

Are the Heathen Lost?

A Study on Romans 1:18-23

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Are the heathen lost? The answer to this question has never been a problem to Bible-believing Christians – the Bible, church history, and missions all give evidence that the heathen are lost, that they are under the wrath of God and are headed for eternal punishment without Christ.

There are many who have taken issue with evangelical Christians over the condition and destiny of the heathen. Some of these take the position that the Bible is not the word of God; they deny sin, hell, God's wrath, and any form of punishment after this life. These folks are not Christians in any sense of the word; they think no one is lost. Another more subtle and dangerous position is taken by some who call themselves Christians. They say that they believe in the wrath of God and eternal punishment for those who have heard, but they do not believe that God will judge the heathen who have never heard about Christ. They say that the heathen are victims of their culture and environment, and that a God of love would never punish them for their sin. Such a statement shows a wrong understanding of the Bible, of God, and of sin. There is a good possibility that a person who holds this view is not a Christian at all, for he does not understand the true meaning of the death of Christ for sin.

Romans 1:18-23 deals with the problem of the heathen being lost. When we consider this subject, we need to remember that our standard of truth must be God's Word, not our own fallen ideas or feelings about what God should do. Thinking emotionally without examining the Scriptures on the subject, many people think it is not fair for God to judge the heathen.

The portion of Scripture we are considering shows that all men are sinners, both Jews and Gentiles, and therefore are under the wrath of God. This section says nothing about salvation, but rather shows why all men are condemned before a holy God. Paul shows that if it can be proven that all men have sin to any degree at all, then a holy and just God must condemn all men. This has nothing to do with men hearing or not hearing the gospel. It has to do with the sinful condition of men's hearts. Sadly, many preachers and teachers have soft-pedaled sin until the fear of God has vanished away.

The section of Scripture we are considering deals with the Gentiles in particular, showing that all are under God's wrath, whether or not they have heard the gospel. The educated Greek, the cultured Roman, the scientific American, an ignorant bushman in the jungle – all are sinners. Paul shows that Gentiles are guilty because they have rejected the light that God has given them. He pictures the religious apostasy of Gentiles from the

original revelation of God that they possessed. He does not tell us when this apostasy took place, but he indicates that it is conclusive and that the effects continue even today.

There are four basic premises for understanding this passage of Scripture: 1) the section is not talking about salvation, but condemnation; 2) God has given all men some light about himself; 3) the light that men have has been rejected by them; 4) the problem is not what would happen if men sought more light. This last premise is another problem in itself. Paul concludes that “none seeketh after God” (Rom. 3:11). His point is that the natural man, because he is a sinner by nature, rejects whatever light God gives him. It is man’s very nature to reject God and to rebel against him.

REVELATION OF THE WRATH OF GOD (Romans 1:18)

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness.” The wrath of God comes down on all men who are sinners, specifically here on Gentiles who hold the truth in unrighteousness. Paul looks back to primitive man, not savage man. Far back in the history of men (Gentiles), all had a concept of the true God — they were monotheists — but because men are sinners by nature, they corrupted the knowledge they had about God and rejected the true God of Scripture. They held truth about God, but suppressed it and rationalized this concept, loving darkness rather than light. Fallen men are sinful and have a bent or leaning towards sin, and they followed their sinfulness further from God.

I have many friends who are serving the Lord Jesus in some of the major colleges and universities in the country. The question of the heathen comes up quite often and my friends answer the question as to whether or not the heathen are lost by saying, “The destiny of the heathen ultimately rests in the hands of an all-powerful, all-wise, and all-loving God.” This answer usually soothes the questioner, and it contains nothing but true statements. Still, it is not an honest answer because it implies that God is not also a just God whose righteous wrath condemns sinners to hell. Paul tells us that the wrath of God comes down upon all Gentiles because they are sinners. Whether or not they have heard the gospel has nothing to do with the sin question. We must never hedge on the issue of the heathen.

REVELATION OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD (Romans 1:19-20)

“Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them.” The “because” points to the cause for the wrath of God upon the Gentiles. They had truth about God manifest in them (in their conscience or mind) which was given by God. However they willfully rejected this light. This was not ignorance, it was willful rejection of the truth.

We are not told that everything that can be known of God was revealed to the heathen, but simply that they had knowledge of God that rendered their rejection inexcusable. No one lives and dies without some revelation from God — a universal revelation which reaches everyone, everywhere, in every age. But whatever knowledge men have they reject willfully because they are sinners by nature.

“For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead.” God has revealed Himself in nature or creation, and this verse says that this is clearly seen by the Gentiles. What man can discover about God from creation is limited but accurate. It can be determined that God is supreme (eternal power) and is a being (Godhead). God is a supreme being! Creation can show us that God is one, good, wise, all-powerful, etc., but it can never show the extent of God’s love, mercy, and grace toward sinners. This is special revelation.

The revelation that the heathen has may be compared to elementary education. The special revelation of Jesus Christ and his work for sin may be compared to college education. The Gentiles had only an elementary revelation, but rejected even that.

From creation, enough knowledge may be gained to understand that God is every man’s Creator and should be worshiped as such. No man should fall into idolatry. The simple evidences of creation have been rejected. When one understands this, it is not hard to understand why God should reveal his wrath against men.

