



Lesson 9

Will Those Who have Never Heard the Gospel be Lost?

Apologetics Press Advanced Christian Evidences Correspondence Course

WILL THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD THE GOSPEL BE LOST?

INTRODUCTION

Not many people on the planet receive as much sympathy as the natives in the African wilderness. Each and every time we consider the ultimate fate of these people who have not obeyed the Gospel, sympathy is poured out for such individuals who are isolated from the world and, as such, probably have never heard the Gospel. “How could God condemn people who never had the opportunity to hear the Gospel?” the argument goes. So what, exactly, does the Bible have to say about those who have never heard the Gospel—whether it be an African natives or your next door neighbor?

We live on a planet populated by approximately six billion people. **Six billion!** And most of those, it probably would be safe to say, never have been afforded the opportunity of hearing the Gospel message about the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ. Therefore, obviously, they cannot respond in obedience to that saving message—even though they might be willing to do so if presented with the prospect. What will happen to these people? Will they be lost? Or will God make some kind of “special allowance” so that they can be saved and thereby enjoy eternity in heaven with Him and His Son?

As we examine these kinds of questions, it is vitally important that we remember two points. First, “the Judge of all the Earth” **will** “do right” (Genesis 18:25). God is every bit as infinite in His mercy and His grace (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13) as He is in His justice and His severity (Hebrews 10:31). Second, since it is the Word of God that instructs us regarding man’s eternal destiny, and since all men eventually will be judged by that Word (John 12:48), it is to God’s Word that we must go to find answers to inquiries concerning mankind’s ultimate destiny. Fortunately, in His wisdom, God has not left us to our own devices concerning matters that relate to our salvation. As Jeremiah wisely observed: “It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps” (10:23).

WILL A “LOVING GOD” CONDEMN PEOPLE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD THE GOSPEL?

There are those who suggest that surely God would not banish from His presence for eternity those who never had an opportunity to hear and obey the Gospel message in the first place. Consider the following examples. In his 1909 volume, *Systematic Theology*, A.H. Strong wrote:

Since Christ is the Word of God and the Truth of God, he may be received even by those who have not heard of his manifestation in the flesh.... We have, therefore, the hope that **even among the heathen there may be some...who** under the guidance of the Holy Spirit working through the truth of nature and conscience, **have found the way to life and salvation** (p. 843, emp. added).

Another modern-day evangelical, Neil Punt, invoked similar ideas in his book, *Unconditional Good News*, wherein he rejected the idea that sinners actually must believe and obey the gospel in order to be saved because “It is an error to think that there is **anything** that **must be done** to inherit eternal life” (1980, p. 135, emp. added). In *What the Bible Says about Salvation*, Virgil Warren wrote: “Our opinion is that scripture does not automatically assign the unevangelized to endless hell” (1982, pp. 105, emp. added). In their book, *Answers to Tough Questions*, Josh McDowell and Don Stewart stated:

Although the Scriptures never explicitly teach that someone who has never heard of Jesus can be saved, we do not believe that it infers [sic] this. We do believe that every person will have an opportunity to repent, and that God will not exclude anyone because he happened to be born at the wrong place and at the wrong time (1993, p. 137).

Statements such as these certainly could cause some to conclude that God simply will not judge the lost, but instead will deem them worthy of eternal salvation merely (or solely!) because they never had an opportunity in their lifetimes to hear the “good news” made available to humankind through the Gospel of Christ. While at first glance such a notion may appear comforting, and may appease our human sensitivities, the truth of the matter is that it has monstrous theological and spiritual implications. Consider these facts.

CHRIST’S GREAT COMMISSION— AND MAN’S ALIENATION FROM GOD

First—in light of the commands inherent in the Great Commission given by the Lord Himself prior to His ascension back into heaven—how can we entertain any suggestion that the “unevangelized” will be saved? Christ’s instructions were crystal clear: “Go ye therefore, and **make disciples of all the nations**, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: **teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you...**” (Matthew 28:19-20). If the view is correct that the unevangelized peoples of the world will be redeemed without ever having been exposed to (and obeying) the Gospel, then potentially we could be doing them great harm if we carry out the Lord’s command and teach them the Truth. By introducing them to the Gospel, we might well be condemning those who otherwise would have been saved. When R.C. Sproul wrote his book, *Reason to Believe*, he expended considerable effort in explaining why such a position is unscriptural. He prefaced his discussion with the following statements:

The unspoken assumption at this point is that the only damnable offense against God is the rejection of Christ. Since the native is not guilty of this, we ought to let him alone. In fact, letting him alone would be the most helpful thing we could do for him. If we go to the native and inform him of Christ, we place his soul in eternal jeopardy. For now he knows of Christ, and if he refuses to respond to Him, he can no longer claim ignorance as an excuse. Hence, the best service we can render is silence (1981, p. 50).

