

# YAMs

## Summer Midweek 2009



### Week Six:

What happens to people who have never heard of Jesus when they die? Do they still go to Hell?



**covenant chapel**

**Question:** What happens to people who have never heard of Jesus when they die? Do they still go to Hell?

**Short Answer:**

First, God is perfectly loving and perfectly just, and that Jesus is the only way to spend eternity with God in heaven. God would violate his love and justice by holding someone accountable to truth they did not know. Therefore, God will not condemn an innocent person for his ignorance. An innocent, ignorant person would have nothing to fear.

The problem is that there are no such people. No one is innocent. What's more – and this is even more controversial – no one is ignorant. God has revealed enough of himself to *all* people that “ignorance” is not an excuse. Therefore everyone is judged by the same standard. Since Jesus is the only way to God, people who don't trust Jesus – regardless of their exposure to the gospel message – do spend eternity separated from God in hell.

This difficult truth should and will affect the way we live – motivated with passionate urgency to send and become missionaries who share the gospel of Jesus Christ with the world.

**Long Answer:**

When we understand and believe the good news of Jesus, God transforms our hearts to care about other people who do not know him. As this happens, we inevitably have to answer this question.

It is a difficult and controversial one. But I believe it is a question that the Bible provides a clear answer to. And the answer should and will affect the way we live as followers of Jesus.

Before we try to answer this question, we should recognize and know three core truths from the Bible:

1. God is perfectly loving
2. God is perfectly just
3. Jesus is the only way to God

**Perfectly Loving and Perfectly Just:**

First, God is completely loving. (Exodus 34:6; Nehemiah 9:7; Psalm 86:5; Psalm 86:15; Psalm 103:8; Psalm 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). More than that, God *is* love (1 John 4:8). Therefore it is God, not us, who sets the standard and definition of love. When we make statements like, “a *loving* God would never condemn someone to hell,” we are judging God by our (incorrect) definition of love.

At the same time that God is completely loving, God is completely just:

**Numbers 14:18** - The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation.

In the Old Testament, God exercised his justice regularly. He destroyed the entire population of the earth except for eight people with a huge flood. He commanded and enabled his chosen people Israel to annihilate entire groups of people – men, women and children - who would have otherwise turned Israel away from God. And later when Israel turned away from Him anyway, He did not spare even his own people from righteous judgment – first Israel, then Judah.

When we think about it, it's difficult to reconcile how God could be both perfectly loving and perfectly just. The answer comes in Jesus – the only way to eternal life with God in heaven.

### Jesus is the only way to God

In order to correctly consider this week's question, we have to grasp the truth that Jesus is the only way to God. If we believe that salvation can come through a variety of religions or traditions, then it really wouldn't matter if people hadn't heard of Jesus when they died. As long as someone followed one of the acceptable paths, he would go to heaven.

But Jesus is the only way, as Jesus himself makes the bold claim:

**John 14:6** – Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

In total agreement, the early church echoes the same truth:

**Acts 4:12** – And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

These (and other) passages are usually the only basis for a Christian's argument that Jesus is the only way to God. But I think an equally effective, if not more effective, argument is that the death and resurrection of Jesus is the only way God can remain completely loving and completely just.

Why? If not for Jesus, God would have to err on one side or the other. If God were to be completely loving, everyone would be automatically saved. Everyone would live with him for eternity in heaven. God would have to ignore his just nature that hates wickedness (Hosea 9:15) and punishes sin for generations (Exodus 20:5).

On the other hand, if God were to be completely just, everyone would pay for his own sin. Everyone would spend eternity in Hell. God would have to ignore his loving nature that desires all to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9) and delights in showing compassion and forgiving sin (Micah 7:18-19).

Jesus is the only answer for this seemingly dualistic nature of God. Through the cross, God himself provides the means for men to be saved. Because of his *love* God sends Jesus to bear the wrath of God's *justice* (1 John 4:10). Because God has provided the means, he remains both perfectly loving and perfectly just. Loving because we can be saved by his grace through faith in Jesus. Just because sin is still paid for in the substitutionary death of Jesus.

It's interesting to note that Christianity is the only religion that has an answer for this seemingly dualistic nature of God. Every other religion has to alter their definition and understanding of God's love and God's justice.

So Jesus is the only way to God because he is the only one who actually deals with sin without changing the loving and just nature of God.

One last, important thought on this. Out of the 11 major world religions, ten teach salvation comes through human effort. Christianity is the only exception, teaching that salvation is not dependent on what we do, but what Jesus did.

