



Do only Christians go to heaven?

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Classical evangelical doctrine holds that salvation comes only through faith in Jesus Christ, and that those without such faith will be condemned to hell. A number of texts are typically cited in support of this position.

In John 14.6 Jesus declares, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me."

In Acts 4.12 Peter proclaims, "Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

For Paul, the faithful will enjoy eternal life, but those who don't know Christ will "be punished with everlasting destruction" (2 Thessalonians 1.9). Hence his urgent call: "How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (Romans 10.14).

Taking such texts at face value, many evangelical scholars maintain that even those who fail to hear the Gospel through no fault of their own will be damned. Often called "exclusivists" or "particularists", this group includes Hendrik Kraemer, Douglas Gevitt and RC Sproul. However, in recent years a growing number of evangelicals have argued that at least some who do not profess Christ before death can be saved. Broadly defined as "inclusivists" or "accessibilists", this group includes Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, Stanley Grenz and Nigel Wright. As evangelicals, they claim to find warrant for their "wider hope" in Scripture.

Inclusivists often draw an analogy with the Old Testament saints. In Hebrews 11, a whole line of godly figures who never knew Jesus explicitly are counted among the redeemed. Those who live faithfully within their own religious context today without hearing the Good News are seen to be in a similar position, and to be similarly qualified for salvation.

Exclusivists, however, reject this argument on the grounds that Jesus decisively globalised the mission of God beyond Israel, and that salvation which bypasses overt faith in Him is no longer possible.

Implicit faith

A second model of implicit faith is often inferred from Romans 2.12-16, where Paul appears to suggest that unbelieving Gentiles who "do not have the law" will be judged according to their "conscience". Inclusivists characteristically apply this to those who do not hear the Gospel before they die.

As we have seen, however, Romans later makes hearing and responding to the Gospel a matter of critical importance for all people, whether they have known the law or not. In any case, it is important to realise that conscience is itself affected by sin, and is thus hardly infallible.

The third instance in which God might be thought to save some who don't profess Christ as Saviour concerns those who die in infancy. Scripture provides no explicit teaching on this matter, but it does offer hints that those who perish before they are old enough to make a conscious commitment might be saved.

It may be significant here that Jesus depicted the kingdom of God as belonging to children (Matthew 19.13-15). Although we are all "conceived in sin" (Psalm 51.5), Ronald Nash argues that our final judgment turns not on our sinful condition as members of a fallen human race, but on the sinful deeds we commit "in the body" (2 Corinthians 5.10).

By definition, he says, this standard cannot apply to deceased infants. Following Charles Hodge and Benjamin Warfield, Nash concludes on this basis that all who die in infancy within and outside the womb should be numbered among the elect.

What is clear is that, if those who die as infants are granted eternal life, it will come purely by the grace of God, whom we must always recognise as the final arbiter in these matters.

The same would apply to a fourth category of persons sometimes linked to the wider hope – those whose mental disability renders them unable to respond overtly to the Gospel. In this instance, as in the others we have considered, God will have mercy "on whom He wants to have mercy" (Romans 9.18).

A second chance?

So far, we have examined only those who die without professing faith, and who move straight from death to final judgement, as Hebrews 9.27 seems to suggest they will. However, some have extended wider-hope thinking beyond the grave, to a second chance for those who are not evangelised in their earthly life.

Pinnock and George Beasley-Murray derive this concept of post-mortem repentance from 1 Peter 3.18-20 and 4.6, where Jesus is shown preaching to "the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago" and to "those who are now dead". However, most New Testament scholars deny that the texts in question have anything to do with "those who don't hear" in the present age. Rather, the "spirits" of 3.19 are generally taken to be fallen angelic spirits, while the "dead" of 4.6, are most likely those Christians who had been "dead to sin" until they met Jesus in His earthly ministry, or those who heard Him and went on to die as martyrs.

As we weigh up these different approaches, one thing must surely remain clear. Understandable though it is, we simply cannot allow speculation on how God might deal with the special cases we've mentioned to blunt our evangelistic edge. We cannot second-guess God. In the final analysis, our proclamation of the Gospel should proceed on the assumption that those who don't know Christ will face eternity without Him — and it should be all the more passionate for that.