

What About Those Who Haven't Heard?



IS GOD UNFAIR?

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“What about those who haven't heard about the Gospel?” is a question regularly asked. Of course, the immediate answer is: “They need to hear! Is God perhaps calling you to take His precious Gospel to them?”

After giving this immediate answer its dues, it is worth pausing to reflect on the depth of emotion behind this question. It is a question worthy of a more earnest answer. Why? Because as sincere as we may be in our concern for the eternal destiny of those who have not had the opportunity to hear the good news; *God is much, much more concerned*. Our compassion for them is the proverbial drop in the ocean compared to the God of love whose heart laments for those lost, “**not willing that any should perish**” (2 Peter 3:9).

The question of those who haven't heard is worthy of a careful answer *because it reflects on God's character*. At the heart of this question is yet another question: “Is God fair?” The standard fundamental answer typically given is: “Those who haven't heard will unfortunately be damned forever”. This simplistic answer certainly contains an element of truth, but it most definitely impinges on the loving, just nature of God because of its simplistic, if not plainly arrogant, tone.

Imagine a child brought up in the jungles of South America; never given the opportunity to accept the good news of Jesus Christ. Imagine for a moment that at the age of sixteen, she slips down a ravine and plunges to her tragic death. She awakes in the next moment before her Creator and Judge. Is she banished to eternal damnation? Surely a dogmatic “yes” answer does bring into question the fairness of the God of love?

This article aims to answer this vital question with an honest search for truth, and a determined quest to avoid a fundamental, clichéd response. In this aim we acknowledge that this article is neither comprehensive nor conclusive, and will no doubt draw its fair share of criticism. Please understand that we are not attempting to take a dogmatic stance on this issue. We first and foremost believe in the justice (fairness) of God as revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

Secondly, we are on a search for His truth, not just our interpretations of truth. Our goal, therefore, is to provoke thought as we seek the heart and ways of God. Before you start throwing stones, consider these telling points...

First, let us acknowledge that although we know God will judge the motives of every human heart (1 Corinthians 4:5); ***we do not know the contents of any individual's heart, nor should we guess.*** God alone is our **“Righteous Judge”** (2 Timothy 4:8) upon whose mercy we all must fall. The Bible repeatedly teaches us to walk in humility, rather than make arrogant, dogmatic assertions where it does not do so itself. Jesus hinted that there will be a few surprises when the Day of Judgment comes (Matthew 7:21-23). This is not a reason for us to doubt our salvation, for assurance is ours as we place our faith in His Word (John 20:30, 31) and enjoy the indwelling witness of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:14-17). But it certainly is reason for us to tread carefully should we assume the place of judge and jury.

Second, let us list the facts that we do know:

(1) God is the Creator and Lover of all people.

As mentioned earlier, God more than anyone, **“desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”** (1 Timothy 2:4). He is the Father of all mankind (Malachi 2:10), and has demonstrated this great love in sending His Son, Jesus Christ (John 3:16).

But before even sending Jesus, Father God has given us all a head start, or more to the point, a “heart start”. Paul makes it clear that God has put in every human heart a moral compass, a **“conscience”**, by which we may know right and wrong (Romans 2:12-16). Yes, this conscience can be seared through persistent wilful rebellion or demonic entanglement (1 Timothy 4:1, 2). ***But God is just, and has given every human being – despite our fallen nature – the resources in their own heart to search for truth.***

A comparative study of the world's religions reveals that they all do agree on some basis for morality. For example, every world religion teaches some version of the Golden Rule: we should not do to others what we would not want done to us. Though Jesus' version was the most progressive in that He made it a positive act of service – **“just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them”** (Luke 6:31) – the fact that every religion reveals some basis for morality, however slim, does indicate that One God has put a moral compass in our hearts. And thus, He enables all of mankind to seek for truth.

A qualification is necessary at this point. Even though all religions do agree on some basis for morality, they all radically differ on their revelation of God and how to answer our obvious immorality as a human race. Only four religions claim to be inspired directly by God – Judaism, Christianity, Mormonism and Islam – the rest, including Buddhism*, claim to be a human attempt to solve mankind's problems.

