar likeness of the aged prophet, wearing, as was his custom, a long mantle. When she described the mental picture presented by the evil spirits, Saul recognized it at once as a description of Samuel. However, Saul himself saw nothing. He "perceived" from the description that it was Samuel.—vs. 14

Easily convinced, as people under such circumstances usually are, Saul did not stop to question how it could be that Samuel was "seen" by the witch as an old man, if he was now a spirit being and far better off than before. Saul also did not think to

inquire why Samuel wore the same old mantle in the spirit world that he wore when he knew him as an earthly being, nor did he consider that the prophet's mantle had long before decayed in the grave. Saul had been forsaken by the Lord, and now was easily deceived by these lying "spirits," who impersonated the prophet and spoke to Saul in his name through their medium, the witch.

"Why hast thou disquieted me, to bring me up?" she represented the dead prophet as asking. (vs. 15) It was generally understood by the Israelites in the days of King Saul that the dead were actually asleep in *sheol*. Hence the question, "Why hast thou disquieted me?" would not sound strange. However, can we imagine for a moment that this condemned witch had the power to raise the prophet from the dead? Additionally, if Samuel was not really dead at all, but enjoying himself in the spirit world, does it not seem strange that he was declared by the witch to come "up" from earth instead of "down" from heaven?

By means of the power of the evil spirits, the dead Samuel is attributed as saying to Saul, "Tomorrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me: the LORD also shall deliver the host of Israel into the hand of the Philistines." (vs. 19) Imagine the faithful Samuel and the beloved Jonathan together in the spirit world with the wicked King Saul! Certainly, this does not fit with Christian theology. Ultimately, of course, but not the next day, all these were together in death, in *sheol*, the Bible hell. (I Sam. 31:1-6) Still in the death condition, they await the resurrection, when all will be called forth by the Son of Man. It did not require any supernatural

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(Continued from page 31) power on the witch's part to correctly forecast the approaching defeat and death of Saul. In fact, Saul already feared it, hence his appeal to the witch.

Actually, neither Saul nor the witch were in communication with Samuel at all, but with one or more of the "spirits in prison." Indeed, their chief activity since the time of the flood has been to deceive mankind, particularly with respect to the condition of the dead. The mention in the Scriptures of these necromancers, witches, and enchanters leads us to infer that through mediums the fallen angels were seeking fellowship with Israel. Apparently it is also the custom for these mediums to change their manner of manifestation from time to time. In the days of Jesus and the apostles, for example, the operation of these spirits had evidently changed from the witchcraft method to that of obsession and possession.

MODERN WORK OF THE "SPIRITS"

Having been once given the power to materialize as men, yet abusing it, these fallen angels continue to exercise their powers through human agencies, either by the use of mediums or through direct control of the mind, as in obsession. It is evident, however, that the human will must consent to this foreign domination before these evil spirits can take possession. When they do take possession, apparently the will becomes so broken down that there is no longer any power of resistance. Hence the service of Jesus and the apostles in casting out demons and devils was much appreciated by those so possessed in their day.

While these fallen angelic beings may, from time to time, change their method of contacting and

deceiving the human race, their influence is always away from God and away from the truth of his Word. Much ado is made about talking with the dead, yet in all the attempts that have been made, what has been the total result? Indeed, many have been convinced that they have been in touch with their dead friends and relatives, but here it has ended. No worthwhile information has ever been procured through these encounters.

HOW CHRIST PREACHED TO THE SPIRITS IN PRISON

Now that we have identified these “spirits” to whom Peter tells us Jesus preached, the question arises, How was this preaching accomplished? How could Jesus be in *sheol*, or *hades*, where there is no consciousness, yet at the same time be preaching to these fallen angels? The explanation of this apparent difficulty is simple when we examine the passage a little more closely. According to the *King James* translation, the apostle said that Jesus “went and preached to the spirits in prison.” Some Greek scholars, however, suggest that the phrase “went and preached” is used in the sense of accomplishing something, and not in the sense of going to any specific place or location. That view suggests Jesus did not go to a place, but preached by his example.

Dr. Benjamin Wilson, in his *Emphatic Diaglott* translation, renders this passage of Scripture, “He preached to the spirits in prison,” leaving out the two words, “went and,” as being redundant pertaining to a proper understanding of the text. In a footnote to this text he states that other authorities agree with him in this respect. Leaving out, then, these two

words, the full text would read, "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, ... By which also he preached unto the spirits in prison." (I Pet. 3:18,19) Thus rendered, the meaning is that it was by his death and resurrection that Jesus "preached" an object lesson to these fallen angels by his faithfulness to the Heavenly Father and Creator, against whom these spirits had rebelled.

Lucifer was the first of these spirit beings to rebel against God, and he evidently exercised a great deal of influence over those who later joined the ranks of the rebels. In Matthew 25:41 the expression, "the devil and his angels," indicates a close relationship existing between Satan and these other fallen spirit beings. It was the spirit of ambition and pride that led to Lucifer's fall. (Isa. 14:12-14) Apparently the same spirit has pervaded the ranks of these fallen angels. By contrast, Jesus' faithfulness, which led him to humble himself and become obedient unto death, would be a powerful sermon to those "spirits in prison." Furthermore, the power of that sermon would be greatly increased when these spirits noted that Jesus, on account of his faithfulness, was raised from the dead and highly exalted to a place at the right hand of God, while they were degraded and abased because of their disloyalty.

Thus we find, laying aside the unscriptural traditions which have been handed down since Old Testament times, that the various Biblical passages bearing on the condition of the dead, when properly understood, are seen to be in harmony with the great fundamental truths that the "wages of sin is death," and that the "dead know not anything."—Rom. 6:23; Eccles. 9:5 ■