“So that they are without excuse.” A better translation is, “for the purpose that they are without excuse.” The thought is that God revealed himself to the Gentiles in nature that they might be without excuse. The rejection of this revelation simply pointed out the real problem — men are sinners and under the wrath of God. No Gentile can plead ignorance for his sinful condition because he has rejected God’s revelation in creation. This revelation is sufficient to show a man he is without excuse, but it does not follow that it is sufficient to bring him to salvation..

REJECTION OF KNOWLEDGE (Romans 1:21-23)

“Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God.” Although the Gentiles had a knowledge of God through creation and conscience, they refused to worship Him. This rejection was sin. The knowledge they had of God convicted them of their sinful condition, so they refused to believe it.

Paganism and idolatry are not steps in human evolution as man advances from slime to divinity. Heathenism is a declension, not an upward reach. The great pagan

nations once knew more than they do now. Man is not in the process of evolution towards God but is in revolution against God!

“Neither were thankful.” Men were hardened to God’s goodness and disrespectful of his person. They were ungrateful. Shakespeare well wrote,

“I hate ingratitude more in a man
Than lying, vainness, babbling, drunkenness,
Or any taint of vice.”

“But became vain in their imaginations [reasonings].” Men became empty of divine reasoning and purpose. This is intellectual rebellion; men do not want to submit to the authority of God, so they rationalized away God and their responsibility to him. People who reject God almost invariably do it in the name of education or progress.

“And their foolish heart was darkened.” Intellectual rebellion brings moral degeneracy, and so there is moral rebellion. The result is moral blindness. Why all this? Because men left their concept of God.

“Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools.” Because they pretended to be wise and turned from God, men’s folly became more obvious. They became fools when they left the true concept of God and chose idolatry. Can there be a greater folly than worshiping an image of a beast rather than worshiping God?

“And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things.” The degeneracy described is from man down to creeping things. Oh, the depravity of the human heart! Men show utter contempt for God – insult, impiety, disrespect. They would rather serve a creature than the Creator.

Behind all the great idolatrous systems is pure monotheism, but this intimate knowledge of God made men uncomfortable in their sins, so a host of lesser deities and divinities were invented as go-betweens, and eventually the knowledge of the true God was lost.

Men today even have idols besides those made of wood and stone. Germany got rid of God and accepted Hitler. Communism rejected divine revelation and made a god of the state. Americans reject God for materialism, sex, and prestige. However, a Christian can never justify idols of any kind. We must not represent God by anything corruptible.

ARE THE HEATHEN LOST?

Scripturally speaking, the heathen are the Gentiles, whether they have heard the gospel or not:

“But when it pleased God, . . . to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen” (Gal. 1:15-16).

“They gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision” (Gal. 2:9b).

Today, however, “heathen” has come to mean those who have never heard the gospel.

All heathen are lost because they have some knowledge of God even though they may not have heard the gospel. They reject what they know, preferring idolatry and sin rather than service to the Creator. When God said they “are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20), he meant what he said! He also declared that all men, Jew and Gentile, are under the condemnation of sin:

“As it is written, There is none righteous, no not one: There is none that seeketh after God” (Rom. 3:10-11).

“For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

Men cannot plead ignorance, injustice, cultural or environmental differences; they can only plead guilty. It is not a matter of belief, for men are condemned already.

“He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:18, 19).

Men are condemned because of sin but saved because of faith in Jesus Christ.

Some say that the heathen are not lost because they have not heard the gospel, and that it is only those who have heard the gospel and rejected it that are lost. If this is true we should never go to those who have never heard because we will only condemn them by presenting Christ, thereby robbing them of heaven which they already possess apart from Christ. How ridiculous! If the heathen are not lost, there is no need for the training of missionaries preachers, and teachers which the Bible obviously values so highly (cf. Rom. 10:13-15).

Romans 2:12 says, “For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law.” This is a definite reference to the heathen.

If all men are sinners and under the condemnation of God, then it is logical that no man deserves heaven – all deserve hell. If a single individual is saved from the just penalty of his sin, it is purely and simply because of God’s mercy. The heathen in Africa are lost, and the heathen in America are lost. When anyone from either group is saved, it is because of God’s sovereign grace.

If the heathen are not lost, then there is no need for the gospel. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Rom. 1:16). If the heathen are not lost, there is no need for Christ, the only escape from sin and eternal punishment:

“Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me” (John 14:6).

“Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

If a person can get to heaven apart from the cross, then the cross has no purpose. If I ever thought that the heathen could be saved apart from saving faith in Christ, I would leave the ministry and Christianity, for the death of Christ for sin would have no meaning.

CONCLUSION

God has made a general revelation of himself to all men in nature. Even though they are unable to escape the consciousness that he exists, men reject even this revelation and substitute many things for God. This general revelation cannot save a person, but God has made a special revelation of himself in Christ and in the Bible, and this revelation is able to save one from his sins and the lake of fire.

Will you ask God to help you move from your limited concept of God, which is not able to save you, to a personal and intimate knowledge of Christ who is able to give you a free and gracious salvation? God’s sovereign grace is able to save anyone who believes on Christ, whether he be a heathen in Africa or a heathen in America.