

"HEAR YE HIM"

A Devotional Series For Radio

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The Sermon: THE SPIRITS IN PRISON

Scripture: I Peter 3:15-20.

Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evil-doers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ. For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing. 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 sometimes 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.

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.

In this sermon we are attempting to suggest some possible answers for some questions which are as old as Christianity itself, but about which the Scriptures say little or nothing except for a few verses in the third and fourth chapters of First Peter. How will God deal with the billions of people who have lived and died without ever hearing the name of Jesus? Are they saved or lost? How can they be saved?

As a basis for this consideration we wish to lay down certain premises upon which all can agree. First, God's power and dominion are universal. There is no place, and there is no time where he is not to be found. His dominion extends to the most distant reaches of space, and to the farthest reaches of time. Out of this premise grow two related conclusions: that God is the God of both the dead and the living, for all live unto him; and that wherever men are, Christ has power to save them.

The second premise which we ask you to accept is that God is just. If he is just, he will not condemn any man for what is not his fault, or for what he cannot help. If men have died without any knowledge of Christ, it is either the fault of God, who "hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation," or else the fault of Christian people who have failed to take Jesus to them. If God is just, then,

there must be some ways and means provided for saving those who have died without Christ and without the law, and giving them an opportunity to accept salvation. Such provision is necessary not only for the heathen nations, but for all the ignorant, the incompetent and insane, and for the good sincere men who have heard but not understood, and who have somehow missed the way through no fault of their own. A just God is not going to condemn any of his beloved creatures to the monstrous, fiendish tortures of a medieval type hell simply because they had no opportunity to know about his Son.

The third premise which we ask you to accept with us is that there is only one means of salvation. There is no other name given under heaven whereby men may be saved, except the name of Jesus. There is no way to obtain salvation save by accepting him as Savior, and exercising faith on him and his name and redemption. Even the dead who died without knowing of him, therefore, must somehow, somewhere be taught to have faith in him and to accept him.

We believe that the atonement and redemption of Jesus are efficacious for infants who die before the age of reason or accountability, for the mentally incompetent, and for all the heathen nations and those who died without the law. But are they to be saved whether they choose to be or not? Does the principle of free

moral will or agency apply only to those who accept Christ in this life? If all who die without an opportunity to hear him and accept him are going to be forced into salvation, whether they accept it or not, then the next logical step is to kill the heathen before even trying to convert them --for then not one will have a chance to reject the message, and none will be lost. No -- reason tells us that if God does not force men to accept salvation during this earth life, then he will not deprive them of agency at any later time.

This reasoning leads us inescapably to the next conclusion. If there is no other name given, and no other means of salvation other than believing on Christ and accepting him as Savior, then there is only one place in which the heathen nations can hear his name preached and accept his salvation. That is in the spirit world. Paul writes in the 10th chapter of Romans: "Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent?"

We are not arguing that there is probation after death for those who have had every opportunity to hear Christ preached in this life, and who have rejected the message even though the Holy Spirit bore witness of it. We are not arguing that rebellious men who reject Christ will get a second chance. We are simply saying that if God is just, all of the one hundred forty-eight and a half billion people who have lived on earth without ever hearing of Christ, must some time, somewhere, somehow have a first chance to make their own choice, to name his name, and to accept him.

We pause to make clear another distinction. Men are either lost, or saved from the second death, on the basis of their acceptance or rejection of Jesus. They are judged, and then rewarded or punished, on the basis of their works done in the flesh. There will be opportunity in the spirit world to accept Jesus, if there was no opportunity before; but no man can go back and change the record of his works; for this no one gets a second chance. There will be just and merciful consideration for those who have sinned in ignorance, but no second chance for those who have rebelliously sinned with full knowledge. Even the ignorant sinner will have no chance to change the

record of his works.

Did Christ preach to the spirits in prison who had not heard of him on earth? Peter says that he did. The ancient traditions of the church say that he did. The ancient creeds say that he descended into hell, or hades, or sheol, the temporary and intermediate abode of the dead and disembodied spirits. Peter, in Acts 2:27, applies to him the verse from Psalm 16:10: "Thou didst not leave my soul in hell." Jesus applied to himself the language of Isaiah 61:1: "He hath annointed me....to proclaim liberty to the captive, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound." Paul, in Ephesians 4:9,10, indicates that Christ both descended into the lower parts of the earth and ascended into heaven, in order that all beings in heaven, earth, and hell might be made subject to him.

Opponents of the theory that Christ preached to the spirits in prison contend that he did not go to hell, but to paradise, because he told the thief on the cross: "Today thou shalt be with me in paradise." This verse presents several difficulties. Luke is the only one who records it. Several ancient manuscripts omit it. Matthew and Mark both contradict it by saying that both of the thieves reviled Jesus. Jesus did not use the word "paradise" on any other occasion. Evidently paradise is not in the heaven where God dwells, for after his resurrection Jesus told Mary: "Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my Father," which he could not have said if he had just returned from his Father's presence. The only explanation that fits is that paradise is one realm in the abode of the dead. This abode in its entirety is variously called hell, sheol, or hades --not a place of punishment, but a preliminary state of peace and rest for the righteous, and of education and correction for those who died ignorant of Christ or his gospel.

In the spirit, while his physical body lay in the tomb, Jesus went and preached to the spirits in prison. He brought out the prisoners who had been held captive by death, who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death. He opened the door of opportunity for those who had not had a chance on earth to receive of his grace or to accept his salvation. He opened the way so that this preaching ministry can continue, giving opportunity for all men who ever lived to have at least one chance to hear the name of Jesus preached, and then to accept or reject him, and on the basis of that choice to be saved or lost.