

## What about those who've never heard the Gospel?

Mark Pickering

You may have experienced it yourself. You're in the middle of a good discussion about gospel issues with a friend. It seems that they understand the main points and are even beginning to grasp the implications for themselves. But just when things seem to be going really well, they wrinkle their forehead and say, 'that's all very well, but what about people in remote tribes that have never heard about Jesus? Surely it's a bit unfair if God's going to send them to hell?' What should you say? Is this the end of a promising conversation or can you reply in a way that will satisfy genuine doubt and still challenge them to respond?

It's certainly an important question. If Jesus really is the only way to God,[2] then we need to have an answer to this, both for our own sanity and for friends who genuinely see it as a problem.

We must start by saying that we do not know for sure. The New Testament never addresses the question directly, as it concerns people who *have* heard the gospel message. This is something that we should always bear in mind when asked. Asking the question could be a diversionary tactic for friends who are trying to escape the gospel's claims on their lives. We must always emphasise to them that this problem does not excuse them from making a response. Scripture is very clear on what happens to those who knowingly reject the gospel message:

*He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting punishment and shut out from the presence of the Lord...[3]*

Another useful verse on this topic is Deuteronomy 29:29:

*The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but*

*the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.*

This underlines the fact that there are 'secret things', that we do not know everything we would like to, but it also places squarely on our shoulders the responsibility for acting according to the knowledge that we do possess.

Let's look now at some of what we can know from the Bible.

### The Justice of God

When someone raises this objection, they are generally implying one of two things: either that other religions must be valid routes to God, or that an exclusive gospel suggests some great miscarriage of justice at the final judgment. God is depicted as saying, 'You didn't accept Jesus, so you can go to hell!' whilst multitudes of poor unfortunates reply 'Who? We never heard of this guy. You can't do that!'

The God of the Bible is a God of justice, not some capricious being who casts people into hell on a whim, depending on the mood he is in that day. Isaiah tells us that 'the Lord is a God of justice'.[4] He is also 'the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness'.[5] There is no question that what he does on that final day will be fair, even though we may not understand all of his thoughts. We can be like Abraham in front of Sodom and confidently assert, 'will not the Judge of all the earth do right?'[6]

### General Revelation

Although many people do not know the full revelation of the gospel, none of us are totally ignorant of him. 'For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. '[7] The created universe speaks so clearly of a Creator that it took rebellious humans thousands of years to come up with a half-decent explanation of how things might have arisen without any intelligent designer, in the neo-Darwinian synthesis. The psalmist exclaims that 'the heavens declare the glory

of God'[8] and we really have to be quite blinded by naturalist philosophy before we can take a walk in the country or gaze at the night sky and not see something of God's creative flair reflected there.

Then there is the witness of our consciences. Though defective since the fall, they still function and give us a sense of a moral order, a morality that we generally know to be correct, even though we fail to live up to it. Paul, in his treatment of God's righteous judgment, tells us that 'Gentiles, who do not have the law...show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness'.[9]

Hence there is no-one that is totally ignorant of God. All of us have some knowledge of him and will be judged according to that. God 'will give to each person according to what he has done',[10] not according to what he had no opportunity to do.

### **The Old Testament Heroes**

We see this principle at work in the pages of the Old Testament. We know that there will be thousands of Jews and Gentiles who lived before the time of Jesus yet will still be part of that 'great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language'.[11] Jesus described Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as feasting in the kingdom of heaven [12] while heaven itself is described as being at Abraham's side.[13]

They clearly did not know the whole gospel message, although there are a few tantalising verses that indicate they may have known more than is explicitly recorded in Scripture. We are told that Moses 'regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt'.[14] How exactly did he view the coming Messiah - how much did he understand what he would do? We do not know.

Christ's sacrificial death on the cross hundreds of years later seems to have acted retrospectively for them.[15] This should not seem strange to us, as God is independent of time and would have no problem looking forward to what Jesus would later do on their behalf. The fact that they did not fully understand the mechanism is not a problem for us. I drive my car and use my computer without understanding all the inner workings that make it

possible.

If their lack of knowledge before Christ's first coming was not an absolute barrier to salvation, is there any reason why sheer lack of knowledge after this time should be an absolute barrier? Those who have really never heard the gospel today are in a similar position to those who lived before Christ. Is it not possible for them to respond to the knowledge of God they do have in the way those heroes did?

### **The Need for Evangelism**

Before any of you cry 'heretic', let's clarify a few things that we are not saying. Firstly, we are not saying that 'all roads lead to God'. Jesus told us that 'no one comes to the Father except through me'[16] and Peter preached that 'salvation is found in no one else'.[17] If anyone of another religion or belief system is saved, it is not *because of* their beliefs but *in spite of* those beliefs. All other religions are distortions of the truth, but still contain some truth. If by the guidance of the Holy Spirit a person looks through that distorted lense, glimpses a dim reflection of reality and responds accordingly, it does not validate that false religion as a whole, but simply the truth that lies buried underneath.

