

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN
TO THE PERSON
WHO HAS NOT HEARD
OF JESUS?**

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INTRODUCTION

Some time ago I was discussing the Gospel with a man who was a regular reader of the Bible, but said he was not a believer. He said something which intrigued me greatly. He said: “I will not believe until I know what God is going to do about that person on a hillside in Nepal who has never heard the Gospel.”

Over the years a number of people have raised this question with me—“If we are saved through faith in Jesus Christ, what happens to those who have never heard of Jesus Christ?” The Bible does not tell us in great detail what will happen to these people, but there are some references to the subject.

For example, in Romans 2:12-16 (Living Bible) – *“He will punish sin wherever it is found. He will punish the heathen when they sin, even though they never heard God’s written laws, for down in their hearts they know right from wrong. God’s laws are written within them; their own conscience accuses them, or sometimes excuses them. And God will punish the Jews for sinning because they have his written laws but don’t obey them. They know what is right but don’t do it. After all, salvation is not given to those who know what to do, unless they do it. The day will surely come when at God’s command Jesus Christ will judge the secret lives of everyone, their inmost thoughts and motives; this is all part of God’s great plan which I proclaim.”*

There is an indication here that all people know the difference between right and wrong, and so are not excused by ignorance.

A further example is mentioned by C.S. Lewis in his book “The Four Loves”. He writes that he sees Jesus’ message about the “sheep and the goats” as applying to those who have heard the Gospel. In Matthew 25: 32, Jesus says he will sit on his throne and judge the nations, and separate out the sheep and the goats. The sheep are those who helped the poor, the hungry, the prisoner—in other words, those who showed love, charity, mercy—they will go to eternal life; the others, the goats, will go to eternal suffering. Because he refers to ‘the nations’, and because they are surprised by what Jesus says, C.S. Lewis takes this whole passage to be a reference to those who have not heard the Gospel.

A further reference is made by Jesus in John 15:22 as he speaks about those who rejected him – “If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin”. From these references we get an impression that God has a way of dealing with people who have not heard the Gospel, but we cannot say what God will do in each case. This is something that we cannot know, and that we will not know, no matter how long we live.

How futile it is then to put our salvation in jeopardy, as this man did, over something which he will never know—what a prescription for disaster!

By making this condition he closed the door shut on God, and on his own eternal destiny with God, and opened the door for his own eternal punishment—so sad.

But are we to remain in a condition of complete doubt about the fate of those who have not heard the Gospel? I don't believe so. How then can our minds be put at rest? As I see it, it depends on our attitude to God—our concept of what he is like and how he works in regard to people—our view of the extent of his love, and of his almighty power.

WHAT ARE GOD'S WAYS LIKE?

In Isaiah 55 God says: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” If God's ways are so far above and beyond our ways, we may be ill-advised to keep challenging God as to how he is going to do this, or how he is going to handle that situation. I see it as a very presumptuous practice.

Does this mean that we can't reflect upon God's ways at all? No, certainly not. But it does mean that we are likely to be disappointed if we think we can figure out what God will do in a certain situation. Let's consider God's way of dealing with people who have heard the Gospel. He created a unique, different way—a perfect way, through Jesus Christ. This is described in Romans 3:20-24 (from the Living Bible)

“Now do you see it? No one can ever be made right in God's sight by doing what the law commands. For the more we know of God's laws, the clearer it becomes that we aren't obeying them; his laws serve only to make us see that we are sinners.”

Forgiveness of sin through Christ

Christ took our punishment

...But now God has shown us a different way to heaven—not by 'being good enough' and trying to keep his laws, but by a new way(though not new, really, for the Scriptures told about it long ago). Now God says he will accept and acquit us—declare us 'not guilty'—if we trust Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, by coming to Christ, no matter who we are or what we have been like. Yes, all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious ideal; yet now God declares us 'not guilty' of offending him if we trust in Jesus Christ, who in his kindness freely takes away our sins.”

So God chose a way that we could never figure out, no matter how much we thought about it. As God says in the Bible—the wisdom of men is foolishness to God, and the wisdom of God is foolishness to those who are perishing.

