

San Juan church of Christ

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What Does God's Word Say About... Using Ignorance As An Excuse

Many believers, as well as unbelievers, of God's word often ask the question, "What will happen to those who have never heard the gospel, or had an opportunity to obey it?" Often this question is posed in a setting of someone in the far reaches of Africa who will never be able to hear the gospel proclamation due to extreme isolation. Most people would find it difficult to believe that a loving God would condemn people who are ignorant of God's word. To them it becomes a matter of whether or not ignorance is an excuse for being lost.

There are three groups of people who are ignorant. Some people are ignorant of various scriptural teachings because they have never been taught God's word (Romans 10:14). Others are ignorant because they have never taken the time to learn God's word, or are not willing to take the time to learn (Romans 10:16-17). Neither of these two categories of people are ignorant because of mental capabilities. A third group of people are those who are ignorant because they do have mental inabilities. These fit into the same group as innocent children...safe in the arms of Jesus (Matthew 19:14).

The answer to this often asked Bible question is provided to us when Peter wrote that the Bible "has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3), which means we can expect to find a Bible answer to the complicated question of using ignorance as an excuse. Paul wrote that the Lord Jesus will come "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 Thessalonians 1:8). Surely, all of us must realize that all who are ignorant of the gospel message do not know God. Therefore, those who are ignorant of the gospel message are those who God will take vengeance against.

When Paul entered into the city of Athens, he passed by an altar with the inscription, "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD" (Acts 17:23). In his address to the Athenians on Mars Hill, he said, "Therefore what you worship in ignorance, I proclaim to you...Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men THAT ALL people everywhere should repent" (Acts 17:23, 30). Because Paul said "all men" this admonition excludes no one anywhere; it matters not where they might live, even in the deepest part of Africa.

Paul wrote, "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made [creation], so that they are without excuse" (Romans 1:20). No man is without excuse because we can look at the universe and know that God exists. Since we can know that God exists, we have a responsibility to do His will.

The Bible clearly teaches that there is only one way to salvation and that is through Jesus when He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). Luke records in Acts 4:12, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men that we must be saved."

The gospel message is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). However, sin condemns "For the wages of sin is death [spiritual separation from God], but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:23). What causes a person to be separated from God is NOT his or her knowledge of the gospel, it is sin.

If one would be capable of heavenly salvation with the Lord because of his ignorance, then why did Jesus give us the Great Commission? "Go therefore and make disciples of ALL the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19).

Please send any comments, questions, or requests for a Bible study to:
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