



# What About Those Who Have Never Heard the Gospel?

By Mark Rogers

## DIFFICULT Issues

The talk show host proclaimed, “There are many paths to what you call God. There can’t possibly be only one way,” as her eager audience listened attentively. One audience member hesitantly interjected, “What about Jesus? Isn’t He the only way?” The host responded, “What if you are somewhere on the planet and never hear the name of Jesus? But yet you live with a loving heart, as He would have you live, but you have never heard of Jesus, are you saying those people can’t go to heaven?” This is a common objection to Christianity in our pluralistic and relativistic culture. It is common even among religious people. In a recent poll, 79% of self-described religious Americans agreed with the idea that many religions—not just their own—can lead to eternal life.<sup>1</sup> So as Christians who believe and proclaim that faith in the saving

work of Jesus Christ is the *only* way to a right relationship with God, how should we answer the question that we will inevitably hear: “What about those who have never heard of Jesus?” Or sometimes the question is asked this way: “How could a loving God condemn people who have never even heard of Jesus?” As with all questions, we need to look and see what God says in His word—the Bible.

### ***1. All People Have Knowledge of God***

First, we must understand that all people have knowledge of God. Many assume that if someone has never read the Bible or heard the gospel, then they must not know anything about God. As a result, they think, “How can God judge someone for sinning against Him if they do not even know who He is?” The truth is, though, that every person knows who God is. The Bible teaches that God has revealed Himself to all people through the world He has made. The

<sup>1</sup>See The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life’s “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” which polled 36,000 adults, <http://religions.pewforum.org/>.

Psalmist teaches that “the heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). The Apostle Paul, speaking of all people, says, “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.” This means that a person does not have to read a Bible or hear a preacher to know about God. God is declaring who He is to everyone, everywhere, at all times, through the world He has made. His glory, power, and nature are “clearly perceived” by anyone who looks up at the innumerable stars on a dark night, or contemplates the vastness of the ocean, or observes a budding tree. God also reveals Himself and His law through the human conscience. Romans 2:14-15 teaches that people who have never read the Bible still have a conscience that bears witness to them about God’s law. God has not left Himself without a witness.

## ***2. All People Suppress This Knowledge and Sin Against God.***

So how do people respond to the knowledge of God that they receive? Romans 1-3 gives us a clear answer to this question: all people “suppress the truth” (1:18). While we should respond to God’s revelation by worshiping Him and giving thanks, we instead rebel against Him and worship the creation rather than the Creator (1:21-23). Human beings receive truth about God, but our sinful hearts lead us to suppress this truth and replace it with false gods. This suppression and replacement process appears in many forms. Sometimes it takes the form of materialism; other times it may appear as some pious form of religion. But no matter what form it takes, God tells us that the suppression and rejection of the true God is wicked. In Romans 3, the Apostle leaves no

doubt that all people are sinners in rebellion against God: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. . . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:10-12,23). When the Bible says that *all* have turned aside, and that *none* is righteous, and that *all* have sinned, that is exactly what it means. Every person is a sinner who has rejected a clear knowledge of God, even those that have never heard the gospel.

## ***3. God condemns people for their sin, not for rejecting the gospel.***

Most people think that God is going to condemn some people to hell. We usually like to think that God will condemn those that are more wicked than us, but that most people will end up okay. If nothing else, many think that God will judge evil people like Adolf Hitler. The question of who God will judge is of eternal importance and should be answered not by what we would prefer, but by what God has revealed in the Bible.

The Bible clearly teaches that God will judge all sinners. Look at Romans 1:18: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” Note two things in this verse. First, God’s wrath is being revealed against *all* unrighteousness, not just the most unrighteous, or the people more sinful than me, or the people who sin only after reading the Bible. God is a holy God who will judge every sin. Second, notice that this verse says God’s wrath is against those “who suppress the truth.” Here, the word “truth” is referring to the knowledge of God revealed through creation, which Paul describes in the subsequent verses (1:19-21). Nowhere does the Bible say that God will judge *only* those

who reject the gospel. Instead, God's wrath comes against all who suppress the knowledge of God and choose to sin rather than to love and worship Him. We have seen in the previous section that *all* have sinned and rejected the knowledge of God. Therefore, *all* deserve the wrath of God, even those who have not heard the gospel. As Carl Henry has said, "All are judged by what they do with the light they have, and none is without light."

