

CHURCH. SUPPLEMENT 2

[LIFE AFTER DEATH] THEORIES ABOUT LIFE AFTER DEATH

(1) The heavenly things.

In John 3:13 Jesus says, “No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man.” *The heavenly things* are especially God’s eternal plan of salvation which Jesus explains in John 3:13-18. Only the Son of God has ever been in the presence of God and knows all the decisions that have been made in heaven. Therefore, God’s plan to save people from every nation in the world and to do that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ lies completely beyond the reach of human knowledge until it has been revealed to people. Only Jesus Christ has descended from heaven and only Jesus Christ has ascended into heaven (Ephesians 4:9-10)¹. Only Jesus Christ knows God’s plan of salvation. Only Jesus Christ reveals God’s plan of salvation to people and carries it out (cf. Matthew 11:25-27; Revelation 5: 1-5)!

(2) The Bible clearly teaches the following truths about life after death.

- The Bible teaches that man is “a living soul” (Hebrew: nefesh chajah) (Genesis 2:7) that consists of a visible body and an invisible spirit.
- The human spirit is immortal and outlives the human body. God has set eternity in the hearts of men” (Ecclesiastes 3:11).
- After death, the spirit of a Christian immediately goes to heaven (Philippians 1:23); is completely aware of others and recognises others (Christ) in heaven and is en has become like the human spirit of Jesus Christ (1 John 3:2). But the spirit of a person that has died cannot make contact with living people on earth (Ecclesiastes 9:5,6,10).
- At the second coming of Christ the body of the Christian will be resurrected from the dead and be like the glorious body of Christ (Philippians 3:21).

(See manual 6, lesson 23 and 5 – The relationship to departed ancestors).

A REFUTATION OF VARIOUS UNBIBLICAL THEORIES CONCERNING WHAT HAPPENS TO MAN AFTER DEATH.

A. THE UNDERWORLD THEORY

1. The underworld theory is not biblical.

The underworld theory teaches that the underworld, called “Sheol” in the Old Testament Hebrew or “Hades” in the New Testament Greek, is the abode of all the dead, whether they are unbelievers or believers. The underworld theory exists in the following two forms:

(1) The first underworld theory (a neutral place).

When both the righteous and the wicked people die, both their bodies and spirits (or souls) descend into *a literal place* under the earth, called Sheol or Hades. This place is somewhere under the earth and has a neutral character. It is a dreary place of shades, a land of forgetfulness, where all the dead are doomed to an existence, which is only a dreamy reflection of life on earth. They view the underworld as a place where there is no moral consciousness, no activity and no joy. They believe that the underworld is neither a place of rewards nor a place of punishment.

This is also the belief of other religions. They believe that people live in the underworld like they live on earth. They believe that the departed dead need money, houses, food, clothes and other earthly luxuries to exist in the underworld, and that these things should be supplied to them by their earthly relatives!

(2) The second underworld theory (a divided place).

The underworld is not a neutral place, but divided into two parts, called *Paradise* for the good people and *Gehenna* for the bad people. Until the final judgement day, the good people enjoy a slight measure of reward in Paradise, while the bad people suffer a slight degree of punishment in Gehenna.

One group believes that Paradise is only for the Jews. Another group believes that Paradise is only for those Jews who observe the Law and that all other Jews and Gentiles will go to Gehenna. These Jews believe that the coming Messiah will deliver all Jews from the underworld, but all the Gentiles (non-Jews) will forever remain in the underworld, the place of darkness.

One group of Christians believes that before the ascension of Christ, all believers went into Paradise, but after his ascension they go into *heaven*.

Both underworld theories are not biblical!

¹ “Near death” experiences in which people claim that they have been in heaven or in hell and then proceed to describe heaven or hell, are therefore lies! Jesus Christ appears in a vision or dream to people. But only Jesus Christ knows what heaven looks like (Matthew 11:27; John 3:13)!

2. The biblical teaching concerning the underworld (Sheol or Hades).

The word “Sheol” or “Hades” does not always have the same meaning in every passage of the Bible. The word describes *three different aspects of death*.