For instance, if a Muslim reads of 'Isa (Jesus) in the Qur'an and learns of his sinless life [18] and the fact that he is a spirit from God,[19] it is just possible that he may grasp that Jesus is in fact greater than Muhammad, who needed God's forgiveness for his sin.[20] This does not however mean that Islam is a valid route to God; only that the Holy Spirit can work in anyone.

The second major point is that this thinking in no way lessens the urgent need for evangelism or mission. It is not to say, 'don't bother with evangelism - they can all be saved anyway'. The heroes of the Old Testament were the exceptions of their time and the shining examples - not just average people. Even in Judaism that had God's true Scriptures and prophets, that had witnessed his miracles, multitudes still went astray and did not follow God. The psalmist lamented that 'everyone has turned away, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one'.[21] If the response to God's revelation at the time was generally so low,

there will be far fewer still who will find God's path in the midst of false religions and ideologies.

The gospel is needed to clarify and instruct. The Ninevites were clearly prepared to respond to God, but they didn't know much about him. It took the preaching of Jonah to turn them to repentance and faith.[22] The Ethiopian eunuch, even though he was reading the prophecy of Isaiah, needed to have it explained to him by Philip before he could see it was really pointing to Christ.[23]

Today multitudes are blinded and confused by wrong ideas about God. Our task as Christians is to hold up the light of the gospel, bringing true teaching about who God is and how we may know him. The Gospel is God's chosen means of disturbing the complacent, bringing conviction of sin and calling men to himself. Those who hear his call are in a far better position to seek after God for mercy and forgiveness.

### **The Honest Seeker**

Jesus promises that those who do seek after God will find him.[24] This may mean that they will come to hear the good news about Jesus in this life. But clearly that wasn't the case for the Old Testament characters. It may therefore mean that such people can live without any assurance of forgiveness and yet are forgiven by God through the atoning death of Jesus, after casting themselves on God for his mercy. The Gospel then would bring such seekers not so much forgiveness itself as the assurance of being forgiven.

### **Summary**

Only God knows how individuals will fare on the Day of Judgment. Such matters are no proper concern of ours. 'It is mine to avenge', says the Lord, 'I will repay'.[25] Yet we have every reason to believe that God will do what is right. Everyone has enough knowledge of God in order to seek after him but the general situation is that men do not, even though their consciences condemn them.

Hence we are called to proclaim the gospel and urge that men and women be reconciled to God. 'We are therefore Christ's ambassadors... We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to

God.'[26] Those who have heard the gospel and still reject God's offer of forgiveness are in grave danger: *If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.*[27] The question of 'what about those who've never heard?' can provide no comfort for anyone who is avoiding the implications of the gospel for themselves. Yet these people will be judged on a totally different basis from those who while remaining in substantial darkness earnestly seek the truth, confess their sins and cast themselves on the mercy of God. We must pray that God will guide them to the truth. We must also remember that if the church through the ages and today had taken seriously Jesus' command to make disciples of all nations,[28] there would be far fewer groping in spiritual darkness. If we really grasp the implications of this issue, we will be challenged more than ever to follow Paul's example and 'preach the gospel where Christ [is] not known'.[29] We will be committed to evangelism and world mission, through praying, giving and going, so that 'the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.'[30]

*This article is based on material in CMF's Confident Christianity Course*

### **References**

§ Based on the Confident Christianity evangelism training course, online at <http://www.cmf.org.uk/outreach/content.asp?content=issue&id=15>

§ See Pickering M, Saunders P. Deadly Questions - Is Jesus the Only Way? *Nucleus* 2001; October:29-33

§ 2 Thes 1:8,9

§ Is 30:18. See also Ps 9:16, 103:6; Is 61:8

§ Ex 34:6. See also Ps 36:5; Je 33:11; 2 Cor 13:11

§ Gn 18:25

§ Rom 1:20

§ Ps 19:1

§ Rom 2:14,15

§ Rom 2:6

§ Rev 7:9

§ Mt 8:11

§ Lk 16:23

§ Heb 11:26. See also Jn 8:56

§ Rom 3:25; Heb 9:15  
§ Jn 14:6  
§ Acts 4:12  
§ Surah 19:19  
§ Surah 4:171  
§ Surah 48:2  
§ Ps 53:3  
§ Jon 3  
§ Acts 8:26-39  
§ Mt 7:7  
§ Rom 12:19  
§ 2 Cor 5:20  
§ Heb 10:26,27  
§ Mt 28:19  
§ Rom 15:20  
§ Hab 2:14.39