*Siddhartha Gautama, or otherwise known as Buddha, did not claim to reveal anything about God. As founder of Buddhism, he only taught that one could find release from suffering in *nirvana*, a state of complete happiness and peace achieved through the work of freeing oneself of all desires and worldly things. When Buddhism was integrated into foreign lands such as the Far East, syncretism crept in. Thus, modern Buddhists often profess belief in a god.

Of the four religions that claim to be revealed from God, only in Christianity does God speak for Himself in the Man Jesus Christ, inviting us into relationship based on salvation by grace. The other three – Judaism, Mormonism and Islam – are based on what a prophet or prophets claimed God wanted them to reveal, teaching a religion based on works.

(2) *Heaven will include people, made righteous by God, who never heard the Name of Jesus while they lived on earth.*

Here we refer, of course, to the Old Testament believers; and not just Abraham, Moses and David, but also people like the Canaanite prostitute Rahab (Hebrews 11:8, 23, 31, 32). They never even knew the Name of Jesus, but were redeemed by their acknowledgement of their need for a deliverer, and their faith that God alone could redeem them. In a sense, they put their faith in the Messiah who was to come; even as we put our faith in the Messiah who has come. The writer to the Hebrews makes this abundantly clear (Hebrews 11:39, 40).

The point should be obvious. Their faith in God – and the salvation that they realised only He could provide – brought them redemption, even though they did not know the incarnate Jesus. ***God looked ahead, down the line of time, to Jesus' work on the cross for them and applied His substitutionary death to them.*** Jesus atoning sacrifice, many years after their death, sealed their eternal life with Father God.

(3) *God will reveal Himself to those who genuinely seek Him.*

The Bible reveals above all else the incredible mercy of God to woo fallen mankind back to Himself. ***From the moral compass of conscience placed in every heart*** (Romans 2:12-16), ***through the splendour and beauty of His creation*** (Romans 1:20), ***to the convincing work of the Holy Spirit*** (John 16:8), ***God tugs and draws on the hearts of men and women to seek Him.*** To the pagans at Athens, Paul explained that God has even appointed the very times and places for each person's existence, ***“so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each of us”*** (Acts 17:26, 27).

The Bible is conclusive that ***God is faithful to reveal Himself to anyone who genuinely responds to His wooing and seeks Him*** (see 2 Chronicles 16:9, Jeremiah 29:13, 14 & Hebrews 11:6). Two examples leap out at us from the Scriptures: Many moons ago, a pagan man from the city of Ur was divinely invited into relationship with the Almighty. Without any clear understanding of the true and living God, this man named Abram – born five generations after the tragedy of the Tower of Babel – responded in faith to the wooing of the Lord (Genesis 11:27-32; 12:1ff; Hebrews 11:8-12). We remember him as the father of our faith, but let us not forget that he was simply a pagan of the Chaldeans to whom God was able to reveal Himself. God, whose ***“eyes run to and fro throughout the whole earth,”*** had found a heart ***“loyal to Him,”*** that He might ***“show Himself strong on [his] behalf”*** (2 Chronicles 16:9).

Many centuries later, a pagan Roman centurion named Cornelius, decided to respond to God's wooing and leave behind the empty shell of Roman paganism. Concluding that there was only one true living God, he sought Him with all his heart (Acts 10:1, 2).

God, who **"is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him"** (Hebrews 11:6), rewarded Cornelius' faithfulness first through an angelic visitation (Acts 10:3-6). Then He called on a confused apostle named Peter to shrug off his own prejudices to reveal the Gospel to this Gentile seeker (Acts 10:9-33). Peter marvelled: **"In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him"** (Acts 10:34, 35). Then while Peter was **"still"** preaching the good news of Jesus Christ, **"the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word,"** so excited was the Father to welcome this pagan Cornelius and his family into the new family of the redeemed (Acts 10:44)!

Amazing stories continue this legacy of God's wooing of fallen man*. In one specific case, an entire Muslim village of 400 families went to bed followers of Allah, but awoke the next morning followers of Jesus Christ. Every home reported a midnight visitation of the resurrected Jesus Christ! Let us remind ourselves of the awesome heart and promise of God to all men and women: **"And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you," says the Lord**" (Jeremiah 29:13, 14).

(4) *No person will be saved based on their religion or because they lived a "good life".*

Neither human philosophy nor religious works can redeem the heart of man. ***God is not a respecter of religion; He is a respecter of faith.*** Salvation is only based on our acknowledgement of our own sinfulness and thus our faith placed in God alone to redeem us. **"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast"** (Galatians 2:8, 9).

