

A second chance to hear the Gospel ?

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the Mormon Church or the LDS Church, teaches a 'second chance' to hear the 'gospel',¹ and quotes 1 Peter 3:18-20 and 1 Peter 4:6 to support this teaching. Latter-day Saints often ask us, "What happens to those who have never had a chance to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ?" This question is sometimes raised by many non-Christians and Christians. We often hear, "Is it fair for God to send people to hell who have never heard the Gospel?" "Are children who die in infancy saved?" This paper proceeds in 4 parts: (1) What is the Gospel? (2) What is afterlife? (3) What do 1 Peter 3:18-20 and 1 Peter 4:6 teach? (4) Answering the common objections. We use the King James Version, the Bible version preferred by the LDS Church.

1. What is the Gospel?

The LDS Church teaches that the gospel is "God's plan of salvation, made possible through the Atonement of Jesus Christ" and the gospel "includes the eternal truth of the laws, covenants, and ordinances needed for mankind to return to the presence of God" (*Preach My Gospel-A Guide to Missionary Service*, 2004. p.70). (See our article "The Gospel")

By contrast, **the Bible teaches that the gospel is the message of Jesus' death and bodily resurrection for the forgiveness of sins** (1 Corinthians 15:1-4) **and the gospel is the "gospel of the grace of God"** (Acts 20:24). By grace alone, apart from self-righteous works, if we confess our sins, God will forgive all our sins and make us worthy to live in His presence (Ephesians 2:8-10, Titus 3:5-6, 1 John 1:7-9). In Galatians 1:7-9, Apostle Paul warned that anything else called the gospel is "another gospel" and any preacher of another gospel is "accursed".

2. What happens to us after we die?

The LDS Church teaches that after death our spirits will go to the spirit world, which is divided into two; "paradise" and "spirit prison" (*Gospel Principles*, 2009, pp.242-244- an official teaching manual of the Mormon Church). "Paradise" in Mormonism is a temporary place and "the part of the spirit world in which the righteous spirits who have departed from this life await the resurrection" (<http://www.mormonwiki.com/Paradise>). The "spirit prison" is (1) for the spirits of those who have not yet received the Mormon gospel and (2) for the spirits of those who have rejected the Mormon gospel on earth or in the spirit prison (*Gospel Principles*, Chapter 41). Spirits of Latter-day Saints in the spirit world will do a missionary work, preaching the LDS gospel to those who are in the spirit prison. If a spirit accepts the LDS gospel and Latter-day Saints on earth go through all the ordinances for him/her, including baptism, priesthood ordinations for men, endowments and sealings, he or she or she will enter "paradise." (*Doctrine & Covenants Student Manual*, 2001, p.446, 447- an official Mormon Church teaching manual)

The LDS Church also teaches that there are four levels of final destiny. At the Final Judgement people will inherit a place in one of three glorious kingdoms in heaven: the celestial kingdom (the highest kingdom), the terrestrial kingdom (the middle kingdom) and the telestial kingdom (the lowest). After the resurrection most people eventually leave spirit prison and go to the telestial kingdom (*Gospel Principles*, p.244)² and only the sons of perdition³ will go to outer darkness (*Gospel Principles*, p.271-273). (See our article, "Heaven")

By contrast, **the Bible teaches that there are only two final destinies: eternal heaven or eternal hell** (Daniel 12:2, Matthew 25:31-46, 2 Thessalonians 1:5-9). **The Bible teaches that those who die in the Christ of the New Testament immediately go into God's presence and enjoy fellowship with him there** (Luke 23:43, Philippians 1:23, 2 Corinthians 5:8).⁴ **The souls of those who die without the Christ of the New Testament immediately go to a state of eternal punishment (Luke 16:24-26), their bodies will not be raised until the day of final judgement** (John 5:28-29, Acts 24:15).⁵

3. 1 Peter 3:18-20 and 1 Peter 4:6

The LDS Church teaches between his crucifixion and resurrection, Christ went to the righteous in the spirit world and appointed messengers and commissioned them to preach the Mormon gospel to all the spirits of the dead (*Doctrine and Covenants* 138:27-30- D&C is one of four scriptures of the Mormon Church). The Mormon Church quotes 1 Peter 3:18-20 and 1 Peter 4:6 to support the doctrine of the redemption of the dead.