Ponder the situation of a person who never has the opportunity to hear the Gospel. If the ideas expressed in some of the above quotations are correct, then that person **will be saved necessarily**. But what about the person to whom we present the Gospel message, and who then, of his or her own personal volition, chooses (for whatever reason) to reject it? Having spurned God's offer of salvation through His Son, can such a one **then** be saved? Not according to God's Word!

The writer of the book of Hebrews noted: "For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more a sacrifice for sins" (10:26). In Luke 13:34-35, Christ Himself lamented the rejection of the Gospel message by His own Jewish brethren (who had been presented with the Gospel, but had rebuffed it repeatedly).

Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ...how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her own brood under her wings, and **ye would not!** Behold, **your house is left unto you desolate:** and I say unto you, Ye shall not see me, until ye shall say, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord" (emp. added).

Consider, too, the important spiritual principle set forth in Hebrews 6:4-6, which, although admittedly speaking about people who once had accepted Christ as their Savior and then had abandoned their faith in Him, nevertheless mentions those who at one time were "enlightened" about Who He was and the salvation He offered—only to reject both Him and that salvation. Would it not, then (if the views discussed above are correct), be better simply to keep the Word of God "a secret" from the heathen and the unevangelized so that they—as a result of their ignorance—can be saved and not be put in the position of knowing the Gospel message and possibly rejecting it? In their book, *I'm Glad You Asked*, Kenneth Boa and Larry Moody observed:

Those who have heard the Gospel and rejected it are doubly guilty—they have rejected not only the Father but also the Son. And the Scriptures are clear about the judgment which awaits those who have refused God's offer of salvation. The wrath of God abides on them (John 3:36; cf. Heb. 2:3; 10:26-31) [1982, p. 160].

Second, those who suggest that the heathen and unevangelized will be saved "as a result of their ignorance" of God's law have failed to realize that **such people are lost, not because they are ignorant of God's law, but because they have sinned against Him**. Almost all humans recognize (albeit begrudgingly, at times) that ignorance of the law does not excuse us from the law's penalties and/or punishments. ["But officer, I didn't **know** the speed limit was 15 miles per hour in the school zone." "Yes, sir. The courthouse is open 8 to 5, Monday through Friday. You may pay the \$150 speeding citation at any time during those hours. Have a nice day."] One must distinguish between **knowledge** of a law and the **existence** of a law. If one must **know** the law before he can **transgress** the law, then there would be no such thing

as a “sin of ignorance.” Yet the Bible speaks plainly of that very thing (Leviticus 4:2,22, 27; Acts 3:17; 17:30-31). Ignorance of the law is neither a legitimate excuse nor an effective guarantee of salvation.

Paul wrote in Romans 2:12: “For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without the law: and as many as have sinned under the law shall be judged by the law.” When people are lost, it is due to their having **sinned against God**. Isaiah wrote:

Behold, Jehovah’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, so that he will not hear (59:1-2).

Boa and Moody commented: “**People are not lost because they have not heard. They are lost because they are sinners.** We die because of disease, not because of ignorance of the proper cure” (1982, p. 147, emp. added).

Man is lost as a result of being afflicted with the horrible “disease” of sin—a condition that, unless treated, always is fatal (Romans 6:23). Because God is depicted within Scripture not only as loving (2 Corinthians 13:11; 1 John 4:7-16) and merciful (James 5:11), but also as holy (Psalm 22:3) and just (Psalm 89:14; Isaiah 45:19; Revelation 16:7), **He cannot—and will not!—overlook sin. It must be—and will be!—punished.** But is there a remedy for this terminal disease known as “sin”? And if so, what is it?

Yes, fortunately there is a remedy for man’s otherwise lethal condition. He **can** have his sins forgiven. The great Old Testament prophet Isaiah wrote: “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool, **if ye be willing and obedient**” (Isaiah 1:18-19). The key phrase, of course, is “willing and obedient.” But willing to do what? And obedient to what command? To be washed in the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ as God has decreed! The blood of bulls and goats never was able to take away man’s sins, no matter how unblemished the sacrificial animal(s) may have been. But the blood of Christ can (Hebrews 10:4-18). **And it is the only thing that will!** The Scriptures speak clearly to this fact when they state that Christ shed His blood on the cross for our sins (1 Corinthians 15:3; Romans 5:8-9), and that He is the “lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). Furthermore, it is **only through Christ** that a person can be saved from the wrath of God (cf. Romans 5:1, 8:1, and Hebrews 10:31).