- Figuratively it describes *the state of death*
- Literally it describes the place of death, which could be *the grave* to which the bodies of all the departed people go
- Literally it describes *hell*, the place to which the spirits (or souls) of only the wicked departed people go.

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) The word Sheol or Hades sometimes means the state of death.

Sheol or Hades is the state of disembodied existence or the state of the separation of body and spirit (or soul).

The state of death 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 at death 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; 17:13-14; Psalm 89:48; Hosea 13:14; Acts 2:27,31; and personified in Revelation 6:8; 20:28.

A few passages in the Bible, like Psalm 16:10, 30:3, 49:15 and 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*” (Hebrew: nephesh) 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. It means that an appropriate punishment of a child would save him from an early death (state of being dead) or from destruction in hell.

The state of death is experienced as a gloomy and hopeless 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, 10:19-22, 16:22 and 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”.

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 demarcated (delimited) and in contrast to plants and trees he has but one chance of living on this present earth!

But in the Old Testament there is hope in life beyond the state of death. Then, in Job 14:12-17 Job expresses a wish-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 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 which, however, he immediately drops in Job 14:18-19. In Job 16:19-21 and 19:25-27 this prophetic thought is taken up again. Although Job is mortal, he knows that his Redeemer, God, lives. At the end of world-history, God will stand on the dust (the elements) of this present earth and get involved in what is happening on earth. After Job’s skin has been beaten off, he will see God apart from his flesh, that is, he will see God in his spirit.

This prophetic thought of Job 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 *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 (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 dead body of the righteous will *rest secure, that is, God keeps the elements of his dead body until the day of resurrection*. His (immortal) spirit will *experience fullness of joy in God’s presence* (Psalm 16:9,11; 17:15; 49:15; 73:24-26; Proverbs 14:32; Isaiah 25:8; Daniel 12:2).

Also in the New Testament there is hope in life beyond the state of death. God is not the God of the dead, but of *the living* Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Matthew 22:32)! 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. For example, when their earthly body is destroyed, their spirit has “a building from God, an eternal house in heaven”. When Christians are separated from their bodies (away

from the body), they are *at home with the Lord* (2 Corinthians 5:1,8; cf. Luke 16:22-25; 23:43; Acts 7:59; Ephesians 3:14-15; Philippians 1:21,23; 1 Thessalonians 5:10; Revelation 6:9,11; 14:13).

(2) The word Sheol or Hades sometimes means *hell*.

Sheol or Hades is *the place of eternal punishment*.

Sheol or Hades as the hell. In some passages, the parallel between death and Sheol is depicted as a threat and a warning more than just a state (Proverbs 5:5; 7:27; 9:17-18; 15:24; 23:14). The meaning is thus much closer to *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 (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

Some interpreters try to escape this difficulty by abandoning the idea of a neutral underworld and by assuming an underworld with two divisions: called Paradise, the abode of the righteous, and Gehenna, the abode of the wicked. However, nowhere in the Old Testament is there a trace of such a division. Instead the Old Testament does speak of Sheol as the place of punishment for the wicked. Moreover, the New Testament clearly identifies *Paradise* with *heaven* (Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 12:2,4) and not as a place in the underworld! And the New Testament clearly identifies *Hades* with *hell* (Matthew 11:23-24; Luke 16:23). In Luke 16:23-24, the selfish rich man died, was buried and found himself in Hades, that is, in hell, where he was in torment. In all these cases, only the wicked people go to Sheol or Hades, that is, hell, because the righteous people go to heaven. Therefore, Sheol can never be viewed as an underworld with two divisions as the second underworld theory above suggests!

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; 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; 11:7; 17:8; 20:1-3). Therefore, "Sheol" can never have a neutral character as the first underworld theory above suggests!

(3) The word Sheol or Hades sometimes means *the grave*.

Sheol or Hades is *the grave*, into which all the dead bodies descend.

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; 17:13; 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; 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), this means, that while the body is laid in a tomb, the spirit is with God (Luke 23:46,53).

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.

Conclusion: Dependent on the context, Sheol or Hades may mean:

- *the state of the dead in which body and spirit are separated* before the resurrection of the bodies.
- the state of the body lying separated from its spirit in *the grave*
- the state of human spirit separated from its body in *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).