By contrast, **the Bible consistently says that there is no possibility of redemption beyond death** (Hebrews 9:27, Luke 16:19-31, 2 Corinthians 6:2). Hebrews 9:27 says, "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment." John 8:24 says, "I said therefore unto you, that you shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins." What does the Bible teach in 1 Peter 3:18-20?

(a) 1 Peter 3:18-20

¹⁸For 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: ¹⁹By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; ²⁰Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the day of Noah, while the ark was preparing; wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water."

What does "Preached unto the spirits in prison" mean? 1 Peter 3:18-20 is a disputed passage among Christians. Four main interpretations are the following⁶:

- (1) Christ as preincarnate, before the Flood (Genesis 6-8), preached repentance through Noah (2 Peter 2:5) to Noah's contemporaries, but they rejected his message, and are now spirits in prison.
- (2) Christ, between his death and resurrection, "during his descent into hell", proclaimed His victory to Noah's contemporaries in their place of confinement.
- (3) Christ, between his death and resurrection, proclaimed His victory to the fallen angels, often identified with sons of God (Genesis 6:2, 4) in their place of confinement.
- (4) Christ, after the resurrection, at the time of His Ascension to heaven, proclaimed His victory to the fallen angels.

Whichever interpretation is correct, evangelical scholars unanimously agree that these verses do not teach a second chance for salvation after death. Moreover, Peter does not say that Christ preached to the spirits generally but only to the limited group of people who disobeyed during the building of the ark.⁷

(b) 1 Peter 4:5-6

⁴⁵Who shall give account to him that is ready to judge the quick and the dead. ⁶For 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.”

What does “the gospel was preached to the dead” mean? 1 Peter 4:5-6 is another difficult passage. Some people think that the dead means spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1). But, Peter referred to ‘the quick and the dead,’ (“the living and the dead”) in 1 Peter 4:5, which means the dead are physically dead. It is unthinkable that Peter suddenly shifted his reference to spiritually dead in verse 6.⁸ Others think that **the dead are those who are presently physically dead, and the time of preaching was during their life time.**⁹ Verse 6 says, “For this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead.” It was because of the final judgement and the vindication of Christians who have died (“this cause”), the gospel was preached also to them that are dead. Note the tense of the verbs, the gospel was preached (in the past) to those who are dead (presently). The context of Peter’s letter’s theme is to encourage suffering Christians in what they believe (1:6, 2:19-23, 3:13-14, 4:14). In 1 Peter 4:1-5, Peter had been arguing that God will vindicate believers who suffer for Christ and will hold their persecutors accountable on the day of the judgement. If Peter had meant to tell that there is a second chance to hear the gospel, it would not have comforted those who were in the midst of suffering¹⁰.

4 Answering other common objections

(a) Is it fair for God to send people to hell who have never heard the Gospel? This question contains several points.¹¹

(1) Those who have never heard the Gospel are lost people too (Psalm 51:1, Ephesians 2:3, Romans 1:20, 3:22-23).

(2) There is no salvation apart from Christ’s redemptive work (Acts 4:12, John 14:6, 1Timothy 2:5, Hebrews 10:12, 14).

(3) It is just to condemn those who have never received God’s special revelation (Romans 1:20, Acts 14:17). *The Bible teaches no one is completely without opportunity, all have known God, but they have suppressed the truth* (Romans 1:18-25). God has revealed himself to all people plainly in creation and in conscience, but people have rejected that light.¹² Our deepest problem is not lack of knowledge about God but refusal to acknowledge God as God. “God is not obligated to give them any more light since they have suppressed the light they have.” (Norman Geisler)¹³ (Romans 1:18, John 3:19) Heed Jesus’ verdict: *And this is the condemnation, that light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil* (John 3:19).