Although the above paragraph may seem completely basic in Christian doctrine, the implications are not. While a person's religion – whether it is Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism – will not bring redemption, neither will it disqualify one from seeking the Lord. As Abram's Chaldean paganism did not keep him from seeking truth, a Moslem who realises the emptiness of his inherited religion, may embark on a search for saving truth. As Cornelius' Roman heathenism did not halt his response to God's wooing, a Buddhist may **"grope for Him and find Him"**. If a Hindu, rejecting the emptiness of reincarnation and superstition, seeks forgiveness and salvation by faith, and God in some way does for him what He did for Abraham, it is only through Jesus' redeeming sacrifice on the cross.

*We highly recommend Don Richardson's mind-blowing book entitled, "Eternity in their Hearts" in which he documents hundreds of amazing accounts of God's intervening work in the peoples of the earth.

Let us return to the young girl born in the unreached jungles of South America. Perhaps she was raised on the understanding that the sun was god, a religion passed on through successive generations of her tribe. As she journeys to the age of sixteen, before her sad death, she becomes convinced that the sun, which her parents worship, must be a *created* object. She has noted its fixed, preordained path, lacking the spontaneity of a true God. She has noted that it disappears for many hours of a day, apparently eclipsed by darkness. Could the true God really be hidden by darkness?

The created world around her reveals evidence of a God of wonder, spontaneity and great diversity. She longs for the knowledge of the true Creator, the One who designed the sun. She finds herself praying to the One that her own heart convinces her does exist. But nobody can answer her divine frustration. The tribal fathers emphatically chastise her for questioning the sun's deity. Her embarrassed family demand that she put away such childish thoughts from her mind. But she continues to seek the Lord, **"in the hope that [she] might...find Him."** But then... that thoughtless slip ends her life in a tragic, premature death.

When she stands in the next moment before her Creator and Lover – **"the Righteous Judge"** – *and her heart immediately recognizes Him as the One she has sought*, will He damn her to eternal hell for not having heard the Gospel? Or will He embrace her with the words, "My daughter, I am He! I am the One your heart has longed for. I am He whom your heart has sought. Finally, now, the limitations of your earthly existence are removed that you may see Me and know Me".

My heart and even my theologically trained mind know which best represents the God of love based on the above clear points of truth discussed.

Am I suggesting that there is a second chance for everyone after one's death on earth? Definitely not! Am I suggesting that someone who has not heard the Gospel of Jesus, after death, gets a quick sermon and altar call before facing damnation? No – a thousand times no! There is no second chance; there is no purgatory; there is no cycle of reincarnation. **"[It] is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment"** (Hebrews 9:27).

What I am rather suggesting is that *God will righteously judge every person's heart as the ultimate conclusion of their journey to Him, or from Him*. There will definitely not be an opportunity to quickly "change our mind," but our **"conscience...[will bear] witness...accusing or else excusing [us] in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ"** (Romans 2:15, 16).

There remains one vital point to mention.

(5) ***Satan is a master at enslaving mankind, blinding us from responding to the wooing of God.***

The devil “**has blinded**” the minds of men and women “**lest the light of the Gospel...should shine on them**” (2 Corinthians 4:4). In other words, ***people don’t reject Jesus because they don’t want Him; they reject Jesus because they can’t see Him!*** And no strategy of the evil one has been more effective in blinding mankind to the Gospel than the bondage of religion*. In deceiving people from the truth by the false promise of salvation through religious effort – a temptation that so appeals to our fallen nature – satan enslaves them, their children, and their children’s children; making it very difficult for their descendants to begin to seek Him, that they might “see Him”.

When God so graciously reveals His character to Moses in Exodus 34:5-7, one attribute of God’s nature, among others, is revealed: “**keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation**” (v. 7).

The latter part of this verse certainly does not imply that God is a masochist who delights in punishing our children! ***It does however reveal the consequences of sin: the bondage that our wrong choices bring upon us and our children.*** The first part of this verse highlights the desire of God to forgive the sinner, but concludes by revealing the enslaving effect of sin that blinds mankind to His mercy. Again, this verse does not speak of God’s desire to punish the sinner; rather, it reveals the difficulty of God’s mercy being received by those blinded by sin.

