

"WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD OF CHRIST?"¹

INTRODUCTION:

A question frequently asked is, "What will happen to people of the past who lived and died without ever hearing about Jesus Christ?" A similar question is, "What about those alive today who die without any knowledge of Jesus Christ? What will happen to them in the judgment?" The goal of these notes is to answer such questions. At the very beginning we need to emphasize **a foundational and critically important truth:**

WHATEVER GOD DOES WILL BE FAIR!

Sometimes these types of questions are asked by unbelievers in order to try and change the subject when Christians speak to them about salvation and their eternal destiny. Often, however, the questions are sincere and deserve an answer. One man has said: "Their real question is, 'What is God like?' Many people honestly are not sure they want to give their lives to a God who is so mean and uncaring that He sends people to hell just because they have never heard of Him."ⁱ

To any who are concerned about those who have never heard, I would simply say, "Don't worry! Since God knows everything and is completely righteous, fair, merciful, gracious and cannot make a mistake, we can relax!" **God will do what's right-without question!** Not one person will be in hell who should have been in heaven or who tried to follow the true God. The Bible says, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly (do right-KJV)?"ⁱⁱ The implied answer is "...the God who judges the whole earth will be just and fair to each individual."ⁱⁱⁱ There are judges on this earth who are corrupt and others who make incorrect judgments because they don't know all the facts in a particular case. But The Judge of the universe knows everything, including the secret thoughts of the hearts of all men, and He is absolutely, perfectly fair and righteous. **Romans 2:11** says: "For there is no partiality with God."^{iv}

"WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO INNOCENT PEOPLE?"

Sometimes people ask, "What happens to innocent people who have never heard about Christ?" When they ask that though, they are assuming something. They are assuming there are people on the face of the earth whether in India, Africa or New York City, who *are* innocent. "If the question is asked in this manner the answer is easy and is obvious. The innocent (person) who never hears of Christ is in excellent shape, and we need not be anxious about his redemption. The *innocent* person doesn't need to hear of Christ. He has no need of redemption. God never punishes innocent people. The innocent person needs no Savior; he can save himself by his innocence."^v

The question "What about the innocent who have never heard?" however "...betrays the assumption that there are innocent people in this world. If that is so, then we need not be concerned about them."^{vi} **The problem though,** as anyone who knows their Bible can tell you, is that **no one is innocent!** All who have ever lived are guilty sinners deserving of hell.

However, one may ask "...if the remote [indigenous person] is guilty, wherein lies his guilt? Is he punished for not believing in a Christ of whom he never heard? If God is just [& He is!], that cannot be the case. If God were to punish a person for not responding to a message he had no possibility of hearing, that would be a gross injustice; it would be radically inconsistent with God's own revealed justice. We can rest assured that no one is ever punished for rejecting Christ if they've never heard of Him."^{vii}

¹ By Mike Edwards, Goroka, Papua New Guinea, Feb.,1999, rev. St. Vincent, West Indies, Nov. 2011, Madison, Ohio, Aug. 2017

But before we relax too much, we should ask, "What if the person who has never heard of Christ has heard of God the Father and has rejected Him?" Is rejection of God the Father as serious as rejection of God the Son? It would seem to be **at least as serious if not more serious...** It is precisely at this point that the New Testament locates the universal guilt of man^{viii}

BUT HOW CAN A PERSON REJECT GOD THE FATHER WITHOUT HAVING HEARD ABOUT JESUS CHRIST?

ANSWER: BY REJECTING THE TWO CLEAR TESTIMONIES OF GOD'S EXISTENCE THAT EVERY PERSON ON EARTH HAS RECEIVED:

1. THE WITNESS OF CREATION - Romans 1:18-23. Creation is the first universal witness of God. **Everyone receives this witness!** And to reject this witness, is to make oneself guilty, whether or not one ever hears of Christ.

An illustration may help us here. If a person wanted to take a trip to New York City from St. Vincent, West Indies, three steps would be involved in order to make that happen. **First** he would need to buy the ticket. **Second**, he would need to go to the airport in St. Vincent and catch his first flight that would take him to Barbados. **Thirdly**, he would need to catch his second flight in Barbados that would take him on to New York City. **Now if he decided not to buy a ticket (step 1), then the question of whether or not he would have ever gotten on the second plane flight in Barbados (step 3) is irrelevant. We already know that he is not going to make it to New York City. And it's not because he didn't board his flight in Barbados. He will not make it to New York City because he refused to do step one, which was to purchase his ticket.** He has no one to blame but himself that he didn't get to New York. However, asking a question like "*I wonder if he would he have boarded the second plane in Barbados if he had the chance?*" is irrelevant and meaningless, because he chose to forfeit his trip to New York City two steps prior to that.