If anyone truly seeks God through general revelation, God will provide the special revelation sufficient for salvation. God is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him (Hebrews 11:6, See Acts 17:27). Acts 10 tells us a story of a Gentile God-fearer, Cornelius, who truly sought the one true God of Israel. God sent Peter to Cornelius to proclaim the gospel (special revelation). Peter declared, “I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.” (Acts 10:34-35) (See the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40).¹⁴

(4) There will be “a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9).

(b) Are children who die in infancy saved?” We do not know whether or not all children who die in infancy and those mentally defective spend eternity with the Heavenly Father. But we are confident of God’s judgement, as the God who has been revealed in the OT and NT is a merciful and just God who does not do anything which contradicts his nature.

The Bible speaks of the urgency of preaching the Gospel, as death seals our fate (Proverbs 29:1, John 8:24, Hebrews 3:7-13, 9:27, 2 Peter 3:9). Paul says, “Now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2). Alma 34:32-35 in the *Book of Mormon* denies a second chance for salvation. “For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labours. And now, as I said unto you before, as ye have had so many witnesses, therefore, I beseech of you that ye do not procrastinate the day of your repentance until the end; for after this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eternity, behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed.” (Alma 34:32-33). (See Mosiah 2:36-39.)

Conclusion: Many people seem to forget that God is just (Deuteronomy 32:4, Daniel 4:37, 1 John 1:9, Revelation 19:2), while admitting that God is love. God is just as well as loving. His justice demands that he condemns all sinners, but his love compels him to provide salvation for all who by grace will believe (See Romans 10:3, Ephesians 2:8-10). A Bible teacher, Wayne Grudem rightly says, “The idea that there will be a chance to accept Christ after death is based on the assumption that everyone deserves a chance to accept Christ and that eternal punishment comes only to those who consciously decide to reject him. But the idea is not supported by Scripture. We all are sinners by nature and choice, and not one deserves any of God’s grace or deserves any opportunity to hear the gospel of Christ - those come only because of God’s unmerited favor.”¹⁵

1. The *Doctrine & Covenants* 76:73, 88:99 and 137:7-10, 138; 30 - D&C is one of four scriptures of the Mormon Church.

2. The Mormon Church teaches that there will be a second chance for those who have never had the opportunity to accept the (Mormon) gospel in this life and they will have a chance to inherit the highest glory of heaven (the celestial kingdom) (*Doctrine & Covenants* 137:7-10) But those who reject the gospel in this life and then receive it in the spirit world will not go to the celestial kingdom, but go to the terrestrial kingdom (the middle kingdom) (*Doctrine & Covenants* 76:71-74).

3. The sons of perditions are “The followers of Satan who will suffer with him in eternity. Sons of perdition include (1) those who followed Satan and were cast out of heaven for rebellion during premortality, and (2) those who were permitted to be born to this world with physical bodies but then served Satan and turned utterly against God.” (<http://www.lds.org/scriptures/gs/sons-of-perdition>)

4. Elijah was taken by a whirlwind into heaven, not into the underworld (2 Kings 2:11). In Matthew 23:32, Jesus reminded the Sadducees, God said that “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” and then said, “He is not God of the dead, but of the living.” This implies that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were living and having unbroken fellowship with God.

5. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester, GB, IVP, 1994) p.590

6. *The Reformation Study Bible-English Standard version*, (Florida, USA, Ligonier Ministries, 2005) p.1815

7. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester, GB, IVP, 1994) p.824

8. Peter Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1990) p.153

9. Ibid

10. William Wood, *Is there a Second Chance?* (Tokyo, Inotinokotobasya, 2007) p.43

11. Norman Geisler, “Heathen, Salvation of” in the “*Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*” (Grand Rapids, Baker House), 1999) p.305-306

12. Ibid, p.306

13. Ibid

14 Some people may contact the gospel through Christian radio, TV, recordings or gospel literature. God may reveal himself through visions, dreams. We must not limit God’s ability in revealing himself to human agency (Norman Geysler, “Heathen, Salvation of” in the “*Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*”, p.306)

15. Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine* (Leicester, IVP, 1999) p. 355