

# WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD ABOUT JESUS?

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Sooner or later, everybody exploring Christianity wrestles with this issue. It can be especially difficult for someone who is a spiritual seeker because it raises suspicions about the very character of God. The question goes like this: If Jesus is the only way to God, what about all the innocent people who have never heard about Christ? Would God really punish them for something that wasn't their fault?

Sometimes people raise this question as an avoidance manoeuvre; they look for difficult theological questions to validate their unwillingness to believe. But many people have genuine concerns about worshiping a God who, from their perspective, is so unjust. Thus, we should not take the issue lightly, but seek to better understand how the Bible addresses it.

It's important to recognize that the Bible offers little direct or sustained instruction on this matter. Related topics are discussed, which are helpful for constructing some valuable inferences, but the lack of direct attention suggests we should hold our conclusions lightly. In addition, it's misleading to use the word "innocent" when describing people who have never heard about Christ. Like all other humans, they are sinful (Romans 3:10-12) and in need of forgiveness for their sins. So what is the plight of those who are so isolated (geographically or culturally) that they have not heard the gospel message or been given any opportunity to respond?

Jesus did categorically say: "I am the way the truth and the life, no-one comes to the Father except through me." What is certain is that no other way, no alternative belief system or actions, exists for us to escape judgment - our situation was so dire it took God himself coming to rescue us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Yet, this doesn't say that people who have never heard of Jesus cannot be saved.

## God is fair

At the heart of this concern is the question of whether or not we can know that God is fair and just. If we can know for sure that he will act completely justly and fairly on judgement day, without some being unfairly prejudiced because they never heard, then our question will be largely settled even though we don't know the detailed mechanics of how he will work it all out.

## Here is some biblical evidence that God is fair:

1. God (as revealed in the Bible) has revealed as one of his dominant attributes his perfect justice, and perfect fairness. It is a theme that is clearly demonstrated again and again in stories of people's lives captured in the Bible.

The Bible even asks rhetorically, “Will not the judge of all the earth do what is right?”

2. God can be completely fair because he knows all the facts, seeing every intent and motive of every human heart (1 Corinthians 4:5).

3. God is fair because he only requires people to respond based upon what they know (Romans 2:11-12). God bases his judgment on the light that has been given a person and the response that a person makes to this revelation.

Ultimately, we trust that God is good, loving, just, and fair. The Bible says that, “the LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love” (Psalm 145:8). We have to settle the fact that God is absolutely fair, because the alternative is absurd - why would God Himself come and die for us if he was devious and unfair? No, if he went beyond justice to mercy in sending Jesus, we can believe he is absolutely fair.

This leads to another question ...

### **What light have all people been given?**

Firstly, we all have the light of creation. In Romans 1:19-20, Paul explains that people possess the light of creation because the invisible attributes of God are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made. God’s creation is a powerful revelation of our Creator. God has clearly proven his existence by what he has made. “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech, and night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard” (Psalms 19:1-3). No one can say they have not been exposed to a glimpse of God through his creation.

Secondly, we all have the light of conscience. In Romans 2:11-15, Paul, a leader of the early church, explains that God will judge everyone on the basis of what they know. He explains that the Jew who knew the Jewish Law in the Scriptures will be judged by that Law. But for the Gentiles who didn’t have the Scriptures, God deals with him on the basis of his conscience. Since God knows the heart of man He knows if a man has obeyed his conscience or rejected its accusations. The conscience of man is the proof that the law of God is written on every man’s heart. Even tribesman in the depth of the jungles of Borneo have been given a conscience.

### **God promises to respond to those who reach out to him**

The Bible says, “Anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists and that he responds to those who earnestly seek Him”. He would not have us believe something that is false, so it follows that, if someone through the

light of creation and the light of conscience believes that God exists and diligently begins to search for him, God will move heaven and earth to reveal himself and Jesus to them. Said another way, if people respond to the light they have been given, God will give them more light, the light of the gospel. Church history has thousands upon thousands of stories to attest to this reality. Let's look at two such stories...

### **The example of Cornelius**

Cornelius, a Roman centurion, is the best biblical example of this fact (Acts 10). This man believed and feared God but he didn't know who God was or that the Messiah had come. Therefore, an angel was sent by God to tell Peter to go tell this man about Jesus. Cornelius heard the message and responded with faith, and had a powerful experience of Jesus himself. Similarly, there are countless stories of people in Muslim and Buddhist and Communist countries who have had dreams, visions and other encounters where Jesus is revealed to them apart from any human intervention. (However, the Bible tells us that this is not God's normal way of revealing himself to people. He is committed to human instrumentality as his main way of getting the message of his grace to us. He desires for Christians to be willing to take his message to those who have not heard.)

### **The example of China**

General Mao kicked all missionaries out of China, and made illegal all forms of Christianity except his own puppet church, enforcing this law with the most unjust persecution and punishment. But as China has opened up to the West increasingly in the last decade or two, it is remarkable to see what God has been doing in that nation: there has been amazing growth in the underground church of China. Against all odds, over 120 million people have put their faith in Christ in the last 50 years.

A good window into what God has been doing there is the book, 'The Heavenly Man' which is an autobiography by Brother Yun (available at most Christian bookshops). His story is one of Christ supernaturally revealing himself to him and to thousands of people around him, and confirming the truth of Jesus with countless miracles, visions and amazing answers to prayer.

### **Venturing into the realm of theological speculation**

The Bible is a practical book not a philosophical one. But for the sake of this question, let's venture into the realm of theological speculation. Firstly, we should understand that Christ's life, death and resurrection is the basis for salvation. Scripture affirms that people receive this gift of grace when they accept Christ and his gift of salvation by faith. But (and many Christian scholars have suggested this answer) perhaps there are special

circumstances where God applies Christ's atoning work to individuals who were, for various reasons outside their control, prevented from knowing about Christ. For example, theologians generally agree that people who lived before Christ and yet trusted in the mercy of God, experienced the mercy of Jesus before the event of Christ's coming, much like we experience the mercy of Jesus after the event of Christ's coming. They agree that God is probably gracious to infants who die at an early age or to those who are mentally incapable of hearing and understanding the gospel message. In this sense, they are reconciled to God "through" Christ, but not in conjunction with an explicit affirmation of faith. Could it be the same for individuals who have not heard simply because of when and where they were born, and that God has the ability to discern who would respond positively if they did have the opportunity?

### **Answering our question with a question**

Finally, this question has a flipside to it that we would do well to consider: What about those people who have heard? The Bible is very clear: If we have heard the message of Jesus, then we are responsible before God for what we do with what we know. So we must be very careful of the danger of excusing our lack of faith in Christ on the basis of a philosophical question.

Jesus, in the Gospels, often answered philosophical questions with personal ones. He knew the human tendency to delay decisions on the basis of hiding behind questions. Jesus once asked his disciples, 'Who do you say I am?' Perhaps in response to our philosophical question, 'What about those who haven't heard about you?' he answers with a personal question, 'Based on what you have heard, who do you say I am? Will you trust in me?'