

Aim of lesson

To make sure that the young people have the basics clear in their own minds, and appreciate that not only is the scriptural teaching about death simple and straightforward, but also that it is compassionate.

Bible background

Genesis 3:19; Psalm 88

Preparation required

Read through the notes familiarising yourself with the references.

Decide how you will share the references between the young people, and what you would expect them to fill in. (The titles in the lesson outlined below should be sufficient for some of them.)

Suggested outline of lesson

Most young people who have been to a Christadelphian Sunday School for some time, especially if they have been attending Sunday evening meetings, will have at least an outline of scriptural teaching on death.

What does the Bible say about death?

Death is a curse. This fundamental teaching affects everything else that we believe. If death is a blessing, and the dead have gone 'to a better place', it is hard to see what the death of Christ means - why did he come to save us from death if it is a blessing? Make sure that the young people understand the significance of this.

Another point worth making relates to evolution. If the human race evolved from some other form of life, then the first humans would have been, like their ancestors, dying creatures from the first. The teaching of scripture, that death is a punishment for sin, could not be true. This is one of the strongest reasons for insisting that mankind must have been a separate creation, made by God with the capacity of living for ever.

In the grave, what state is everyone in?

The point of these passages is to show that death is an unconscious state. Look at some of them - enough to make the point clear. It is worth looking at Psalm 88, and comparing the different names given to the grave. It is poetic language, describing the grave as though it were one place that everyone went to.

It will be useful to compare the AV and NIV translations of Psalm 146:4. The word 'breath' (AV) or 'spirit' (NIV) is a reminder of the creation of man in Genesis 2:7 (the Hebrew word there is different, but the idea is the same). The same Hebrew word (ruach) does occur in Genesis 7:15, 22 and refers to all the creatures that died in the flood.

Who goes to hell?

All people - Psalm 89:48

Joseph (according to Jacob) - Genesis 37:35 (sheol)

Hezekiah - Isaiah 38:10 (sheol)

David - Psalm 16:10 (sheol) and the Lord Jesus - Acts 2:27,31 (hades)

Even God's influence reaches there - Psalms 139:8

Finally, to lay to rest any doubts, these passages show that 'hell' is the place that everyone goes to on death - the grave. It is, in a sense, a place of punishment, but only in the sense that death is the punishment for sin. Even Christ was placed in 'hell' at his death.

Since the words 'sheol' and 'hades' (especially the latter) are in normal English usage, it is worth explaining them here, and clarifying that 'sheol' is the normal Hebrew word for the grave in the Old Testament, and 'hades' its New Testament equivalent. The other common word, 'gehenna' is the subject of the next lesson.

It is possible to be raised from hell?

These passages make clear not only that we can be saved from 'hell' but that it is in God's power to raise us from the dead - the dead are not under the power of 'the devil' in eternal flames.

What do you think?

It is worth discussing the effect of the teaching that the dead have 'gone to be with Jesus'. Apparently comforting, until one considers some of the implications:

- * has the deceased really gone to heaven, or to the other place?
- * are they looking down and watching what we do?
- * if so, are they trying to communicate with us?

What does this mean about spirits and mediums?

Make clear that since the dead are dead, there is no possibility of communicating with them, and therefore that whatever talents 'mediums' have, they do not include the ability to contact dead relatives.

Note that in the Old Testament, such practices were linked with idolatry, and were condemned by God.

Ask the young people if they have seen 'mediums' on television or elsewhere, and discuss what they actually saw.

It is worth discussing the visit of Saul to the witch at Endor. Explanations vary, but the most satisfactory is that the witch was, like modern mediums, a clever psychologist, used to summing up her clients and interpreting small hints taken from their words and appearance. However, in this case, much to her consternation, God did really bring up Samuel from the grave, and the subsequent conversation was a direct one between Saul and the prophet.

Relevance to our lives

Emphasise the simplicity of scripture teaching, but make clear the fact that death is what it seems to be - a curse from which we need to be saved.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, it is not easy to know what to say to people when they have lost a relative and believe that their soul has gone to heaven. Give us wisdom to know what to say, and to remember the mercy of your judgement on mankind. Amen

Other suggestions for activities

Look at Philippians 1:23 and discuss what Paul meant when he said that to die was to be with Christ.