So it is with one who rejects God and chooses instead to worship sticks, stones, material possessions, animals, kneel at a god shelf, etc. The hypothetical question of whether that person would have accepted Christ if he would have heard of Him is irrelevant. He chose to reject the even more fundamental and universally understood fact that there is a God, and that He is the all-powerful creator of everything in the universe! To reject that crystal clear and incredibly basic truth, is to reject God and miss heaven. Dewitt notes, "As we observe the universe around us, we see design and beauty far beyond anything we or even nature itself could produce... they point to a superior being beyond man whom anyone may choose to seek... If I were to live in your house a while, I would know you existed even if I never met you. The pictures, artifacts, and designs I would find around the house would tell me of your existence as a distinct person with a definite personality. I would have enough information to decide to try to find you if I wanted to."^{ix} So it is with the creation which clearly testifies of God's existence.

Sproul adds: "**Notice (in Romans 1:18) that God's wrath is revealed not against innocence or ignorance but against ungodliness and wickedness. What kind of wickedness? ...The answer is clear, the suppressing of truth. We must ask, 'What truth is being suppressed?' The rest of the text provides the answer...'*although they knew God they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened'* (1:21)...God reveals that He is, that He has eternal power and deity...God does not reveal Himself only to a small elite group of scholars or priests but to all mankind...**

"What else does this text [Romans 1] teach?

- **First**, we learn that (the testimony) is clear and unambiguous... this knowledge is not obscure...
- **Secondly**, we learn that *the knowledge 'gets through' and finds its mark*... We read, *'They knew God.'* **Man's problem** is not that he doesn't know God but that *he refuses to acknowledge what he knows to be true*...
- **Thirdly**, we learn that *this revelation has been going on since the foundation of the world*...
- **Fourthly**, we learn that *the revelation comes by way of creation*...
- **Fifthly**, we learn that *the revelation is sufficient to render man inexcusable*. The passage says, *'So they are without excuse.'* What excuse do you suppose the apostle had in mind? What excuse does general revelation eliminate? **Obviously the excuse eliminated is that of ignorance**. If the apostle is correct about general revelation then **none will ever be able to say to God, 'I'm sorry I didn't worship and serve you. I didn't know you existed**... If God has in fact clearly revealed Himself to all men, no man can plead ignorance as an excuse for not worshipping Him."^x

"BUT AREN'T PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN REMOTE AREAS OF THE WORLD RELIGIOUS? SURELY THAT COUNTS FOR SOMETHING, DOESN'T IT?"

Sproul responds: "Perhaps they worship totem poles, cows, or bee trees. But at least they are trying and doing the best they can. They surely don't know any better. If they are born and raised in a culture that worships cows, how can they be expected to do any differently? **It is precisely at this point that the notion of general revelation is devastating. If Paul is correct, the practice of religion does not excuse the pagan but in fact compounds his guilt** (cf. Rom 1:22-25) ...Here the apostle examines pagan religion. He views it as a distortion of the truth. An 'exchange' takes place between the truth of God and the lie. God's glory is replaced by the substitution of the 'glory' of the creature. *Creature worship is religion, but it is the religion of idolatry. To be zealous in the worship of idols is to be zealous in the insulting of the glory and dignity of God...Idolatry represents the ultimate insult to God.*^{xi} To reduce God to the level of the creature is to strip God of His deity."^{xii}

2. THE WITNESS OF CONSCIENCE - Rom. 2:15. DeWitt observes: "Nature is not our only source of information about God. Another one is within ourselves-*conscience*. We have the idea of a standard of goodness beyond what we are able to keep. Conscience tells us about sin: the difference between the way we live and the way we know we ought to live."^{xiii}

DeWitt goes on to share an interesting illustration of how conscience works: "A few days ago, I had a man in my office who had been an atheist most of his life. He told me how as a teenager he had rejected the beliefs of the church he grew up in and replaced them with a moral code that he thought he should live by. Then he tried to live by it. *To my surprise... I couldn't keep my own moral standards. What's worse, I found myself pretending I was the kind of person I had decided I should be, even though I couldn't pull it off.*' That's fascinating,' I said. 'You made up your own religion, converted yourself to it, then backslid from it, so you became a hypocrite about it!' He agreed. We both had a good laugh. But there is a point here not to be overlooked. Even though he outwardly rejected God, he could not escape his inner knowledge of a goodness beyond what he was able to keep... What finally brought him to a belief in God was his realization that man has a sense of goodness far greater than he needs for basic survival."^{xiv}

3) **THERE IS A THIRD WITNESS LEADING TO ETERNAL LIFE: CHRIST!**

John 1:1-12 declares that Jesus Christ is the ultimate light that came into the world. The Bible is crystal clear that Christ alone can enable a person to go to heaven (e.g. **John 14:6; Acts 4:12**).

4) **A FOURTH & FINAL WITNESS OF THE WAY TO HEAVEN: THE BIBLE** -Lk. 16:31; Jn. 5:46-47. Jesus said that individuals who willingly reject what the Bible says, would not believe even if they saw something as miraculous as someone rising from the dead!

TO SUMMARIZE: Rejection at any point (*Creation, Conscience, Christ, or the Bible*) makes one guilty of rejecting God and truth, and deserving of condemnation & punishment (cf. The Jews-Rom. 2:12; 9:4).