The inspired writers of the New Testament placed great emphasis on the necessity of being “in Christ.” In the American Standard Version of the Bible, the phrase “in Christ” appears 89 times in 88 verses. The New Testament makes it clear that it is only when a person is “in Christ” that he has “redemption” (Romans 3:24), “eternal life” (Romans 6:23), “every spiritual blessing” (Ephesians 1:3), “forgiveness” (Colossians 1:14), and “salvation” (2 Timothy 2:10). Those who have been baptized “into Christ” (which is how the Bible tells us we get into Christ—Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3-4) will not be con-

demned (Romans 8:1). What is the logical implication? Those outside of Christ will not have forgiveness, salvation, or eternal life, but will be condemned for their sins. Whether a person has never heard of Christ or whether he simply has heard of Him but not obeyed Him, that person is outside of Christ. According to the apostle Paul, any person who fits into either category will be lost eternally. He said that Jesus will render “vengeance to them that know not God” and to those who “obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thessalonians 1:8). He further described these unbelievers as those “who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

The fact of the matter is, God promised salvation only to those who hear the Gospel message (Romans 10:17), believe on His Son (John 3:16), confess Christ’s name (Matthew 10:32-33), repent of their sins (Luke 13:3), have those sins remitted through baptism (Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21), and remain faithful (Revelation 2:10). Subsequent to the Day of Pentecost, Peter called upon his listeners to: “Repent ye therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out” (Acts 3:19). The word for “blotted out” derives from a Greek word meaning to “wipe out, erase, or obliterate.” The New Testament uses the word to refer to “blotting out” the Old Law (Colossians 2:14) and to “blotting out” a person’s name from the Book of Life (Revelation 3:5). One of the great prophetic utterances of the Old Testament was that “their sin will I remember no more” (Jeremiah 31:34).

There was no happy solution to the justice/mercy dilemma. There was no way that God could remain just (since justice demands that the wages of sin be paid) and yet save His Son from death. Christ was abandoned to the cross so that mercy could be extended to sinners who stood condemned (Romans 3:23; 6:23). God could not save sinners by fiat—upon the ground of mere authority alone—without violating His own attribute of divine justice. Paul discussed God’s response to this problem in Romans 3:24-26 when he stated that those who are saved are

...justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, in his blood...for the showing of his righteousness...that he might himself be just and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus.

Mankind’s salvation was no arbitrary arrangement. God did not decide merely to consider men sinners, and then determine to save them via a principle of mercy and grace. Sin had placed men in a state of antagonism toward God that was so severe, men were referred to by inspiration as God’s “enemies” (Romans 5:10). Mankind’s sin could be forgiven, and men once again could become God’s friends, only because of the vicarious death of God’s Son.

CONCLUSION

Some have suggested that Christians are narrow-minded when they suggest that mankind’s salvation can be found **only** in Jesus Christ. Truth, however, **is** narrow! But what about sincerity? Does it count for nothing? While

sincerity certainly is important in a relationship with God, the fact of the matter is that God does not want just **sincerity**; He wants **obedience**. Saul (who later would be called Paul) was entirely “sincere” in his persecution of Christ’s church, and even did what he did to oppose it “in all good conscience” (Acts 22:19-20; 23:1; Galatians 1:13; 1 Corinthians 15:9), yet God struck him blind (Acts 9:3-9). Paul later would admit in his own writings that he was sincere, but **sincerely wrong**. Kurt DeHaan observed:

Isn’t it enough to be sincere? No, it’s not. **Sincerity is important, but it’s not an adequate substitute for knowing the truth.** Sincerity doesn’t pass a college entrance exam. Sincerity doesn’t win an automobile race. Sincerity doesn’t repair a broken washing machine. Sincerity won’t bake the perfect cake. And sincerity won’t pay your rent or mortgage. **Sincerity will not fill the gap when there is a lack of skill or knowledge, nor will all the sincerity in the world transform error into truth** (1988, p. 8, emp. added).

While the Lord certainly wants us to be sincere, He also requires something else, which is why He instructed: “If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

The Truth of the Lord is narrow, as Jesus made clear in His beautiful Sermon on the Mount (read specifically Matthew 7:13-14). In fact, Christ observed: “Not everyone that saith unto me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Jesus later commented on the attitude of the people of His day when He said: “This people honoreth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men” (Matthew 15:8-9).

