

## What about people who haven't heard about Christ?

Perhaps you have heard that trust in Christ is the *only* way to be right with God and enjoy eternal life. That sounds rather exclusive, particularly if there are many people who have never heard of Christ. Most people think of God as fair and just, and sending people to hell for not believing in someone they have never heard about doesn't seem to meet that standard. So the question arises: "What about the people who haven't heard about Christ?" It's a very good question. Here are a few options in response to that question.

**First, we could answer the question by saying that God doesn't judge people who haven't heard of Christ.** In other words, he holds people accountable if they have heard, but he doesn't hold people accountable who haven't. But does this option make sense given the evangelistic thrust of Christ himself? Before Jesus left earth, he told his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20) and even promised that when the Holy Spirit came upon them they would do exactly that (Acts 1:8). But here's the rub: if people don't have to worry about hell if they have never heard of Christ, wouldn't it be best for the disciples (and for you and me) to tell no one about Christ? Think of it this way: you trust Christ, but you know not everyone does. When your children are born, you don't know if they will trust Christ or not. Because you want to insure they are with God in eternity, you make sure they never hear about Christ. That way they can never reject him. I think you must admit that this kind of scenario—one in which the Christian is encouraged to keep Christianity to herself—is rather odd.

**Second, we could answer the question by saying, "Yes, God will judge those who haven't heard, that's just their bad luck."** The Bible declares that all people have sinned and fall short of God's standard (Romans 3:23) and thus are condemned if they do not trust Christ for forgiveness (John 3:18). But under this option, some get to hear of Christ, some don't. Those who don't...well, too bad for them...their fate is set. My guess is this doesn't settle too well with you. And it doesn't settle too well, because it doesn't measure up to the passion God shows for the lost (Luke 15; 2 Peter 3:9) and God's stated willingness to judge people differently based on what the truth they have been exposed to (Luke 12:47-48). But is there an even more weighty reason to dismiss this second option? I think so.

The second option is weakened because it assumes people haven't heard or can't hear (as does the first option). This is not the stance the Bible takes. The Bible says that *enough* knowledge of God has been given to all people through creation alone (Romans 1:20) and furthermore that knowledge of our personal shortcomings is validated by the God-given conscience God has given to everyone (Romans 2:12-16). In other words, if someone has no access to a Bible and no Christians to teach him, he nonetheless has enough evidence to believe God exists and that he falls short of God's standard. With this information, it would not be unreasonable then for someone to seek the mercy of God, unless, of course, he just doesn't want to bother.

Furthermore, the Bible promises that God will make himself evident to the honest seeker (Proverbs 8:17; Matthew 7:7-8). You might ask, "You mean if someone honestly seeks, God will see she finds out about Christ?" Yes, that is what I am suggesting. The Bible paints the picture that everyone has been given enough information to encourage seeking, and that if one honestly seeks, God will make Christ evident. A great example of this is the biblical story of the Ethiopian seeker. In his search for truth, he gets his hands on some of the Old Testament, but he does not understand it. Because he is an honest seeker, God makes sure that Philip is sent to him to explain. Soon thereafter, the Ethiopian places his faith in Christ (Acts 8:26-40). A more modern example is the vast number of people in the Middle East

who have recently reported seeing life-like dreams of Jesus. When a Christian comes along, it isn't unusual for Muslim seekers to ask, "Can you please tell me about the Jesus I keep having dreams about?" A final example involves use of the internet. Did you know that today one online ministry alone has engaged over 1.6 billion people with the message of Christ in the last 14 years, with tens of thousands choosing to follow Christ everyday as a result? God is a big God, so we should expect he is able to get word about Christ to those who are truly seeking. Is it true then that some people today don't know about Christ? Yes, but is it also true that they have been given enough to seek God and find Christ? I think Scripture would say yes to the second question as well. It is this kind of thinking that has led me to embrace a third option over options one and two. **A third way to answer the question of what happens to people who have not heard of Christ is to say that people have indeed heard enough to respond to Christ and are responsible for what they have heard.** This response seems to make most sense of what the Bible says and what we see in the world.

One final thought. I think you would agree that today you know more about God and Christ than you have in the past. In fact, by asking the question, "What about those who haven't heard?" it's evident you understand the claims of Christianity, namely that everything hinges on one's belief in Christ. Since this is the case, even if uncertainty remains regarding the standing of others before God, that uncertainty doesn't apply to you. You know of Christ and his provision of grace for those who trust in him, and the question is: what will *you* do with that knowledge?

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