For those raised in false religion, the devil has done well to dismantle their God-given moral compass. Satan has blinded their mind to the power of God’s creation as revealing His glory; often in fact, turning the creation into the object of worship. And the evil one has numbed their hearts to the wooing of God’s convicting Holy Spirit. Therefore, because of religion, ***many will not seek Him.*** Religion kills, and the devil delights in its enslaving power.

*The word “religion” refers to “a person’s system of belief,” and thus is a neutral word. In fact, James uses it positively in distinguishing true from false religion (James 1:26, 27). But here we use the word “religion” in its negative connotation, referring to two areas of deception. On the one hand, we refer first to those man-made religions where the ***object*** of a person’s system of belief is either a created being, or a false revelation of the one true God. On the other hand, we include the more subtle deception, the one that the Christian religion is prone to. Even we who profess to believe in Jesus Christ may become ensnared by religion, where we can shift our focus from the One in whom we believe to the ***system of belief itself***. We fall back into attempts to earn God’s favour by our works, or worse yet, we start to use God (and His Word) to achieve our version of the “better life”. [See Romans 8:14-17; 2 Corinthians 3:2-6 & Galatians 3:1-6].

These five thoughts are truths we do know, clearly revealed in the Bible. How we hold together some of the tensions they create may differ from one person to the next...and this is fine. The point is: we must be careful not to make dogmatic, fundamental statements where the Bible itself does not. Doing this is not just unwise, but foments religion of the most horrific kind.

A vital question...

Let us answer the question that should pop up somewhere in every mind through reading this article: “If God justified Old Testament believers – and possibly others who haven’t heard – because of the acknowledgement of their need, and thus their faith placed in Him alone for salvation, why did Jesus have to come and die for mankind?” The simple answer is this: ***God could not promise a Deliverer, and then not deliver on the Promise.*** From as early as Genesis 3:15, God promised the needed Deliverer, and at the God-appointed time, He sent forth His Son – the promised Redeemer – in whom all before Him and after Him will be justified.

The reason Jesus had to come in Person and die for mankind was to ***reveal the full revelation of the Father’s heart.*** For even though Old Testament believers were justified by their faith in God alone, they did not enjoy the abundant life of peace, joy and assurance we can now know in Christ (John 10:10; Romans 14:17). Indeed, our motivation to preach the good news of Jesus Christ lies, in part, in the new life that one can only know on this earth when we surrender to His loving Lordship. Thank God: the blessings of salvation are not just limited to eternal life after we die, but abundant life before we die!

A serious criticism...

This brings up one of the anticipated criticisms of this article: will it not steal from our motivation to evangelize? If God Himself will reveal His heart to those who are truly seeking truth, why bother preaching the Gospel? Our hearts would break if anyone comes to this conclusion based on the contents of this article. As a ministry with an active heart for missions, proactive in church planting, we would never want to throw cold water on the fires of missionary zeal and evangelistic fervour. However, we are convinced that the discussions opened by this article are of critical importance.

First, this article encourages a search for truth, and truth is after all what He is about. Secondly, ***armed with the knowledge that our God is at work in the nations of the world; that He is going ahead of us, actively seeking to reveal Himself to lost people; our missionary zeal is greatly fuelled.*** On the one hand, our intercessory prayer is inflamed to remove the satanic blindfolds that keep people from the truth. On the other hand, we are enthused with the knowledge that we are gloriously invited to co-operate with God in His work of revealing Himself to others.

Even when Paul motivates the need for us to preach the Gospel – “**And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?**” (Romans 10:14) – he concludes by saying, “**So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. *But I say, have they not heard? Yes indeed: Their sound has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world***” (Romans 10:17, 18).

In other words, Paul first motivates the need for evangelism – “**And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?**” But he then encourages us with the inspiration for evangelism: *everyone has already heard* – “**...have they not heard? Yes indeed...**” He then quotes from Psalm 19:4, revealing that through His activity in creation, God is continually at work, wooing mankind to Himself so that His “message” is clear to all mankind, and we – you and I – have the awesome privilege of participating with God in confirming His plan of salvation!

What could be more inspiring, more thrilling?

You or I could be the next Peter led by God to uncover a seeking Cornelius and to pull the trigger of revival!

“Here I am Lord. Send me!”

**This article is part of a series entitled:
That None Should Perish**

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