

## **Is Ignorance a Doorway to Heaven?**

What happens to a person who never hears the gospel when they die? Do they go to Heaven? Do they go to Hell? That question is being discussed in our Sunday School classes, pulpits, and in the local coffee shop more often than we may realize. The troubling reality is evident by the wide variety of answers that are given to that question. With an often watered down gospel message preached on the television and radio coupled with a soft message of God's judgment, the result is staggering and may be the cause for so much controversy over this old debate. In order to fully address this question, it is important that we examine several key issues surrounding this debate.

### **What Does The Bible Teach About Sin?**

The Bible is clear about sin. Everyone on planet earth (past, present, and future) has sinned against God (Romans 3:23). Most people who are in a solid Bible preaching church understand that fact which is clearly presented in Scripture and preached from the pulpit. However, what is often missed in the discussion of sin is the justice of God's character. In other words, if God is fully just and righteous, He must punish all sinners for their sin. In fact, in Romans 6:23, Paul explains that the "wages of sin is death." It becomes clear that what man deserves for his sin is the wrath of God in Hell, which is called the "second death" (Revelation 20:11-15). However, many church going evangelicals understand that man deserves the wrath of God, but they fail to understand that God is required to judge all sinners who have sinned against Him.

### **What Does The Bible Teach About Salvation?**

The Bible teaches us about the love of God (John 3:16). In fact, Paul tells us in Romans 5:8 that God knew how wicked we were, but sent His Son to die for us. That is the purposeful act and plan of God being carried out on the cross. That plan was put into place before the foundation of the world (1 Peter 1:20, Revelation 13:8). Much like the subject of sin, many good church going evangelicals believe in the love of God also stated as the "good news" of the gospel. However, many of those same people overlook the clear doctrine of the exclusivity of Christ. In fact, that doctrine, although clearly taught in Holy Scripture, is one of the most divisive doctrines in our present day. Ronald Nash notes, evangelical objections to the exclusivity of the gospel often serves as a "romantic" comfort for those who "could sleep better if there were less urgency or no urgency in getting the gospel to the unevangelized."<sup>1</sup> The exclusivity of Christ is taught in Acts 4:12 and John 14:6. It was Jesus Himself who claimed to be the "way, the truth, and the life." Although many will quote that part of John 14:6, they often leave off the last phrase of the verse that says, "and no man comes to the Father but by me." Is Jesus the only way to Heaven? Is Jesus the only means of justification of sin? Is Jesus the only means of reconciliation to the Father? While Jesus is the only means of justification and reconciliation, He is not

merely the means to an end. The Scripture teaches that God's plan ends with Jesus as the exalted One that every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess as Lord (Philippians 2:5-11)! According to the Bible, Jesus is the absolute single door of salvation, and that very subject is the heart of this growing debate! While the Bible uses such phrases as "whosoever will" and "whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved (Romans 10:13)" - the fact remains - not everyone does! Therefore, those who do not call on the Lord for salvation are not saved. To use the language of Scripture, every person who is not saved by Jesus Christ is lost and currently under the wrath of God awaiting full judgment (Romans 1:18-20).

### **What Does The Bible Teach About Man?**

While the Bible teaches that all people have sinned, it goes beyond that to teach that all of mankind is without excuse. In Romans 1, Paul points out that all people have witnessed God in His marvelous creation and that all of mankind is without excuse! Not only is man a sinner who deserves the wrath of God, but he is also unable to deny that God exists. The creation of God declares that there is a God and that He is eternal. Only the fool tries to deny that (Psalm 14:1)! Furthermore, it's this clear teaching that also demonstrates that man is not truly ignorant. Whatever light man is given in creation, he tries to suppress it and push it away (John 1:9-11). The very law of God has been written on the hearts of mankind (Romans 2:12-16), but it's the wickedness of sin that causes man to reject that light and run away. Therefore, the only searching that takes place in the world is by those people who are searching for a god to worship that fits into their little box. The Bible is explicitly clear that no man on his own searches after God (Romans 3:11).

