

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #87: WHAT ABOUT THE HEATHEN?

By John Temples

What will happen to the “heathen”--unevangelized people living in isolated parts of the world? This is an emotionally charged but often-asked question. It concerns people in remote places who live in primitive cultures and, presumably, have never had the gospel preached to them--they “have never seen a Bible.”

This question is asked by Christians, because they know the Bible; and they understand the reality and the horrors of hell. Therefore, they wonder how God can be fair if He punishes people in hell who had no knowledge of Him or the gospel in this life.

This question is also asked by non-Christians. Unfortunately, their motives for asking are sometimes not so pure. One reason an unbeliever might ask this question is to attack the idea of an all-loving God and to discredit His divine judgment. Another reason might be to deflect the force of the gospel, to avoid personal responsibility. (If the truth about your sins is getting too uncomfortably close to home, then just start talking about somebody else’s sins.)

As we begin to wrestle with this question, let us consider: How did the heathen become heathen? Were they always ignorant of the true God? Did none of their ancestors ever know the truth of God’s existence? Actually, there have been at least two times in the history of the world when every single person alive knew the true God: right after the creation and right after the Flood. Every person alive today is a descendant of Adam and Noah. Therefore, it cannot be said of any particular culture or line of people that they have NEVER heard of God. How, then, did the knowledge of God fall by the wayside? Whose fault is it that one generation failed to teach the next generation? It was either God’s fault or the people’s fault. (I think we know the answer.)

Paul addressed this issue in Romans 1:18-25. Here is that text in the NIV:

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 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. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator — who is forever praised. Amen.”

It is evident that all men in antiquity once (nay, twice) knew God, but most of their descendants turned against Him and deliberately rejected and forgot Him. God says they are “without excuse.” This helps our understanding, but does not completely answer the question.

Here is a second principle: The Bible makes it clear that God has charged people of all nations with sin, even people and nations that had no direct connection with Him. In Genesis 15:13 and 16, God spoke to Abraham, telling him that his descendants would one day possess the land of Canaan, but not yet. Why would they not possess it immediately? “*Because the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete [full, KJV].*” Who were the Amorites? They were Canaanites--pagans living in the land of Canaan. They were ignorant of God, yet God spoke of *their iniquity* (guilt, sinfulness). These were “heathens,” ignorant of God; but God still charged them with sin.

Centuries later, the Bible spoke of another group of “heathens”--the people of Nineveh. They certainly did not know the true God--they had no connection with Israel (except as pillagers and plunderers). One day, God told Jonah to go and

preach to the Ninevites that in forty days, they would be destroyed. Why? “For *their wickedness* has come up before Me” (Jonah 1:2). So, even in Old Testament times, when God was allowing the nations to “walk in their own ways” (Acts 14:16), He was still holding those nations accountable for sin.

When we come to the New Testament, we see God again holding all mankind accountable. Read the sermon preached by Paul in Athens, recorded in Acts 17. This sermon is notable in that it is the only sermon recorded in the New Testament specifically addressed to “heathens.” Notice the all-inclusive language Paul used in this sermon:

- God gives to all life breath, and all things (verse 25). This reminds us of a statement Jesus made, that God sends rain on the just and the unjust. God cares and provides for all people. (It is implied that all people are therefore indebted to Him.)
- Verse 27 affirms that every nation has the responsibility and the ability to seek God.
- Verse 30, speaking of the history and previous generations of these people, says, “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked; but now commands all men everywhere to repent.”

What about this statement, “the times of ignorance God overlooked”? It seems to say that God “gave the heathen a pass” during Old Testament times. (The King James Version even says that these times God “winked at” (an unfortunate translation). But we have already seen that God DID hold the heathen accountable during that period.

The explanation lies in the meaning of the word “overlook(ed).” It does NOT mean to ignore, wink at, or let off the hook. The Greek word for “overlooked” is *hupereidon*, meaning “to look over or past, to see beyond, to allow to pass for the time being.” Basically, it means that God, while assigning guilt to the pagan peoples, did not punish their iniquities immediately, but postponed His wrath. The Biblical Exposition Commentary says, “For centuries, God was patient with man’s sin and ignorance.... This does not mean that men were not guilty (Romans 1:19-20), but only that God held back divine wrath.” Notice, though, that whatever

“God overlooked” means, it did not apply to the Athenians Paul preached to, and it does not apply now; because Paul said all men everywhere must now repent!

