

What Does God's Word Say About... Those Who Never Heard the Gospel – Part 1

When Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians he said you have “heard in the word of truth, the gospel which has come to you, just as in all the world it is also constantly bearing fruit and increasing...if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven and of which I, Paul, was made a minister” (Col. 1:6, 23). Elsewhere, the apostle stated that the faith of the Christians in Rome was being “proclaimed through the whole world” (Romans 1:8). Also, in Romans 10:18 Paul wrote “surely they have never heard, have they? Indeed they have; their voice has gone out into all the earth; and their words to the ends of the world.” The brethren in Thessalonica were commended because their evangelistic fervor had spread the gospel throughout Macedonia and Achaia, and “in every place” (Thess. 1:8).

Isaiah prophesied in the Old Testament “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of Jehovah, as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9). Paul quotes from this scripture in his letter to the Romans, making the application to the Christian age, with the great gospel harvest to be achieved among the gentiles (Romans 15:12). When Daniel interpreted the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, he spoke of a “stone” that, without hands [a divine activity] was cut out from a mountain. The stone itself “became a great mountain and filled the whole earth” (Daniel 2:35). This “stone” is identified as God’s kingdom, the church, which was to be established in the days of the Roman kings (Daniel 2:44).

In order to provide justification for disobedience to the gospel many will ask, “What about the Amazon tribesmen who have never had the opportunity to hear the gospel?” These people provide questions such as this to supply intellectual cover for their hardness of heart. As a result of this thinking, people will conclude that such isolated communities will be saved, perhaps, by being good moral people. Paul answered this question by writing “when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those WHO DO NOT KNOW GOD and to those who do not OBEY the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess. 1:7-8).

This argument has considerable appeal, (who wants to think of the poor tribesmen being lost without ever having heard of Jesus?) First, this argument does not account for our universal knowledge of God. As Paul said in Acts 17:26-27, “and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.” God created us with an inherent impulse to seek after Him (Romans 1:19-20). God has given us plenty of evidence for His existence from the creation itself.

If the Amazonian tribesmen were honestly seeking to find God, God would make Himself available. “Seek and you will find” (Matt. 7:7). Paul wrote, “for ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 3:23, 6:23).

Second, in punishing guilty sinners, wherever they may be found, God is not unfair. Paul wrote in Romans 2:9-11, “There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does

evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.”

Third, this argument makes the gospel into the problem rather than the solution. To illustrate we will return to our hypothetical tribesman who is being a “good person” in the way that so many people claim to be today. It is thought because he has not heard the gospel, presumably he is safe from condemnation. However, if a missionary shows up and preaches the gospel to him, his chances of eternal life has diminished. According to this thinking, he was 100 percent saved before he heard the word. But now, he will only be saved if he obeys the gospel. Sadly, not all “good people” are obedient to the gospel. Even if he does obey, he needs to live as a faithful disciple of Jesus, which is considerably more difficult than just being a “good person.” In short, what was supposed to be the good news, has been very bad news for our tribesman! Before, he was not accountable to anyone. Now, he is accountable to Jesus who demands his whole life. If this is the nature of the gospel, rather than making sure that as many people hear it as possible, we ought to bury it as deeply as we can.

When an individual hears the gospel, instead of making excuses, they should ask the question, “What about me?” God is always calling, and it is up to all of us to answer that call (2 Thess. 2:13-14). It is the responsibility of every Christian to be obedient to the great commission given to us by Jesus to “Go therefore and make disciples of ALL the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19).