B. THE PURGATORY THEORY

1. The purgatory theory is not biblical.

The purgatory theory teaches that at death only the spirits (or souls) of Christians who are perfectly pure go to heaven. They are “the saints” mentioned in Matthew 25:46 and Philippians 1:23. The spirits (or souls) of all other Christians first go to “purgatory”, a place of fire, anguish and suffering pain, before they can enter heaven. In purgatory, they have to undergo a process of cleansing from all their pardonable sins, which they have committed on earth. According to the Roman Catholic Church, purgatory is not a place of punishment, but a place of purification and preparation for entering heaven.

The duration in purgatory and the intensity of the purification depends on how many sins still need to be purified. The time in purgatory can be shortened and the intensity of suffering in purgatory can be alleviated:

- by the prayers and the good deeds of the still living Catholics
- especially by the sacrifice of *mass* in the Roman Catholic Church
- The pope has jurisdiction to grant *indulgences*, which can lighten or even terminate the temporal sufferings in purgatory.
- The pope may “canonize” someone, that is, declare someone who has done a lot of good to be “a saint”.

The Roman Catholics base this theory not on the Bible, but on an apocryphal book, 2 Maccabees 12:42-45, which says: 40. Under the clothes of each dead soldier they found idolatrous statuettes ... 42. They pleaded in prayer that this sin may be erased. ... 43. Judas the Maccabee held a collection and sent a huge sum of money to Jerusalem as a sin offering. 44. He did this with a view to the resurrection of the dead. He brought this sin offering on behalf of the dead, so that they may be 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.

(1) At death all Christians immediately go to heaven.

All (born-again) Christians are “saints” (1 Corinthians 1:2). 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”.

(2) 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!

C. THE SOUL-SLEEP THEORY

1. The soul-sleep theory is not biblical.

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

The soul-sleep theory is often combined with “the annihilation theory” and “the second chance theory”. After death, both the body and the 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, be saved and 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, “Our friend, Lazarus, has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up” and 1 Thessalonians 4:13, “do not be ignorant about those who fall asleep”. Both passages speak about “death” as “sleeping”. They base their theory on passages like Psalm 6:5 and Ecclesiastes 9:10, which speak of the dead as being unconscious (ignorant); “there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom”. 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.

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

The Bible only teaches that the dying person falls asleep. The term is derived from the similarity between a dead body and a sleeping person and is used as a euphemistic expression of physical death.

(2) 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 the Triune God and with all other Christians who have died before them.

(3) 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 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 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.

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 that leads to showing mercy to “the brothers of Christ” (other Christians)(Matthew 12:50; Hebrews 2:11-12) (Matthew 25:34-40). The basis for their condemnation is that they have not shown mercy to Christians (Matteüs 25:41-45).

D. THE ANNIHILATION THEORY

1. The annihilation theory is not biblical.

(1) The annihilation theory.²

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 a new body and a new spirit (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 between death and resurrection also no in-between state! At the resurrection a complete new body and new spirit (or soul) is created only for the righteous!

They teach that God created all people mortal, but man could gain immortality by faith, obedience and sanctification. The unrepentant sinner will be destroyed (annihilated).

² Annihilationism (also known as extinctionism or destructionism) is a belief of Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses. At the Last Judgment those not receiving salvation are destined for total destruction, not everlasting torment. They oppose a belief in hell. Those who reject salvation through their free will are eternally destroyed. Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that there can be no punishment after death because the dead cease to exist.

However, the Bible teaches that God created all people immortal and that they lost their immortality when they became disobedient. At the fall into sin, God removed immortality from men. People who turn to God, receive eternal life, but people who do not repent receive eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46), which is something different than annihilation.

(2) The destruction theory.

They interpret the word *destruction* as “annihilation”, a total destruction of consciousness or the whole existence. According to some adherents, the wicked are destroyed after a limited time of conscious suffering for their sins. According to other adherents, 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.