Consider the Great Commission--“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). Who are the subjects of the Great Commission? “All the nations.” Mark’s version (Mark 16:16) reads, “And He said to them, Go into *all the world* and preach the gospel to *every creature*.” Luke 24:47 has it this way: “...repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to *all nations*, beginning at Jerusalem.” All four versions of the Great Commission say that remission of sins is to be preached to all people in the world. But remission of sins is for what class of people? *Sinners*. That must mean that all accountable people are sinners and are in need of redemption. And that is exactly what the plainest passage in all of Scripture says on this subject: “For *all have sinned* and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

Let’s review so far. We are dealing with the question, What about the heathen? Will God punish people in hell who have never heard the gospel? We have learned two important truths:

- The whole human race knew the true God at least twice in its history, and God holds accountable those who failed to pass on that knowledge to their children.
- The Bible consistently, in both Old Testament and New Testament, teaches that all morally accountable people are charged with sin, even people who have no direct connection with God.

“But,” people will say, “that still seems so cruel and unjust. How can a loving God judge people today by the gospel of Christ who have never even heard the gospel of Christ?”

That brings us to a third principle: *A person can be lost for reasons other than disobeying the gospel of Christ*. Romans 2:12 is a very significant passage. It says, “For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law; and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law.” Notice what this is

saying: People who possess God's law and violate it will be judged. That part we understand--that would point to Jews under the Old Testament and Christians under the New Testament. But it also says that people who have sinned without (apart from) law will be judged apart from the law.

Who are these people? They are the so-called heathen--the ones who "have never seen a Bible." In Romans 1 and 2, Paul gives two reasons why the whole world is accountable before God--two reasons that are NOT connected with a written law:

- They have the testimony of *creation*--"the things that are made."
- They have the testimony of *conscience*--their innate sense of right and wrong.

The testimony of creation is referenced in Romans 1:20--"For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are *without excuse.*" This simply means that the most primitive savage who ever lived should be able to look at his earthly surroundings and the heavens, and even his own body, and conclude that they did not make themselves; some higher, divine being had to have made them. Verse 20 affirms that simply by observing the creation, they ought to be able to see at least two attributes of God: His eternal power and Godhead (divine nature). That is why they will be judged for worshipping cows and snakes. And remember, in many cases they did this willingly and with full knowledge (Romans 1:21, 28).

Another passage that powerfully teaches this principle is Psalms 19:1-4--"The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. *There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.* Their line [literally, their sound] has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world." These verses emphasize the fact that there is no civilization so remote that they are beyond the testimony of nature as to the existence of God.

Next, consider the testimony of conscience. Romans 2:14-15: “For when Gentiles [heathens], who do not have the law, by nature do the things contained in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves; who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them.” What does “by nature” mean in this verse? It means habitual practice, cultural norm, custom, a general sense of right and wrong. All cultures have some kind of moral code or ethical system, whether formal or informal, written or unwritten. And all normal people have consciences which bother them when they violate their own belief systems.

Romans 2:14-15 affirms that God will hold people accountable for the light they have. He will judge them based on how they uphold or violate their own standards of right and wrong.

Here is Romans 2:14 in a paraphrase version, the NLT: “Even Gentiles, who do not have God’s written law, show that they know His law when they instinctively obey it, even without having heard it.”

So here are at least four standards by which all mankind will be judged:

- The law of Moses (for those who lived under it while it was in force).
- The law of Christ (for all people after Pentecost and all people living today).
- The law of conscience and the law of creation (for the Gentile nations who lived before the coming of Christ, and for any persons living today who have never had access to the gospel).

There’s one final line of reasoning we should consider on this subject. It is to ponder the implications of the popular idea that ignorance of God’s law will allow some people to escape condemnation for their sins. If that is true, then Christ could have stayed in heaven, and ignorance would actually be the safer, more preferable state! And even if this were true--that God would let people who didn’t have the Bible off the hook--that would not apply to you and me, because we DO have the Bible!

IF IGNORANCE GETS ONE INTO HEAVEN, THEN BRING THE MISSIONARIES HOME

If a person gets a pass at the judgment because he or she did not know the will of God, then why send missionaries to teach them? We would be doing them more harm than good, because many would reject the gospel upon hearing it. The best thing to do (if this idea is true) would be to bring all the missionaries home and make sure the heathen never hear about Jesus. Obviously, this is incorrect reasoning. Ignorance is not a plan of salvation!

Our conclusion is this: all people who are mentally capable of moral judgment are accountable people, and are lost without the sacrifice of Christ. And people can be lost for reasons other than disobedience to God's revealed law. They can be lost for observing the creation and not acknowledging the Creator. They can be lost for violating their consciences and their own moral sense of "I ought." Whatever the ultimate outcome, we can be sure that God, the righteous Judge, will rule in every single case what is just and appropriate. --John Temples

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NOTE: For additional insight and study on this important topic, I'm reprinting here an article on the subject by the imminent Bible scholar brother Wayne Jackson:

How Will God Judge Those Who Never Hear the Gospel?

By Wayne Jackson

On the judgment day, what will God's response be to those who never had a chance to hear the gospel? No one out of his own reservoir of knowledge and wisdom can emphatically state how God is going to judge any specific case.