### **What Does The Bible Teach About Missions?**

The heart of the church is missions. Any church that refuses to engage in missions is hardly a New Testament church by any biblical definition. Christians are missional people by God's design. After being saved by Grace, it is the plan of God to send His people out into the world as witnesses for His name's sake. The people of God have been called by God (Romans 8) and commissioned by God (Matthew 28:18-20). All throughout the history of the church, people have been going out into the world preaching the message of Christ. In Romans 1:16, Paul said that the gospel is the "power of God unto salvation." However, he goes beyond that to say, "to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Gentile)." In other words, even the Gentile can be saved, but the emphasis is upon the gospel. Statistics tell us that 3.8 billion people on planet earth have never heard the gospel of Christ. Many of those people are living in tribes and jungles among unreached people groups. If ignorance of the gospel was the doorway to Heaven, wouldn't our commitment to missions through mission offerings, mission trips, and lifelong missionaries to foreign lands be a lost cause? Could it be possible that our mission endeavors serve as a means of damnation rather than salvation? If a person could go to Heaven through a lack of knowledge, telling them the gospel with the reality that they may reject it would be risking their eternal life. The point is clear - God has sent people on a mission with the message

of the gospel as His means of reaching the unreached. According to the Word of God, all people without Christ are under the wrath of God (Romans 1:18). It's God's plan to send us out on a saving mission to reach the nations with the good news of Jesus Christ.

**Conclusion:**

If the man on the island who has never heard the gospel recognizes the general revelation of God in creation and throws himself down under the mercy of God and calls out for salvation, will he be saved? A better question may be, does this ever occur or has this ever occurred? The fact is, that is a hypothetical situation that does not exist.<sup>2</sup> The individual who never hears the gospel will never desire to repent because it is through the special revelation of God's Word that mankind is given the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and comes to the realization of his own sinfulness. In other words, what Paul asked to his readers remains true today - "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? (Romans 10:14)" Certainly Jim Elliot understood this truth as he devoted his life to reach the unreached Auca Indians in the South American jungle. We can likewise be certain that Lottie Moon understood the urgency of this truth as she gave her life reaching the people of China with the gospel. If ignorance leads to Heaven, why would people be called to such great sacrifices?

Those who are emotionally driven to a conclusion of Grace without Christ in this debate should reconsider based on the Word of God. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that Sodom and Gomorrah never heard the gospel and they all perished under the judgment of God and remain in Hell today. Is that fair? On another note, Nineveh should have received the same judgment, but under the rich mercy of God, they received a warning from a disobedient prophet named Jonah and they repented. Rather than perishing under the judgment of God, they received mercy and forgiveness. Is that fair? Jonah certainly didn't think so. At the end of this debate is the stark reality of our own salvation. We were saved by the rich mercy of our great God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:18-20). That simply isn't fair. That's amazing Grace - how sweet the sound.

Pastor Josh Buice

.....

**What Are Some Popular Opinions On This Subject:**

- 1. If people who never hear the gospel die and go to Hell, that is not fair and God would never do that to anyone.*

**Response:** The Scripture has clearly reveals that all people have sinned against God (Romans 3:23). If everyone received from God what was fair, we would all go to Hell (Romans 6:23). The fact is, Grace is not fair - it's Grace. Judgment and wrath is fair because it is what we all deserve. Furthermore, God is not responsible for our sin. Therefore, He did not merely send undeserving people to Hell. Anyone who goes to Hell deserves it.

2. *If a person never hears the gospel, they are spared from the wrath of God because they never rejected Jesus.*

**Response:** People do not go to Hell on the basis of rejecting Jesus alone, they go to Hell because they are a sinner who has broken the righteous Law of God. It is their transgression against God that requires the wrath of God.

3. *God loves the sinner and hates the sin.*

**Response:** Does God judge sinners or just their sin? The rich man from Luke 16:19-31 was experiencing the wrath of God personally. Jesus experienced the wrath of God for our sins. The Father didn't pour out His wrath on the sin, He poured out His wrath on the Son who became sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). Therefore, we must conclude that God both loves and hates at the same time, but He is committed to judging the sinner.

#### **Sources:**

.....

1. Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994): 163.
2. Russell Moore, [The Man on the Island: Facing the Truth About those who Never Hear the Gospel](#).
3. Carl F. H. Henry, "Is It Fair?" *Through No Fault of Their Own?: The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, ed. William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991): 245-56.
4. Mark Dever, *The Message of the New Testament: Promises Kept*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2005.
5. Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993.
6. William Carey, *An Enquiry*. Dallas: Criswell Publications, 1987 (1792 edition).
7. John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993.
8. John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*. rev. anv. ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008.
9. D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspective In Tension*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002.
10. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.
11. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*. 2d ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998.