

## *Those Who Never Hear the Gospel*

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Theologians differ over the question of what happens to those who never hear the gospel.<sup>1</sup> Jesus told his disciples, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’ (John 14:6). Peter said, ‘there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among humankind by which we must be saved’ (Acts 4:12). Does this mean that all those who never hear of Jesus are lost?

The Bible does not address this question directly. However, it does give some clues, from which tentative conclusions can be drawn.<sup>2</sup>

### **Clues**

The first clue comes in the book of Jonah. God told Jonah to go to the evil, pagan city of Nineveh and preach against it (1:1–2). After Jonah’s dramatic disobedience and deliverance (1:3–2:10), God told him a second time to go to the city and preach his message to it (3:1–2). This time Jonah went and told the people, ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown’ (3–4). This led them to repent (5–9), as a result of which God did not do to them what he said he would do (10). This upset Jonah (4:1–4), leading God to afflict him with the loss of something that was valuable to him (5–8). Reminding him of how he felt about this, God said to him, ‘And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left ...?’ (9–11). The lesson is that God is concerned for people who know little about him.

A second clue comes in Paul’s letter to the Romans. Here he explains how God can judge those who do not have his law by how they act in relation to such law as they have: ‘For whenever Gentiles, who do not have [the] law, by nature do the things of the law, these, not having [the] law, to themselves are [the] law: who demonstrate [that] the work of the law [is] written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness with [this], and their reckonings between one another accusing or even excusing [them], in the day in which, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of humankind through Christ Jesus’ (2:14–16).<sup>3</sup>

A third clue is provided by the men and women of faith under the old covenant. The writer to the Hebrews says that these, ‘having been commended through their faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, in order that, without us, they should not be made perfect’ (11:39–40). He goes on to tell his readers that they have come, not to Mount Sinai, but ‘to Mount Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels in full assembly, and to the congregation of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous ones made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., John Sanders, *No Other Name* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Here I expand my discussion in *God’s Control over the Universe*, 2nd edn. (Latheronwheel, Caithness: Whittles, 2000; distributor: bmdpgn@amsolve.com), pp. 69–70. I have not included 1 Timothy 4:10 because of uncertainty over the meaning of *malista* [see T.C. Skeat, *JTS* 30 (1979), 173–7].

<sup>3</sup> Paul is not speaking here about Christians. He does not say that the Gentiles concerned have the law itself ‘written in their hearts’, as Jeremiah prophesied that Christians would have (Jer. 31:31–34). He only says that they have ‘the work of the law’ written in their hearts (*grapton* agrees with *ergon* not *nomou*). This presumably refers to what the law requires.

better than [that of] Abel' (12:18–24). Here 'the spirits of righteous ones made perfect' are evidently the spirits of those of whom the writer earlier wrote, 'without us, they should not be made perfect'. They are, in other words, men and women of faith under the old covenant now made perfect through Jesus.<sup>4</sup> This example shows how God can accept people who do not know Jesus, and subsequently perfect them through him.

A second example of this is God's acceptance of the Roman army officer, Cornelius (Acts 10:1). Luke says that he was 'devout and feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always' (2). An angel told him, 'Your prayers and your alms have gone up for a memorial before God' (3–4). The angel then told him to send for Peter (5–8), and God revealed to Peter that he should not refuse to help a Gentile (9–22). Peter accordingly went to Cornelius (23–33), saying, 'Truly I grasp that God is not partial, but in every nation anyone who fears him and works righteousness is acceptable to him' (34–35). He then proceeded to tell Cornelius about Jesus (36–43). Cornelius so embraced what he heard that God gave him the Holy Spirit while Peter was still speaking (44–48). When Peter told the other apostles about this (11:1–17), they concluded, 'Then God has also granted to Gentiles the repentance that leads to life' (18).

## Conclusions

These clues suggest that God can save those who never hear the gospel by judging them according to the light that they have, and then perfecting them through Jesus. Thus he can judge their response to what they can know of him through 'the things that have been made' (Rom. 1:19–20), their endeavour to do what they believe to be right (Rom. 2:14–16), and their remorse when they fail to do this (Psa. 51:17). He can then perfect those he accepts, after they die, through Jesus, as he did the OT saints (Heb. 12:23).

This does not mean that Christians need not spread the gospel, because God wants people to live in the light, not in ignorance. While he accepted Cornelius, he still wanted him to hear about Jesus. As Paul told Timothy, 'God ... wants *all* people to be saved and to come to a *full* knowledge (*epignōsis*) of the truth' (1 Tim. 2:1–4).

Jesus accordingly told his disciples, 'You are the light of the world ...' (Matt. 5:14–16), and, after his resurrection, gave them the Great Commission: 'Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, [and] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you' (Matt. 28:19–20). Here 'disciple' (*mathētēs*) literally means 'learner'.

Jesus likewise commissioned Paul 'to open the eyes' of Jews and Gentiles, 'to turn [them] from darkness to light and [from] the authority of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are made holy by faith [placed] specifically into me (*tē eis eme*)' (Acts 26:16–18). Paul accordingly travelled far and wide to tell people about Jesus, and fulfil the prophecy, 'Those who were not told about him shall see, and those who have not heard shall understand' (Rom. 15:20–21, quoting Isa. 52:15).

The Church's task is thus to hasten the day when, through Jesus Christ, 'the earth shall be full of the knowledge of YHWH as the waters cover the sea' (Isa. 11:9).

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<sup>4</sup> Paul speaks of God 'passing over' sins until Jesus' propitiatory death (Rom. 3:21–26).

These conclusions are, as I said at the beginning, tentative. Readers should carefully compare what I have written with the arguments of those who take a different view.

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