For example, did Judas die lost? The New Testament is clear that he perished (Jn. 17:12; Acts 1:25). But what about Solomon? Did he turn from his life of reckless abandon? The book of Ecclesiastes may suggest that he did, but the issue is far from certain.

When God destroyed multiplied thousands on various occasions among the Gentile nations, does this mean that every soul among them was lost (cf. Rom. 2:12-16)? When vast numbers of the Hebrews fell under divinely imposed pestilence, was every accountable person that suffered the consequences of those judgments also eternally lost?

We simply do not know the answers to these questions. One cannot sit down with pen and paper and make a list of all Bible characters, and then write “saved” or “lost” beside each name, as though he knew for certain the destiny of each. In some cases one may know definitively (as with Judas), but the eternal destiny of hundreds of others remains a mystery.

The sovereign Lord has not appointed us to do his work for him — passing final sentence with regard to the eternal welfare of others.

There are, however, several things that we can be certain of regarding his final judgment of mankind.

Righteous Judgment

Abraham once asked the rhetorical question:

“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25).

The Lord will judge the world with his own righteous standard (Psa. 96:13; 98:9; Acts 17:31; 2 Thes. 1:5). He will be fair, for he is not a “respector of persons” (Acts 10:34).

Not even the lost will quibble with him. Rather, they will acknowledge his sovereignty and his justice (Rom. 14:11; cf. 2:5). The ungodly will be “convicted” of the rebellious way of life they pursued (Jude 15).

Certain Judgment

In his speech to the Athenians, Paul declared that God has appointed a day in which he will judge the world. The apostle affirmed that the assurance of that coming day is guaranteed by the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (Acts 17:31). No firmer historical anchor exists!

Dreadful Judgment

There is a declaration in Paul's second letter to the Christians of Thessalonica that is terrifying in its prospect. Hear him: "...and to you that are afflicted rest with us, at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of his power in flaming fire, rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus: who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (2 Thes. 1:7-9).

The point that we must make, in view of the question under consideration, is this. In the opinion of many scholars, the construction of this passage, with the double use of the Greek article, i.e., the ones who know not God, and the ones who obey not the gospel, indicates that two classes of persons are in view. Samuel Green suggested that "two distinct classes, incurring different degrees of punishment" are under consideration (1907, p. 199; cf. Robertson 1931, 45).

Can we affirm, contrary to this statement, that some will be saved who never knew God, or who did not obey the gospel? Many writers make this presumptuous assumption, but he who does so, does so presumptuously. When Peter asked the rhetorical question, "What shall be the end of them who obey not the gospel of God?" (1 Pet. 4:17), he didn't appear to leave the question open to idle speculation.

One must also recall that, in one of his teaching illustrations, Jesus declared that even those who "knew not" the Lord's will, but did things "worthy" of condemnation, will be punished by the returning Master (Lk. 12:47-48).

Some Concluding Points

One thing is perfectly clear. No one can count on ignorance to save him. As Paul told the people of Athens, who worshipped in "ignorance" (though perhaps sincerely), "the times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now he commands men that they should all everywhere repent" (Acts 17:30). The terms "all" and "everywhere" leave very little wiggle room! Additionally, this point has been made frequently, and with much force.

If it is the case that those who never hear the gospel will be saved in their sinful condition simply because they do not know the truth, would it not be better to leave them in that state of ignorance? Because if they are exposed to the truth, and then reject it, there is little controversy as to what their fate will be.

In discussing Romans 1:18-32, Professor Jack Cottrell has written:

“We deceive ourselves if we hold out false hope for the unevangelized based on their non-hearing of the gospel” (1996, 170).

There are difficult issues that we simply must leave in the hands of our all-wise and benevolent God. We are neither knowledgeable enough to see through the fog of our limited information, nor are we righteous enough to presume to say what “should be” the case. So often we tend to err on the side of human weakness.

The Christian’s task is to present the gospel — firmly and compassionately — with absolutely no compromise as to the conditions of salvation and the principles of godly living. But we must refrain from infringing upon divine territory. We must leave the final disposition of the matter to the omniscient God.

If there is one lesson that the Bible student should learn from the Savior’s “parable of the tares,” it is this. Fallible men are not qualified to do the final separation of the “wheat” from the “tares” (Mt. 13:28-29).

We also must avoid meaningless speculations that may place the Lord in an unflattering light.

For example, if salvation is to be bestowed upon honest but ignorant souls, apart from the redemptive mission of Jesus, then why did he come to earth to endure the cross? Did the Father whimsically send him to die, thus initiating a “plan” of redemption, when, in reality, there was no need for such a drastic measure? The very thought of such is unbearable. If we may partially paraphrase Paul, if salvation is accessed apart from Christ, did he not die in vain (Gal. 2:21)?

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