

## What About People Who Never Hear The Gospel?

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by Wayne S. Walker

Recently, one of the Bible class teachers in the church with which I work related to me that a question had been raised in his class concerning what will be the eternal condition of those who have died never having heard the gospel of Christ and obeyed it. This is an age-old problem that will probably continue to be raised as long as there are people around to think about it. Of course, any honest inquiry deserves a reasonable response. It is unfortunate, however, that some among us frequently bring up this question as a prelude to introducing false doctrine. We must strive to avoid extremes on either end of the discussion.

The answer to the question is very simple — I do not know. And I believe I can safely say that no one else on earth does either. The fate of such people is one of the secret things that belong unto God (Deut. 29:29). These individuals are in the hands of an all-merciful Judge, and He will certainly do what is proper. I have no right to preach that they are definitely going either to heaven or to hell. I cannot make God's decisions for Him. However, I have not only the right but the obligation to proclaim what the scripture has to say on the subject.

First of all, I doubt very much if there has ever been anyone who has absolutely had no opportunity to hear the truth. Even in the first century, as primitive as those times may seem to us, Paul was able to say, *"The gospel, which ye have heard ... , was preached to every creature under heaven"* (Col. 1:23). With our modern means of transportation and communication, it is practically unthinkable that there could be a large number of people who never have had and never will have a chance to hear the gospel in some way or another. And even in times past, the God I believe in has always been capable of working out things in His providence to provide His word to whomever sincerely needs and wants it through entirely natural means. If, perchance, certain heathen groups have not received the gospel, it may be that God knew ahead of time that they would reject it and decided to send His servants to places where they were more useful. Truly, as the old song says, "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform."

Let us understand that *"All have sinned and come short of the glory of God"* (Rom. 3:23). People will not be lost simply because they have somehow not heard and obeyed the gospel. They will be lost primarily because they are sinners. *"The wages of sin is death"* (Rom. 6: 23). The gospel is God's power to save them from sin and death (Rom. 1:16). If a man falls, or jumps off a boat, into the ocean, he may likely drown. If a ship comes along and picks him up before he drowns, he will be saved. But if a ship does not come along, will he drown merely because there was no ship to save him? No, he drowns because he is in the water. If men will be saved in their sins because "they have not had a chance to hear the gospel," then why bother preaching it at all? In this way, the gospel becomes a condemning agent rather than a saving power.

Look at a few scriptures. Ezekiel 33:6 reads, *"But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, and the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand."* Here is a group of people, living in iniquity and ignorant of an impending attack as punishment; and the watchman does not warn them. Even though he is held in part responsible, they must still suffer the consequences of their sin in spite of their ignorance: death by the sword at the hands of their enemies.

See also 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9: *"...in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished..."* People who do not know God, whatever the reason, have "no hope" (Eph. 2:12), but only *"a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation..."* (Heb. 10:27). Now I am not consigning all the heathen to hell; God is the Decider of that. I am merely proclaiming what the Bible teaches on the topic, and that is all we can know concerning the matter. It is just as wrong to preach that certain ones will go to heaven as it is to place them in hell. But the Bible does say they have no hope of heaven.

Jesus said, *"He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned"* (Mk. 16:16). Whoever does not believe — that God exists, that Jesus is the Son of God, and that the Bible is His word — shall be condemned. Why? Because he has not taken the steps to meet the conditions for the forgiveness of his sins by God. Instead, ... let us go out and proclaim the saving gospel to all so that men might hear, obey, and be saved...

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