(1) 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 created *immortal*. 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! But Adam and Eve did not possess immortality in the sense that they could not die. 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, Christians will receive immortality. At the resurrection, the perishable body will be raised *imperishable* (1 Corinthians 15:42,50). This means that at the resurrection, man will *receive immortality*. Then Christians cannot die and will not die anymore! Only Christians are called “immortal”, because only they have eternal life and are destined to glorify God forever in spirit (or soul) and body. Christians inherit a never-ending and absolute perfect life, eternally blessed in the presence of God.

(2) The spirit (or soul) certainly survives death.

In Exodus 3:6 God said to Moses, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” According to Jesus, “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)! Thus, at death, the spirit (or soul) of man does not go out of existence, but survives death and continues to exist.

(3) 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* (that have turned to dust) of people will *not be recreated, but will be resurrected from the dust!* The bodies of both the righteous and the wicked will be resurrected from the dead.

There is nothing in the Bible that suggests that righteous people and the wicked people will not be resurrected at the same time! The Bible teaches only one general resurrection of all the dead at the second coming of Christ!

1 Corinthians 15:35-42 and Philippians 3:21 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 for people, but a glorious transformation of their original mortal bodies! In this way people remain recognisable just as the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ (John 20:24-29).

Matthew 25:46 teaches clearly that after the final judgement day, both the righteous and the wicked people will continue to exist forever! Thus, at death, the spirit (or soul) or the body of man does not go out of existence. Also after the resurrection and the final judgement day, the spirit (or soul) or the body of man does not go out of existence!

(4) 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 *simultaneously*. 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* (Matthew 25:46; 2 Thessalonians 1:9).

(5) The word "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 of the flesh cannot mean annihilation. It means "punishment" by "destruction of his body". 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 only inflict severe damage or punishment 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 that these people are banished from experiencing God's love, mercy and care. They are expelled from beholding and marvelling the glorious majesty of Jesus Christ. According to Revelation 20:10 and 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.

E. THE SECOND CHANCE THEORY

1. The second chance theory is not biblical.

(1) The second chance theory teaches that salvation through Christ is still possible after the physical death of man.

Adherents of this theory believe that certain people still have a second chance to come to faith, namely:

- People who never had a chance to hear the gospel
- People who never properly understood or considered the claims of Christ
- People who died as an infant

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.

(2) They base their 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 4:6, which according to them, say that Christ in the period between his death and resurrection *preached to the spirits in prison*, which they view as Hades or the underworld.
- 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*.

2. Biblical arguments against the second chance theory.

(1) The eternal destinies of people are determined by their faith and life of faith while they are still on earth!

The faith and works of a person done in his body while he still on earth determines the eternal destiny of people. Things that occur in the intermediate stage between death and resurrection have no influence on this.

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!

The eternal destinies of people depend on how they have lived here on earth. In Matthew 7:22-23, 10:32-33 and 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 he has 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!

(2) The eternal state (position) 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; 25:41,46)! They will suffer the agonies of the withdrawal of God's ever-present love and care (2 Thessalonians 1:8-10). The blackest darkness "is continually being reserved forever" for the unrighteous people (Jude 7-13).

(3) The second chance theory is often an excuse not to proclaim the gospel. It 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)!

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

(1) 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. Hades is interpreted as being the underworld, the abode of the spirits of people who lived *before* the first coming of Jesus.

(2) 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.

(3) The correct interpretation.
1 Peter 3:18-22 does NOT speak of Christ's *descent* into the underworld, but speaks of Christ's triumphant *ascension* to heaven. It does not speak about the preaching of the gospel, but of the proclamation of his final victory to all disobedient people.

1 Peter 4:1-6 does NOT speak of preaching the gospel to *dead* people, but speaks of having preached the gospel to people when they were still alive.

Therefore, 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. It is his ascension itself which is the proclamation of his triumph over all and everything in the universe!

(1) Verse 18 speaks of Christ's work of atonement and reconciliation through his death and resurrection.

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 and his spirit was in the presence of God the Father. Nowhere in the Bible do we read that the spirit of Jesus went down to 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 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 at God's right hand above all the powers in the universe (Matthew 28:18; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Ephesians 1:20-23; Philippians 2:9-11; Revelation 1:5).

