

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

39 Who Is Going to Be in Heaven?

Scripture: John 14:1-6:

We continue our study of Biblical and personal eschatology. A distinctive feature of the Scriptures, both of the Old Testament and the New, is the constant looking forward to a better future, from which existing sorrows and evil will be wholly absent. Christians are people who believe there will be such a consummation. The justification for this belief is not speculative nor does it derive from the traditions of men. The bias is taken from Scripture, and great is the confidence that God cannot lie. (Titus 1:2) Our concern this morning is with the people heaven will receive.

I. WHO IS GOING TO BE IN HEAVEN?

Heaven bound people are heaven born people. Our physical birth renders us physically alive. The Christian teaching is that there is a second birth which brings spiritual life. This can be known as regeneration. It is the infusion of new life, divine life, life which has no end. A person experiences this new birth by first acknowledging to Christ that he has sinned. Christ clearly said that He *“had not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”* (Matthew 9:12-13) This is followed by a sincere repentance, as Jesus has said. This involves a change of mind and attitude regarding sin. Having realized the guiltiness of sin, and having exercised repentance, the candidate for heaven is now ready to receive Christ as Savior. This is one way of saying that you place your whole trust in Christ as the one who gave His life for your sins. It is upon this reception of Christ and dependence upon Him as your only Savior that the gift of eternal life is received. A final part of the transaction is an open declaration of what has been done. Jesus said, *“Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, Him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven.”* (Matthew 10:32) From the moment of one's regeneration one may be confident of going to heaven. It is the special ministry of the Holy Spirit to grant this assurance. The Word of God assures us that if heaven is our future home, we will know it. *“He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself.”* (1 John 5:10) Romans 8:16 declares, *“The Spirit beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.”* Be assured that if your repentance is genuine and your trust in Christ is sincere, God will keep His

Word and welcome you one day to the eternal home which has been prepared.
(John 1:12)

II. WILL THOSE WHO NEVER HEARD THE GOSPEL GO TO HEAVEN?

The fate of the so called heathen has long been questioned by those who look askance at the doctrine of Christ's substitutionary atonement. Even believers have felt it is a question upon which no one should dogmatize and is best left in the counsels of God. Even so illustrious a spokesman as John Wesley has said, "We have no authority from the Word of God to judge those who are without." Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165) and Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 200) believed the unevangelized of the world found favor with God through their insight and their attendance to virtue under natural law. During the reformation period it was Zwingli's conviction that the fate of the departed is known only to God alone, and since God has revealed so little to us concerning these things, we ought not to seek to know much concerning them. He felt that the heathen would be forgiven by the merits of Christ, although they had never heard of Him.

As an aside I would like to draw your attention to a way in which Jesus viewed the heathen. In the context of a dispute among brothers He said, "If a man will not hear the church, let him be as a Gentile (heathen) and a tax collector." (Matthew 18:17) It is not stretching the point to say that Jesus had in mind the deliberate and willful refusal of a known obligation. This surely broadens the category of heathen to those who have heard the gospel and refused its overtures as well as to include those who have not heard the gospel at all.

Concerning the heathen who live out their entire days without a hearing of the Christian gospel, it would seem to me that several important truths apply. I will suggest an operating formula which I believe to be in keeping with Scripture and a satisfactory answer to this most difficult of questions. The formula is this: Salvation comes to man by the grace of God. This grace is realized through true faith in the maximum revelation that God has given at a certain point in time. Let us consider the following principles.

1. God Is Love:

We must say that man is not always thinking about God. In point of fact, most of the time he is thinking other than God thoughts. Thoughts about material things, pleasures, loved ones, and himself pretty well crowd out any or much consideration about God. But God does not relate to man in that way. God is always mindful of man's wellbeing. It is as if God was saying to men of all

ages and places, "You are in the middle of every thought I have." We are not left to speculate as to how God would have us know Him. We are to understand that God loves all men and desires their salvation and fellowship. (John 3:16; I John 4:8; II Peter 3:9; I Timothy 2:4) It is the feeling of some that we have no direct statement in Scripture as to what God will do with those who die without hearing about the Son He had sent to be everyone's Savior. If it is true that we cannot dogmatize on this matter, let us at least be certain that no loveless act will befall them.

2. **God Is Just:**

A second consideration to keep in mind is that God always acts in keeping with His nature. We know that God is absolutely perfect. He is free from all defilement. (Psalm 99:5; Isaiah 6:3; Leviticus 11:43-45) One aspect of this perfection has to do with the way God relates to mankind. Here we are able to speak of God as being just. He is honorable and fair in all His dealings with man. The plight of the heathen should lead no one to question the justice of God. We read in Job 34:12, *"Surely, God will not act wickedly, and the Almighty will not pervert justice."* (Isaiah 45:21; Revelation 15:3)

3. **The Scripture Seems to Teach that All Who Truly Seek Will Find:**

The story of the African eunuch in Acts 8:26 and following is a familiar one. We find a man pondering the meaning of truth God has been gracious to make available to him. Revelation having been made, the need for illumination arises. Enter Philip the evangelist. Seizing the opportunity, Philip makes known to the inquirer the way of salvation. Joining this story with other promises in Scripture I believe it is a fair assumption that no one will remain outside the grace of God who sincerely desires it. Can every seeker expect a Philip of some kind? I believe He can. Amos 5:4 reads, *"For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel, Seek me and live."* We are admonished in Isaiah 55:6, *"Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."* It is difficult to conceive of a God who has done so much to woo man to Himself remaining undiscovered by the sincere seeker after Him.

Another example of this truth may be drawn from Acts 10:24-35. Here a man by the name of Cornelius desires to hear all things about God that Peter has

been commanded to speak. I realize that the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius were Jewish proselytes and may have had more available to them than the totally uninformed heathen, but in both cases God honored their quest for truth. I just might say that they did have to hear the gospel before they found salvation.