God confounds the wisest people as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 (Living Bible)

“I know very well how foolish it sounds to those who are lost, when they hear that Jesus died to save them. But we who are saved recognise this message as the very power of God. For God says, ‘I will destroy all human plans of salvation no matter how wise they seem to be, and ignore the best ideas of men, even the most brilliant of them.’ So what about these wise men, these scholars, these brilliant debaters of this world’s great affairs? God has made them all look foolish, and shown their wisdom to be useless nonsense. For God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never find God through human brilliance, and then he stepped in and saved all those who believed his message, which the world calls foolish and silly. It seems foolish to the Jews because they want a sign from heaven as proof that what is preached is true; and it is foolish to the Gentiles because they believe only what agrees with their philosophy and seems wise to them. So when we preach about Christ dying to save them, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it’s all nonsense. But God has opened the eyes of those called to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, to see that Christ is the mighty power of God to save them; Christ himself is the centre of God’s wise plan for salvation. This so-called ‘foolish’ plan of God is far wiser than the wisest plan of the wisest man, and God in his weakness—Christ dying on the cross—is far stronger than any man.”

How does this help us handle the problem of the person in Nepal who has never heard the Gospel? If we go on what we know of God from these verses, we must come to a conclusion that God will have a unique and perfect way of dealing with those who have not heard the Gospel, just as he has for those who have. It will no doubt be a way which we could never figure out, no matter how long or how hard, or how brilliantly we think about it.

But there is one thing we can be absolutely sure about—that is, that God will handle all these matters with perfect love, mercy, justice, and righteousness. How do we know this?

If we have a dear friend who has been faithful to us, over many years, always helpful in times of difficulty, always there when needed—then, if a new situation crops up, we fully expect our friend to be as faithful as ever. So it is with ourselves and God. We

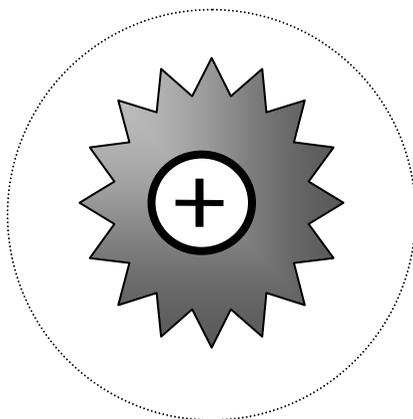
know what he will be like in unknown situations, because of what we know about him in known situations. From what we know of God in the Bible, and especially through Jesus, also in our own lives, and in the lives of others, we know that God is trustworthy, faithful, loving, merciful, patient, just and righteous.

So, for what we don't know, we can equally trust God to be exactly the same. God never changes, he is the same yesterday, today, and always.

So we can trust God to deal with the person in Nepal as he has dealt with us—in perfect love, justice, and righteousness.

THE KNOWABLE AND THE UNKNOWNABLE.

The diagram below is designed to illustrate a very important point.



The circle in the centre represents the things in the Bible that we can know clearly because they are clearly and specifically stated. The shaded area is rather less definite,

and represents those things in the Bible which are fairly clear, but we don't know all about them. The third area represents those things in the Bible which we know little about, and about which we are likely to be puzzled.

Outside these circles are the boundless things which are not even mentioned in the Bible. It's important to note that everything we need to know about God, about ourselves, about how we should behave, and about God's great eternal plan for us through Jesus Christ, fall into the inner circle. What we need to know is clear. What we don't really need to know falls into the other areas. And the cross of Jesus is at the very centre of the inner circle. Our salvation and our peace is found there, not among

the unknown or unknowable. Why does God leave us in the dark about some things—the things in the outer circles?

Firstly, there is a very practical reason—if God told us everything about what he does, the Bible would be many times its present size—not very practical

Secondly, we don't need to know any more than we do at present.

Thirdly, it's not our business to know more.

It is between God and the other person—it is basically God's business.

When we stand before God at judgement, he will not ask us about the person who never heard of Jesus—he will ask us about ourselves, who have heard about Jesus.

We can certainly be concerned in this life about the people in Nepal and elsewhere—but our response can be more appropriately to support missionaries, to send Bibles, to pray for them—some will even go there to help them. But there is one thing we must not do—concern ourselves about what God is going to do about them

So we concentrate our attention on the knowable. And the most important knowable is Jesus himself, as we are reminded in John 17:3—“*And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent*”.

To know God and Jesus Christ—this is eternal life, beginning now in this life—and this is a lifetime study.

Whenever we have doubts, or our minds wander into the dangerous areas of the unknown, or the unknowable, we can always go to the centre—to the foot of the Cross and to the risen Christ—that is where all questions are answered, where all problems are solved, where all doubts are dispelled, and where real life abounds, now and forever.

Thanks be to God. Amen.