LET'S RETURN TO THE QUESTION OF OUR ANCESTORS & OTHERS WHO HAVEN'T HEARD THE GOOD NEWS OF CHRIST. As noted earlier, because of who God is, and how He works, we can rest assured that everything He does will be fair and right! That fact alone should eliminate apprehension and bring peace to our mind & heart.

In addition though, there is another comforting truth in regard to those who haven't heard of Christ:

SCRIPTURE APPEARS TO TEACH OR AT LEAST IMPLY, THAT GOD HAS OBLIGATED HIMSELF TO GIVE MORE LIGHT TO THOSE WHO ARE FAITHFUL TO THE LIGHT THEY ALREADY POSSESS! Cf. Jer. 29:13; Ezek. 34:11; Mt. 7:7; Lk. 19:10; Heb. 11:6; etc.

Throughout church history there have been numerous stories of missionaries coming into tribes that have never heard the gospel before, who have asked those missionaries questions such as "*Are you here to tell us about God?*", "*Have you come to tell us about Jesus Christ?*" etc. In some of the cases somehow the actual name "*Jesus*" or "*Christ*" had been supernaturally revealed to them—even though they knew nothing about Jesus Christ or even who He was! At the present time (2017) there also continue to be *extremely well documented first-hand testimonies* of individuals in a variety of countries receiving visions of Jesus Christ, leading them to search further & ultimately to receive Christ as their Lord & Savior!* Some of those people expressed it thusly: "*I always knew He existed, but I never knew His name,*" or, "*I've always known there was a loving God somewhere.*"

In Acts we see this principle of God getting further light to those who are obedient to the light they already have. ***The Ethiopian eunuch***, who did not know Christ but was worshipping the true God and listening to his conscience, was granted further light—God even pulled Philip out of a revival campaign to go into the desert to give that eunuch the message of the gospel!^{xv} A similar thing occurred when ***Cornelius a Roman centurion*** who was obedient to the light he had, was given the entire message of the gospel God sending an initially reluctant Peter to Cornelius and his family to give them the message of the gospel and lead them to a saving knowledge of Christ.^{xvi}

What will God do with a person who lives and dies in a jungle somewhere with no knowledge of Jesus Christ, but who rejects the idolatry of the rest of his tribe and acknowledged the one true God and was obedient to the light he had? One thing is certain: The merciful, righteous, holy, just, all-knowing, perfect God of the Bible will make no mistakes. Whatever He does will be completely fair, righteous and just! In addition, knowing that God has promised to get more light to genuine seekers of Him (since He knows all things and thus knows exactly who those genuine seekers are) should be a source of comfort, in regard to this issue.

"WHAT ABOUT SMALL CHILDREN WHO DIE? or MENTALLY HANDICAPPED PERSONS?"

The Bible doesn't say a great deal about this. But since we know God is fair, we can be certain that while no one is born innocent, nonetheless, God will not punish individuals who are unable to understand and respond to the message of the gospel. Additionally, Scripture does imply that infants and small children go to heaven.^{xvii}

AN IMPORTANT CONCLUDING THOUGHT: God may want to use *you* to reach some people in that very condition i.e. they do not know who Jesus Christ is! They may be individuals who are in *physical jungles & primitive locations*, or they may be in the *concrete jungles of major cities*. Regardless, the convicting question to every believer remains:

"How shall they hear without a preacher?"^{xviii}

No believer is exempt! Every Christian has been called to the task of faithfully giving out the gospel day by day!

REFERENCES

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- i. "Answering the Tough Ones," David A. DeWitt (Moody Press: Chicago, IL, 1980), p. 60
 - ii. Gen. 18:25
 - iii. DeWitt, op cit. p. 61
 - iv. cf. II Chron. 19:7; Prov. 24:23; & Acts 10:34-35
 - v. "Reason to Believe" [formerly, *Objections Answered*], R.C. Sproul (Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1978), p. 49.
 - vi. Ibid.
 - vii. Ibid, pp. 49-50
 - viii. Ibid, p. 50
 - ix. DeWitt, op cit., p. 61
 - x. Sproul, op cit., pp. 51-53
 - xi. The Bible is extremely strong in its total condemnation of idolatry. See for example, Ex. 20:3-5; Isa. 40:18-22; 41:29; 42:17; 44:9-20; 45:16,20; 46:5-10; 48:5; I Kings 18:21; II Kings 18:4; etc.
 - xii. Ibid, pp. 54-55
 - xiii. DeWitt, op cit., p. 62
 - xiv. Ibid.
 - xv. Acts 8:26-40
 - xvi. Acts 10:1-48
 - xvii. e.g. II Sam. 12:23; Matt. 19:14. cf. Deut. 1:39 where a similar principle is seen. See also Matt. 18:2-4.
 - xviii. Romans 10:14
- Zacharias in his DVD series "Yes, Your Question" states that he knows of dozens of such examples. He then related the first-hand story of an individual that he met & talked with personally in a Muslim country that had to remain unidentified, who had received a vision of Jesus Christ *every night for seven years* leading him to eventual saving faith in Christ!