4. No Person Is Without the Knowledge of God:

Here we arrive at a very important point in any discussion concerning the heathen. It is of such importance because it deals with the ignorance or lack of ignorance which marks the so called savage. The assumption is that because such a person has not heard of Christ, there is no knowledge of God. Is that a valid assumption?

A. Revelation:

Traditionally, evangelical people have emphasized revelation as facts or words, particularly, God's disclosure of truth in propositional form in the Bible. This is not, however, the total truth as far as revelation is concerned. Evangelicals have said, "What the Bible states is true." This is fine as far as it goes. It is equally true to move further by saying that God's acts are a part of His revelation as well as His **words**. When we go to the words of the Bible we find that God's acts and propositions are sometimes combined, interdependent and interwoven. These acts of God, however; are not always self-explanatory; they must often be explained by propositional statements to have clear meaning. An example of this is the cross/work of Christ. This is the act of giving according to John 3:16. God's love is the explanation of the act. We would not know this was an act of love embracing such magnitude unless we were told so. Thus we may define revelation as the act and content of divinely communicated truth. God is involved in communication both Himself and His truth to man through His mighty acts and His gracious words.

B. General and Special Revelation:

For convenience sake, theologians have therefore divided revelation into general revelation and special revelation. General revelation is called such because it is available to all men, not only those who have access to the Scriptures, or to Israel or the church. God acts in general revelation. These activities of God are seen in **(1)** nature; **(2)** providence; **(3)** and

conscience. The Bible emphasizes the validity and reality of general revelation in Romans, chapters 1-2. The point is that through general revelation all men have a certain amount of data available to them. This ought to lead all men to acknowledge God. Not to do so will be to be held responsible by God. However, it is important to realize that the Bible does not teach that general revelation, is adequate in itself or all that man needs nor is it in itself saving truth.

C. General Revelation:

The key passage is Romans 1:18-28. The truth conveyed there is that **(1)** man has suppressed the light from nature and has become subject to God's wrath (v.18). **(2)** Natural revelation is genuine and is from God (v.19). **(3)** Natural revelation has been available since the creation of the world (v.20). **(4)** Inasmuch as man has deliberately turned away from this light (v.21-22), God has given man over to the natural result of his folly (v. 24, 26, 28). Natural revelation imparts certain information about God. Four characteristics are usually spoken of; **(1)** His existence, **(2)** His power, **(3)** His eternity, as He preceded what He created, **(4)** His nature as being of a higher order than man who was created.

We understand from this passage that the heathen are responsible for the degree of revelation they have received from nature. (Romans 1:20) It is well to note the words of some who have been discerning here. Aristotle writes, "God, having become unseen to every mortal nature, through His works is now seen." From Plato we learn, "The world must have a cause, and that cause is the eternal Maker." Cicero observes, "What can be so clear when we look at the sky and the heavenly bodies as that there is some deity of surpassing mind by whom these are governed?"

The heathen are responsible for the revelation received in tradition. (Romans 1:21, 28 and possibly 2:15 *"the law written in their hearts."*) These passages seem to imply that there was a greater primitive knowledge of God which was rejected and thus God permitted it to become distorted with the passing of time.

They are responsible for the revelation in conscience. (Romans 2:15-16). This is a divinely given capacity to gauge or be sensitive to the moral quality of an act or attitude. The key passage is Romans 2:14-15 and its value in terms of revelation is to convey some concept of God's holiness

and righteousness. The word for conscience (suneidesis) appears 31 times in the N.T.

It is interesting to note that heathen writers acknowledge rejection of light which has been given. Seneca writes, "We are all wicked; that we blame in another, each will find in his own bosom..." Horace observes, "I see the better course, I follow the worse." The lostness of the heathen is not because they have not heard the gospel. It is rather because they are born in sin and have sinned personally and deliberately in not following the glimmer of light made available to them. Thought inadequate in itself, it held the promise of more light when responded to. (Romans 4:20-22; Hebrews 11:6) Light rejected only brings greater darkness.

5. Greater and Lesser Privileges Will Be Recognized:

The Bible makes much of God's scale of values. (Matthew 12:7, 12, 15, 23:23; Mark 2:27; I Corinthians 3:12; 13:13; Revelation 20:12) Long have we believed that all sins are equal. They are not. All sins are sin but not all sins are equally sinful and some acts are better than others. We are led to believe that God's judgment will take this into account and that His judgment will be different for different people. Hearing the gospel is a serious matter inasmuch as it increases responsibility. (Luke 12:47-48; Matthew 11:20-24) In the last passage the wicked but unknowing people of ancient Sodom were favored over those who possessed knowledge.

What are the criteria by which the heathen will be judged? It will be according to the light they have (Romans 2:12), according to all the truth about each individual (Romans 2:21), according to the strict impartiality and justice of God (Romans 2:11) and according to each man's deeds (Romans 2:6).

6. There Is No Evidence of Salvation Apart from Christ:

We cannot understand how justification can come outside of Christ, but this does not prove that in the infinite wisdom of God there is no way. Could the heathen before the time of Israel have been saved by responding to the light of nature? I don't know. We know that Abram never heard of Christ. He was faithful to the light given him and somehow God applied the blood of Christ to his account. This was also true of Noah. I don't know if John Wesley was right when he wrote, "*He that feareth God and worketh righteousness*

according to the light he has, is acceptable to God.” (Romans 4:9) I do know that the Lord would have all men informed. This He has made very clear. We are thus energized to reach every creature. This is the light we have been given. We would do well to walk in it. The mysteries are best left with God.

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