

What About Those Who Have Not Heard?

This question, posed with regards to those who have never heard the gospel, is both a very good question and a very difficult one. It is difficult because the exclusivity of Christ can be one of the most uncomfortable truths of Scripture.

Let me give you a few things that we should hold onto as truth as we approach this topic:

- 1) God is just—As we approach this topic, we must keep the fact that we can trust in God's character as revealed through Scripture in the forefront of our hearts and minds. Scripture over and over again affirms that God is more loving, kind, compassionate and just than we are. In fact, when it looks at our moral character in comparison to His nature, it says "My thoughts are not your thoughts neither are your ways my ways." (Isaiah 55:8) This verse speaks of how superior God's righteousness is over ours. We must approach the question of those who have not heard the gospel with this fact firmly rooted in our hearts and minds.
- 2) Nobody is going to hell for any other reason than their sin. As the Bible affirms, all of humanity are sinners (Romans 3:23), all are under judgment (Romans 6:23), and all are dead in their sins (Ephesians 2:1-4).
- 3) The only reason why people will be in heaven is because of Jesus paying the price for their sin on the cross.

In a few different places of the Bible, we see that we cannot be good enough or sincere enough for salvation. We need a Savior! A couple of different places in Scripture show this reality. One of these examples is Nicodemus in John 3. If there was a good man in that day, it was Nicodemus. He was a religious man; a Pharisee. He was the kind of guy who would have had a very devout home where they recite the creeds and serve in the synagogue. He paid attention to every detail of his life to try to live in a way that pleased God. We can see other things about him. He was a spiritually perceptive man. He knew that Jesus could only do what He was doing if God was at work in Him. While others were missing it, Nicodemus was not. He was also a member of the Sanhedrin which was like the supreme court of Israel. Jesus later refers to Nicodemus as the rabbi of Israel which means that he probably had a distinguished reputation in Jerusalem. Here was a man with a sharp intellect, discernment, position, morals, and integrity. One commentator called him "the reverend, professor, doctor." So, this "reverend, professor, doctor" comes to Jesus at night, being careful of who would see him and know about his conversation. Jesus tells this "good man" that what he needs (and by implication what all of us need) is not some addition to his fine-tuned religious system of how to earn points with God. You can't climb into the kingdom. "You are not good enough. In fact no one is good enough and the system of 'being good' that you are trusting in is broken. What you need, you do not have!" What he needed was new life... a new life that comes from the Holy Spirit through trust in Jesus (John 3:16-18)! So, we see goodness and sincerity was not enough for a Jewish leader.

Then, in Acts 10, we see a Gentile man named Cornelius who is said to be devout, God-fearing, generous and a man of prayer. Yet, it states that he was not saved until Peter arrived at his house and Cornelius received forgiveness of sins in Jesus (Acts 10:43, 11:13-14). His prior goodness was not enough.

In the two stories mentioned above, we see that there is no salvation other than in Jesus, and there are other places in Scripture that affirm this reality. As it says in Romans, whether Jew or Gentile, we all need a Savior.

4) The primary way God spreads His gospel is through His people proclaiming the Good News!

I think it is very important to remember that God's heart has always been for the nations. From the call of Abraham (which was the beginning of redemptive history in Genesis 12), we see God's eye on salvation for the nations. The nations have been and always will be the heartbeat of God. In the great commission, Jesus tells His disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. The nations were on Jesus' mind and He was sending His disciples to them. As a result, we are to be people who embrace God's heart for the nations. We need to soberly take this to heart and understand what Paul says in Romans 10:14-15; "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" God has entrusted His mission to His people. His heart is that all nations would hear the gospel and believe. This is why we are to be "proclaimers" of the good news. The global mission of God to redeem the nations is not a side mission of the church. It is the mission of the people of God.

5) While I affirm that God's primary avenue of spreading the good news of Jesus Christ is through His people, we also affirm that God is at work where His people are not.

While we are confronted with the difficult reality that the sincerity of Cornelius was not enough for salvation, there is more to be gleaned from this story. We can be encouraged to know that God was sovereignly at work in Cornelius' life, revealing Himself, before God's people ever arrived at his door. As in this story, I believe that God continues to reveal Himself in places where there are no believers and that He does this by dreams or visions.

It is interesting to me how many stories missionaries in other countries (specifically countries closed to the gospel and where it is illegal to be Christian) tell about people having dreams and visions of Jesus. A great number of Muslim conversions are due to these visions. When I say this, I don't mean a handful of occasions. I mean thousands upon thousands of times.

Islam actually has a high view of visions and angels. So, when Jesus appears to them in visions and dreams, God is revealing Himself to them in a way that they can embrace and understand. He uses their sensitivity to reveal Himself. This is the grace of God!

I know of a story about when the Gospel came to Liberia. God had revealed truth to a young man by giving him a vision of a box floating on the water. So, this man traveled many hours to the coast line of Liberia. When he arrived, by the providence of God, he saw a boat for the first time in his life and off the boat stepped two missionaries from America. They shared the gospel with him and he ended up becoming a pastor in Liberia! God is at work in ways and in places we are not. This isn't just something that has happened... this is something that continues to happen! One of our alum shared with me how he recently met a young man who had had a dream about Jesus before our alum ever arrived. I wonder if God sent our alum to this closed nation for just this young man.

As to the question of how much needs to be known and understood about Jesus for someone to experience Jesus as their Savior, this is another tough question. Is the revelation of Jesus in a dream or vision enough or is it just a precursor to receiving more of the gospel? In the situation with Cornelius, we see that God sent Peter to share the truth in the aftermath. This question is hotly debated with missionaries on both sides of the argument.

But, for the sake of responding, I will rely on a quote from Ravi Zacharias. He says "The danger of a Western perspective is thinking that if something isn't neatly packaged, it's no good. And unfortunately, some Western Christians think that unless a person says the creed just like they

do, they don't know God. Yet, what does an infant know of his mother? He knows she nourishes him, she changes him, she embraces him, she kisses him--she must be a friend. That child doesn't know his mother as well as he will when he's eighteen. But he knows her enough to love her." So, how thorough a person's understanding needs to be of Jesus to be saved, I cannot answer, but I do know that they must place their trust in Him!

It is my hope that we will fix our attention on the fact that God, in His great mercy and grace, made a way for our salvation in Jesus. I hope that we will realize that while the message of Jesus is exclusive, it is the most inclusive message ever shared—No matter how deep you are in your sin, there is a Savior that can rescue you. I hope that we will be amazed at God's mercy and grace in Christ Jesus for all the nations, and that we would join Him in His heart for their redemption!

May the Lamb that was slain receive the reward for His suffering—the praise and glory of the nations!