

WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD?

Sooner or later, everybody exploring Christianity wrestles with this issue. It can be especially difficult for a 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 maneuver; they look for difficult theological questions to validate their unwillingness to believe. But many skeptics 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 tenuously. 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?

The New Testament asserts that the work of Christ is the only way to a right relationship with God (John 14:6, Acts 4:12). There is only one mediator between God and humans: Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5). This is clear. Passage after passage in the New Testament presents Christ as coming to earth, dying on a cross, rising from the dead, and offering his life, death, and resurrection to all who would want to be restored to their heavenly Father. If there were other ways to God, then Christ's sacrifice would have been in vain.

However, we should understand that Christ's work is the basis for salvation. People receive this gift of grace when they accept it by faith, hence the passion Christians have for sharing their faith with others. But some Christian scholars have suggested that there may be 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, God may be gracious to infants who die at an early age or 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 whom God discerns would respond positively if they did have the opportunity?

To be honest, we don't know for sure. Perhaps this is not the case, and therefore it is imperative that Christians continue to share their message of hope with others. Perhaps God is so gracious to judge people based on what they could possibly know and nothing more. But this would not diminish a sense of urgency for both seekers and Christians. Transformation and a purpose in this life remains a motivation to place our trust in Christ and share the good news with others.

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 TNIV). He does not want any to live self-destructive lives, but for all to turn from their sin and be reconciled to him (2 Peter 3:9). Therefore, we are faced with two choices. Will we trust him? And will we help others come to trust him?