#### ***4. The only way for anyone to be saved from judgment is to trust in Jesus Christ.***

God is just and holy and will punish all sin, but he is also loving and gracious and desires to save sinners. Therefore He has provided a way for sinful, rebellious people to have their sins forgiven. Jesus, the Son of God, came to earth as a man, lived a perfect life, and then died on a cross. He died as a substitute for sinners, thereby taking upon Himself the punishment and wrath that we deserve. The only way to be forgiven and avoid the wrath of God is to trust in Jesus and His wrath-bearing work for us on the cross. The Bible teaches clearly that there is no other way to be saved. The Apostle Peter preached, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Jesus Himself said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

So what about those who have never heard of Jesus? Some think that maybe there is another way for them to be saved, other than Jesus. Paul deals with exactly this question in Romans 10. Right after explaining that all who call on Jesus will be saved, he asks, "But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard" (Rom. 10:14)? His answer is that a preacher must be sent and go to proclaim the truth about Jesus, for "faith comes

from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:14-17). The only hope for any sinner, whether she lives in America, France, or the Sahara Desert, is the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is why Christians participate in evangelism and missions: in order to tell sinners that God has provided a way to be forgiven and reconciled to God.

#### ***Is this Just?***

At the heart of questions about those who have never heard the gospel is often the accusation, or at least the feeling, that God would be unjust to condemn these people. So, is it just? The answer is, yes, it is just for God to punish sinners, and the Bible teaches that all people on earth are sinners.

In fact, if God is just, He *must* punish sinners. Imagine seeing a story on the news about a man who robbed a car at gunpoint, then held up a convenience store while taking two people hostage. After leaving the store he did not have enough money, so he robbed a bank, injuring three people in the process. At the trial, video evidence is presented along with multiple eyewitness testimonies and a signed confession. The man is clearly guilty. Now imagine the judge hearing all the evidence then saying, "Defendant, you are clearly guilty. But, I am a good judge and loving judge, so I forgive you. You are free to go." If you saw that on the news, you would not think that judge is good and righteous. A judge that does not punish criminals is unjust and negligent. God is the judge of all the earth. He is a good and just judge, and will not let the guilty go free.

#### ***Is this Fair?***

The question of justice and fairness are similar, but distinct, questions. Someone may be able to see how God can *justly* punish a person who has not heard the gospel. But they may think it is not *fair* for

God to give some people an opportunity to hear the gospel, while others do not receive the same opportunity. When someone questions God's fairness at this point, they are confusing mercy and fairness. Mercy is not required for God to be fair. God could fairly and justly judge all of us and forgive no one. The fact that He sent His own Son to die for sinners was an act of absolute, unmerited grace. The fact that He makes this good news known to anyone is again an act of mercy. Rather than questioning the fairness of God for not acting like we think He should, we should rejoice and be amazed that He offered this sinful and rebellious world any mercy at all—especially at the cost of the blood of His Son.

### ***Additional Questions***

There are several other common questions and objections that often occur in conversations about this topic. There is only space for two here. First, *What if a person who has not heard the gospel has a good heart, seeks after God, and throws himself on the mercy of God? Will they be saved?* The Bible teaches that this simply never happens. No person has a good heart and no one seeks after God (Romans 3). We all have wicked and rebellious hearts and will only genuinely seek after God and trust in Him when our hearts are changed by the Holy Spirit through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Second, *Does God sometimes tell people about Jesus directly, leaving no need for another person to tell them the gospel?* There are no examples in the New Testament of someone being saved without coming into contact with a human messenger of the gospel. In fact, Romans 10 teaches that if someone is going to know about and call upon Jesus for salvation, a human messenger must go and share the good news. While it may seem appealing to think that God sometimes saves people by speaking the gospel

directly to them, He has given no indication in the Bible that this is actually the case. Christ has called His church to take the gospel to all nations, and has told us of no "Plan B."

In the end, this question about those who have never heard the gospel is not just about those in distant lands. These truths should remind us that we, just like them, are sinners in need of God's grace. By God's mercy, we have heard the good news of Jesus Christ. We must ask ourselves: What have we done with the gospel? Have we trusted in Christ? Are we doing whatever we can to see the gospel of Jesus Christ spread to our friends, our neighbors, and to the ends of the earth? May God help us answer all of these questions in a way that glorifies Him and His great mercy.

*Mark Rogers is a member of Crossway Community Church and is working on a PhD in historical theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.*