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The Fate of Those Who Never Hear the Gospel

by David Dunlap

Christians, for generations, have wrestled with the question of the fate of those who never hear the gospel. Many have wondered upon what basis will God judge these unevangelized millions. Many have concluded that God, in some way, will allow them into heaven, despite never having believed in Christ. Paul Kanamori (1857-1945), the great Japanese evangelist, had a very dear mother who was a devout Buddhist. Every morning she rose before dawn, lit candles, burned incense, and prayed to Buddha. Unfortunately, she died without ever coming to salvation in Jesus Christ. However, Kanamori said he expected to see his mother in heaven.¹ C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), the well-known Christian apologist, once wrote, "There are people in other religions who are being led by God's secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it."² In our day, Emerging Church leaders argue for a form of "universalism" where people from all world religions will be saved and admitted into heaven. Emerging Church author William P. Young writes in his best-selling book *The Shack*, "You asked me what Jesus accomplished on the cross; so now listen to me carefully: through His death and resurrection, I am fully reconciled to the world."³

The Bible and the Fate of Those Who Never Hear

However, we must ask, what does the Bible say about the fate of those who never hear the gospel? As we attempt to answer this question, we urge all Christians to cling to the teaching of Scripture, despite how we might feel emotionally. The Christian gospel says: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). Do we have the right to substitute the name of Buddha, Vishnu, or Krishna for Christ? Of course not. We read also, "Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name in heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The Bible is clear, cogent, and categorical. It allows for only one interpretation. All other statements of Scripture which are less clear must be interpreted in light of the broad teaching of the New Testament.

How Does God Save Men?

In chapters eight through ten of the book of Acts, we find the Lord reaching out to three very different types of unsaved individuals with (3)

*"There is not
the remotest
hint in the New
Testament of
any way that
people might be
saved without
personally
putting their
trust in Jesus
and Him
alone."*

Dick Dowsett

*Regional Secretary with
Overseas Missionary
Fellowship*

three very different gospel methods. In chapter eight, God reaches out to an Ethiopian eunuch through the evangelist Philip, using the fifty-third chapter of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. In chapter nine, He reaches out to a hardened Jewish scholar named Saul, without the Scriptures or the preaching of an evangelist, but through the gospel ministry of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. In chapter ten, the Lord again reaches out to bring a man to salvation, in this case a Roman centurion named Cornelius. He was a devout man, praying always, and a giver of alms, but nevertheless unsaved. The Lord in a vision tells him to send for Peter who would come and tell him “words” whereby he would be saved. In these chapters the Lord is exercising a worldwide evangelistic ministry; He brings an African, a Jew, and a European to the saving knowledge of Christ. In His outreach ministry in one case, the Ethiopian eunuch, the primary means was the Word of God, in the second case, Saul, it was the Lord Himself, and thirdly, Cornelius, He worked by the means of an evangelist. Even as the Lord Jesus Christ reached out to the lost peoples of the world in the days of the book of Acts, likewise He is reaching out to the nations of the world today using the same principles.

What About Salvation in the Old Testament?

The Bible is unmistakably clear that eternal salvation is only by faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. This gospel is an exclusive gospel. There is not one gospel for those who have heard the preaching of Christ and another gospel for those who have not heard. Nevertheless, the Bible is also very clear that many of the individuals in the Old Testament were saved by faith. If you were to ask those Old Testament men of God, “Were you saved by believing in the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross?”, they would doubtless reply, “We have never heard of Jesus Christ.” Does this mean they were not saved? By no means. The Bible teaches that although these Old Testament men of faith did not know the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, they knew a great many of the most important gospel truths. In the book of Job, the oldest book of the Old Testament, we read, “...how shall a man be just with God?” (Job 9:2). In another place Job says, “I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at a latter day upon the earth” (19:25). Of Abraham we are told, “He believed in the Lord and He counted it to him for righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). Later, in the New Testament Jesus tells us, “Abraham rejoiced to see My day and was glad...” (John 8:56). The saved of the Old Testament were not noble savages who possessed no knowledge of the true God. Indeed, the Old Testament believers were saved by the same gospel, the same cross, and the same Savior as we are, although separated by time and Calvary.

What About Peter’s Sermon in Acts 10?

As the apostle Peter brought the message of the gospel to Cornelius, he said to this Roman centurion, “But in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him” (Acts 10:35). Some Christians have pointed to these verses as evidence that those in far-off lands who never hear the gospel are saved, nevertheless, if they fear God and do works of righteousness. We would argue that this cannot be the meaning of Peter’s words, for Cornelius was such a man. He “feared God and worked righteousness” but was nonetheless

“In the fifty years that I have labored for the Lord in China, I have never met anyone who claimed to have lived up to the light he had. Moral failure was a universal phenomenon.”