Now, with the understanding of these three core truths, we can seek to answer this week's question.

### Never Heard?

First, because God is perfectly loving and perfectly just, and because God himself has provided the means for our salvation through Jesus alone, we conclude that people who reject Jesus go to hell.

We should weep that such people spend eternity in hell. God takes no joy in it (Ezekiel 33:11) and we shouldn't either. At the same time, most of us are okay with that concept - at least when it pertains to people who have heard the gospel and who have made a conscious, blatant decision to reject it.

But what about people who haven't ever heard about Jesus? If they never had a chance to hear the truth about Jesus, God would never hold them accountable for that, right?

It is true that God would be unjust for holding someone accountable to truth they did not know. And so, in theory, yes – God will not condemn an innocent person for their ignorance. An innocent, ignorant person would have nothing to fear.

The problem is that there are no such people. No one is innocent. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). There is not one righteous person, not a single one (Romans 3:10).

What's more – and this is even more controversial – no one is ignorant. God has revealed enough of himself to *all* people that ignorance is not an excuse. The clearest teaching on this is found in Paul's letter to the Romans:

**Romans 1:18-23** - For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. 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 and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Here's what we see from this passage: regardless if people have heard of Jesus or not, men will be judged by their failure to recognize and honor the grace and power of God revealed in nature and in their own consciences. Paul says that God has clearly and plainly revealed himself to all men for all time. There is no such thing as an excuse in this regard.

Furthermore, even those people who have never heard about Jesus are guilty of rejecting him, as they "suppress the truth" that has been revealed. People suppress the truth that they have. That is the basis for their judgment.

From this we are left to conclude that there are no innocent, ignorant people. Therefore everyone is judged by the same standard. Since Jesus is the only way to God, people who don't trust Jesus – regardless of their exposure to the gospel message – do spend eternity separated from God in hell.

This is a teaching we may never like or think is fair. Certainly it is one that we may never fully understand why God works this way. But, as much as I might not like this truth, I believe the Bible is clear on it.

When we understand this truth, we can do two things with it. We can be mad that God works this way, or we can be filled with passionate urgency to reach people with the gospel, for that is God's most frequently appointed means of offering his salvation to people.

## Motivation:

This difficult truth should affect the way we live. In fact, it should affect the way we live much more than if God didn't work this way.

Logically, if people who never heard of Jesus automatically went to heaven, we would have a huge motivation problem for missions. Instead of sharing the gospel with people, we would instead want to make sure that as few people as possible heard it.

Why? If they don't know about Jesus, they can't reject him. So ignorance would be the best strategy to ensure people went to heaven.

But clearly, Jesus teaches us that our mission in this life is to make disciples. (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). He also teaches that not everyone will accept this message (Luke 10:16; John 12:48; Romans 10:16).

Furthermore, the Bible teaches the following:

**Romans 10:13-17** – For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?...So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

If we look at this passage in reverse, we can see the process God most often uses for bringing salvation to non-Christians:

1. Christians are sent to preach the gospel
2. Through preaching, non-Christians hear the gospel
3. By hearing the gospel, some non-Christians believe
4. Those non-Christians who believe call on Jesus to save them
5. Jesus saves them

At the same time, it is possible for God to bring salvation by another process. For example, in the Islamic world, where Christian mission is incredibly difficult and severely prohibited, many former Muslims have had visions and dreams where Jesus spoke to them. And we know from the Bible that God can and does supernaturally reveal himself to some people who oppose and even hate him...

**Acts 9:1-5** - But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you

persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

While supernatural revelations do happen (and we should rejoice when they do) God most often chooses to work in and through his followers to bring the message of salvation to those who haven't heard, understood, and believed.

Even Paul, who was himself saved by a supernatural revelation of Jesus, did not sit back and wait for Jesus to reveal himself the same way to others. More than anyone else, Paul was motivated with passionate urgency because he understood that God saves people through the ministry of his followers.

Therefore all of us, like Paul, should be motivated to obey Jesus by going and making disciples of all nations.

I urge you to wrestle with this difficult truth. Lodge it in your conscience. If we grasp it, we will not be able to live the same way. Our hearts will break for those who have never heard the gospel and we will be moved by the Holy Spirit to send missionaries – or even become missionaries ourselves – to the unreached people of the world.

God is loving, God is just and Jesus is the way to God. May we always be people motivated to share that truth with those who don't know or don't believe.

## [Learn More](#)

### **From the Bible:**

**Romans (especially chapters 1-11)**

### **From Books:**

***What About Those Who Have Never Heard?* – Ronald Nash**