(2) Verse 19-20 speaks of Christ's "going" and his "preaching".

Christ's "going" was not a going before his resurrection, but 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 was not a going between his death and resurrection. It was not a going in the human spirit of Jesus before his resurrection, but a going in his glorified body after the resurrection!

Christ's "going" was not a going downwards, but a *going upwards*. Verse 22 says that Jesus did not go down to the underworld of spirits of dead people, but upwards 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 the resurrection, ascension and enthronement is regarded as “a 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 in heaven!

“The proclamation” of Christ was not a preaching of the gospel, but a proclamation of his triumph. Verse 19 simply speaks of “preaching” (a proclamation). But 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 of people who died before and are imprisoned somewhere. His triumphant going to heaven (after his death and resurrection) was itself “the proclamation” of his final triumph! 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 triumph!

Christ’s “going” was a proclamation directed to all careless and disobedient beings.

Verses 19-20 say that this proclamation of his triumph 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; 6:3; 7:6). But when the flood came, Noah’s faith was vindicated and the unbelief (and disobedience) of the wicked generation 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 a warning to all people 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; 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)! The ascension of Jesus Christ is the proclamation of his total triumph!

(3) Verses 21-22 speak of the resurrection, ascension and enthronement of Jesus Christ.

The victory parade of a Roman general returning to Rome after a victory, in which his captives are following in his train chained to his chariot, is a *symbol* for the triumph of Jesus Christ during his ascension into heaven, in which his captives follow in his train.

According to 2 Corinthians 2:14 and Ephesians 4:8 Jesus Christ brings all Christians in history along in his victory parade. He conquered them by his love and grace that are proclaimed in the gospel. Jesus Christ first descended from heaven to the lowest place on earth (i.e. he took on the weak and mortal human nature) in order to reveal God and make atonement for sins. After that he ascended to the highest place in heaven (i.e. he now possessed the glorified human nature) in order to bring everything to fullness (Philippians 2:6-11; Ephesians 1:10). “This is why it says: ‘When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men’. (What does ‘he ascended’ mean except that he also descended to the lowest earthly regions. He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)” (Ephesians 4:8-10). The triumphant ascension symbolises that Jesus Christ conquered sin and death by his death and resurrection. In his triumphant ascension he displays to all the kingdoms on earth all the Christians he has conquered through the power of his mercy and grace!

According to Colossians 2:15 all the conquered evil powers in history follow Jesus Christ in his train. The victory parade symbolises that Jesus Christ conquered all the powers of darkness by his death and resurrection and displays them to all the kingdoms of the world!

According to 1 Peter 3:21-22 all good angels and all evil spirits in the universe and all governments on earth willingly subject to Jesus Christ! Jesus 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 (John 5:22)!

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 to people 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 preached to those who are now dead (literally “the dead”, people who were alive in the past, but have died in the mean time), so that they might be judged (by dying) according to men in regard to *the body*, but live according to God in regard to *the spirit*”. Their human spirit was already born again (they lived according to God in regard to the spirit), but their human body still had to die (they still had to be judged according to men in regard to the body).

(1) Verse 6 teaches about the purpose of preaching the gospel.

The real reason for preaching the gospel to people is either to save them or to judge them! Verses 3 to 5 say that people, who continue to live in sin and an immoral life-style, will be judged! And verses 1, 2 and 6 say that Christians, who live the rest of their lives on earth for God, will be saved! All people, including Christians, will in the future “be judged according to men in the body”. This means that *their lowly 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. With their inner beings they will 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 in the persecutions or through natural death, and were already dead by the time Peter wrote his first letter. The fact that they believed in Christ when they were still alive did not preserve their physical bodies during the persecutions. But it saved them from the punishment for sin and from eternal death, and it enabled them to live sanctified lives in the midst of persecution!

(2) Verse 6 does not and cannot teach the second chance theory.

Verse 6 cannot mean that the gospel was preached to the spirits of dead people either in the underworld or in hell, because *these spirits did not have physical bodies anymore!* 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, that is, to the spirits of people who had already died, because these spirits would no longer have bodies that could be condemned to die after the gospel was preached to them!

Conclusion. 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)!”