J. Hudson Taylor
(1832-1905)
Missionary leader

unsaved. Peter explains in the following chapter, "...Who shall tell thee words whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved" (Acts 11:14). Cornelius needed the gospel message, as brought by Peter, in order to be saved. What then is the meaning of Acts 10:35? It seems that those throughout the world who "fear God and do works of righteousness" God will bring greater revelation of the gospel, whereby they may believe and be saved. Bible commentator William MacDonald writes,

*"If a man fears God and works righteousness, he is not thereby saved. Salvation is only by faith in Christ. But God will make sure that he has the opportunity to hear the gospel and be saved."*⁴

God is not indifferent to the lost condition of the forgotten people of the world. On the contrary, He is active in winning these unsaved by every means possible.

The Importance of Revelation 5

Some may say, "That is very well to say that God will give opportunity to those who fear God, but where is the evidence?" It may be that the evidence for this work of God is found in Revelation chapter five, where we read, "For Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by Thy blood out of *every kindred, and tongue, and people and nation*" (Rev. 5:9). Here we find that there are redeemed around the eternal throne from every kindred, tongue, people, and nation. As we examine these four words just a little more closely, we begin to see the monumental worldwide evangelistic work that God has been accomplishing over the past millennia.

1. "Kindred" - (Greek "Phule") Many translate this word as "tribes." This verse tells us that some from every tribe in the world will be redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. Concerning these tribes the Greek language authority W. E. Vine writes, "'tribes' are 'people united by family or habitation, clans.'"⁵ *Operation World*, the world missions fact book, tells us that there are 16,000 tribes in the world today.⁶

2. "Tongues" - (Greek "Glossa") This word is more properly translated "languages". Therefore, this verse tells us that there will be some from every language group redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. Missions organizations such as Wycliffe translators tell us that there are approximately 6,900 languages in 200 countries in the world today.

3. "People" - (Greek "Laos") The word "people" means "those of the same race and language." Praise be to God that one day there will be some of every "people" in the world redeemed by the blood of the Lamb! The Sovereign Evangelist is bringing to pass the greatest evangelistic campaign the world has ever known.

4. "Nations" - (Greek "Ethnos") This word relates to the ethnic or cultural groups within nations. *Operation World* tells us that there are 5,000 ethnic subgroups among nations today. There will be some of every ethnic or cultural group who have come to Christ by faith and have been redeemed by the blood of the Crucified One.

The Sovereign of the universe is working in this world so that there will not be one culture, tribe, language, or race that will not know something of the saving power of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

"There is not a culture, nor a country, nor a class of men where the value of this redemptive work will not be effective. The great host of the redeemed will include men from every nation and culture."

James Allan

from *What the Bible Teaches: Revelation*, John Ritchie



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Conclusion

How will God reach the forgotten and forsaken peoples of this world and bring some to salvation in Christ? An eternity of ages will be needed to fully declare it. However, it may be in some cases, as with the Ethiopian eunuch, that He will use the matchless Word of God; in other cases, as with Cornelius, He will use an evangelist or missionary; and it may be in many other cases, as with the apostle Paul, that the Lord Himself will be the One that will win a vast number to the faith. Might it be that the risen Lord Jesus Christ, possibly by means of supernatural revelation, will preach salvation to many in the closed Muslim lands, the difficult Communist lands, and the unreached tribes, tongues, and ethnic groups scattered in the far-off corners of the world? Today, missionary researchers tell us that many in the Muslim world, in China, and in other lands closed to the gospel report that their initial contact with the gospel has come through a dream, vision, or revelation of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures tell us that the Lord Jesus Christ will be active in winning the lost of this world. "My servant ...to whom he was not spoken of, they shall see: and they that have not heard shall understand" (Isa. 52:13). We cannot be sure how He will accomplish this work, and yet we do know that there will be a vast number redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, who with a loud voice will say, "Worthy, worthy is the Lamb that was slain..."

Endnotes

1. J. Herbert Kane, *Christian Missions in Biblical Perspective*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976), p. 164
2. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York, NY: McMillian, 1967), p. 176
3. William P. Young, *The Shack*, (Los Angeles, CA: Windblown, 2007), p. 192
4. William MacDonald, *Acts: Dynamic Christianity*, (Kansas City, KS: Waltherick), p. 114
5. W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of NT Words*, (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1981), p. 155
6. Robert Johnstone, *Operation World*, 6th ed., (London: Paternoster, 2001), p. 15