

WHAT HAPPENS TO PEOPLE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD ABOUT JESUS -WILL THEY GO TO HELL?

Acts 4:12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave his life for the sins of the whole world, dear friends,

“Exclusive” is a dirty word. An exclusive club that bans from membership those who have not obtained a certain social standing? An exclusive political group that bars membership on account of race? An exclusive party that invites only those with good looks and good money? They all have an air of discrimination, don't they? They all have an air of arrogance or snobbery, don't they?

People come to church because they expect that there they will not find the same kind of problems and weaknesses which they see in the world around them. They come to escape from a world that discriminates and excludes, a world that judges, evaluates and shuts out on the basis of social standing, age, money and physical appearance. When they think of the church, they think of Jesus, and they come for shelter, for understanding, for being included by a God who loves all.

No wonder, then, that many people are confused, if not turned off, when they hear in the message of the Christian Church a claim that sounds exclusive. Jesus himself made such an exclusive claim when he said, **"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."** (John 14:6) If there could be any doubt about that exclusive claim of Jesus, the early apostles of our Lord repeated it as they were building the Christian church. In the words of our text for today, the apostle Peter before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem said, **"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."** (Acts 4)

What especially bothers people is the fate of the heathen who never hear the name of Christ in their lifetime. Can people who have never heard the Gospel

be saved anyway? Can our God be just, can he be fair, can he truly be a loving God if he sends people to hell for never having heard the message of salvation? Are Christians wrong in insisting that Jesus is the only way? Will all those millions of people who believe in something else actually spend eternity in hell?

These are important questions because they strike at the very heart of God's love and fairness. Let's consider the question in the light of our text as well as all that God's Word proclaims.

1. In the Bible God repeatedly declares that He wants all people to go to heaven. Listen to just these two passages:

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

"God our Savior wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4). From these and other similar passages, we know that God truly desires the eternal salvation of all people. And he has done many things to make that happen.

1) He has given everyone a conscience and the testimony of the created world (Romans 2) so they they might recognize that there is a God who is powerful and wonderful and who expects them to live their lives by his rules.

2) He has given all people this natural knowledge of him so that **"men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us "** (Acts 17:27).

3) He has sent His dear Son to do everything required for the eternal salvation of all people, and to die for the sins of the whole world.

4) He has commanded His disciples to take the message of Jesus into the world and proclaim it to every creature.

5) Finally, He has blessed the Christian church with the means to reach the world with the Gospel of Jesus - means such as modern communications and tremendous financial resources.

In Romans 2:11 the apostle writes that **"God does not show favoritism."** He is fair. He goes on to say that he will never judge unfairly. He will not

condemn someone for failing to believe something he has never heard. But listen to what God says in Romans 1: **"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him"** (Romans 1:16-21).

In other words, those who never hear the Bible have another voice in their lives - their conscience. God has given a conscience to everyone who is ever born. Paul writes that our consciences **"also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them "** (Romans 2:13-15).

So when people refuse the voice of God to them through the witness of their conscience, and do not seek God or give thanks to him, and when they disobey the testimony of God in their conscience and live their lives in willful disobedience to God and His will, Paul's conclusion is that on God's day of judgment they will be **"without excuse."** The God who condemns them is and will always be just and fair.

2. Yet, I'm afraid that sometimes when people ask that question, implying that either God is unfair and unloving, or that all people will eventually be taken to heaven, the love and fairness of God or the accuracy of His Word is not the whole issue. Since the question is asked by people who know the claims of the Gospel, I suspect that many times there may be ulterior motives in the question.

If a person can convince himself or others that God is unfair, then he or she is off the hook for taking the message of Christ to the world. Yes, God talks to us and sends us into the world with the message of his love for all people. He tells us to go, to use our financial resources, our time, and our energy to tell the world of his love. But instead of doing that, we have spent our resources

on ourselves. Instead of going as he said, we have sat here questioning God's love and fairness. And if we can convince ourselves that God is unfair, then we can convince ourselves that he is much worse than us.

In his Word God declares that he loves the world. He asks us to do the same. He says that he loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son to die for its sin. Now he asks us to love the world enough to take the Gospel of his love to it.

The question before us today, rather than leading us to question God's love or fairness, should lead us to question our own love and faithfulness.

There are people in this world who have not heard of God's love for them in Christ. Yes, there are people in our own community who have not really heard the real story. Why is that? Why haven't they heard? Who is supposed to be telling them?

Those questions lead us to the heart and soul of the mission of the Christian church. Jesus said it in the words, "**Go into all the world.**"

Christians who know and are convinced that Jesus is the only way to heaven, and who put their money, their time, their energy and their prayers into telling the world about Jesus are not elitists. Elitists want to exclude others from their own happiness. They are only concerned about themselves.

But that is not the case with the God that we know from the Bible. Nor is that the case with Christians who worship that God. They know God is so fair and so loving. They also know that he includes them in the wonderful mission of telling the world. So we send missionaries. So we call pastors and teachers. So we give generously to support them. So we build churches. So we go out to the community and tell our neighbors through personal testimony, through outreach programs, and through invitations.

One day the world will be judged. When it happens, we will all see that God is fair. But on that day no one will be helped by our doubts about God's love or fairness. But they will be helped by our love for them which was shown in our bringing the Gospel to them. With the Lord's grace in our hearts let's share his love. Amen.