Will those who never have heard the Gospel be lost—even though they might be “sincere”? Indeed they will be! Their separation from God throughout eternity will have been caused by two factors: (1) they sinned against God; and (2) they had not been taught—and thus were not able to take advantage of—the Gospel plan of salvation that was offered to all men as the free gift of God (Romans 5:15-21; 6:23b) to restore them to a covenant relationship with Him.

For those of us who **do know** the truth regarding what men must do to be saved, the burden to share that truth with those who **do not know it** presses down with unrelenting fury. When Philip stood in the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch who was on his way back from Jerusalem, he asked: “Understandest thou what thou readest?” That Ethiopian gentleman’s response still rings in our ears over two thousand years later: “How can I, except some one shall guide me?” (Acts 8:30-31). That is the Christian’s job—to gently guide the lost into “the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17). In 2 Corinthians 4:5-7, Paul wrote:

For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.... But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God, and not from ourselves.

A chapter earlier, the apostle had reminded those first-century Christians at Corinth: “Ye are...an epistle of Christ...written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in tables that are hearts of flesh” (2 Corinthians 3:2-3).

What a blessed opportunity—and onerous responsibility—to be the “earthen vessel,” the “living epistle,” used by the Lord to bring another soul back into His fold. Realizing that “he who converteth a sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall cover a multitude of sins” (James 5:20), and knowing the “goodness and severity of God” (Romans 11:22), dare we countenance failure? No!

Those who never have heard—and thus never have obeyed—the truth of the Gospel message **will** be lost! And if we do not do our utmost to get that message to them—so will we! While the unevangelized may **be** lost, they do not have to **remain** lost. And we may be all that stands between them and an eternity of separation from God.

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Questions—Lesson 9

TRUE OR FALSE

Write TRUE or FALSE in the blanks before the following statements.

- _____ 1. A loving God would not condemn people who never have heard the Gospel.
- _____ 2. By sharing the Gospel with people who never have heard it, we might be doing great harm to people who otherwise would have been saved.
- _____ 3. Sincerity and a good heart will save many people on the Day of Judgment.
- _____ 4. God is every bit as infinite in His mercy and His grace as He is in His justice and His severity.
- _____ 5. The planet on which we live is populated by approximately six million people.
- _____ 6. The Truth of the Lord is narrow.
- _____ 7. There are certain commands from God that people **must** obey to inherit eternal life.
- _____ 8. In Acts 2, Peter told his listeners all they had to do was “believe in Jesus” and they would be saved.

MULTIPLE CHOICE

Circle the correct answer(s).

1. God pledged salvation to those who:
- (a) Never have heard the Gospel (b) Pray to ask Jesus to come into their hearts
- (c) Are simply “sincere” (d) Respond to the Gospel message in “obedience of faith”
2. People are lost because:
- (a) They have not heard the Gospel (b) They are not a member of a denomination
- (c) Their parents sinned (d) They have sinned

3. The inspired writers of the New Testament placed a great emphasis on the necessity of being:
 - (a) Sinless (b) Baptized (c) In Christ (d) Merely sincere
4. Ignorance of a particular law does what?
 - (a) Excuses us from penalties (b) Means we are not bound by that law
 - (c) Means we technically cannot break the law (d) Does not excuse us from that law
5. Which of the following are necessary for salvation?
 - (a) Belief in Christ as the Son of God (b) Confession
 - (c) Repentance (d) Being baptized for the remission of sins

COMPLETE THE BIBLE VERSE (NEW KING JAMES VERSION)

1. Matthew 28:19-20: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the _____, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."
2. Hebrews 10:26: "For if we _____ willfully after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins."
3. John 1:29: "The next day, John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Behold! The _____ of God who takes away the sin of the world!'"
4. Romans 10:17: "So then _____ comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."
5. John 14:15: "If you love Me, _____ My commandments."
6. Matthew 7:21: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord' shall _____ the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven."

7. Matthew 15:8-9: “These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in _____ they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”

FILL IN THE BLANKS

1. Boa and Moody correctly observed: “People are not lost because they have not heard. They are lost because they are _____.”
2. Josh McDowell and Don Stewart wrongly asserted: “We do believe that every person will have the opportunity to _____, and that God will not exclude anyone because he happens to be born at the wrong place and at the wrong time.”
3. Kurt DeHaan correctly stated: “Sincerity is important, but it’s not an adequate substitute for knowing the _____.”
4. A.H. Strong incorrectly stated: “We have, therefore, the hope that even among the heathen there may be some...who under the guidance of the Holy Spirit working through the truth of nature and conscience, have found the way to life and _____.”
5. Virgil Warren wrongly wrote: “Our opinion is that scripture does not automatically assign the _____ to endless hell.”

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