

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Jack L. Arnold

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WHAT ABOUT THE HEATHEN?

Non-Christians, and many Christians too, most frequently ask about the heathen. “What about the person who has never heard of Jesus Christ? Will he be condemned to hell?” At the outset I think we must acknowledge that we don’t have the whole story about how God will deal with these people; He hasn’t told us. Certain things are known to God alone. In Deuteronomy 29:29 we read, ***“The secret things belong to the Lord our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever.”*** On some things God has not fully revealed His plan; this is one instance. Our concern should be with the things He has revealed. As we think about this question, however, Scripture does offer some very clear points for us to keep in mind.

First, God is just. All the evidence we have indicates that we can have confidence in His character. We can trust that whatever He does with those who have never heard of Jesus Christ will be fair. All Scripture indicates that God’s character is just.

Second, no person will be condemned for rejecting Jesus Christ of whom he has never heard; instead, he will be condemned for violating his own moral standard, however high or low it has been. The whole world—every person, whether he has heard of the Ten Commandments or not, is in sin. Roman 2 clearly tells us that every person has a standard of some kind, and that in every culture people knowingly violate the standard they have. A knowledge of anthropology confirms this. Paul writes:

“All who have sinned without knowledge of the Law will die without reference to the Law: and all who have sinned knowing the Law shall be judged according to the Law. It is not familiarity with the Law that justifies a man in the sight of God, but obedience to it.

When the gentiles, who have no knowledge of the Law, act in accordance with it by the light of nature, they show that they have a law in themselves, for they demonstrate the effect of a law operating in their own hearts. Their own consciences endorse the existence of such a law, for there is something which condemns or excuses their actions.

We may be sure that all this will be taken into account in the day of true judgment, when God will judge men’s secret lives by Christ Jesus as my gospel plainly states” (Romans 2:12-16). (*The New Testament in Modern English*, translated by J. B. Phillips).

Third, Scripture indicates that every man has enough information from creation to know that God exists. This is clearly stated in Romans 1:19-20: ***“For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.”*** Psalm 19 confirms this fact. From Matthew 7:7-11 and Jeremiah 29:13 we may conclude that if a man responds to the light he has and seeks God, God will give him a chance to hear the truth about Jesus Christ.

Fourth, there is no indication in the Bible that a man can be saved apart from Jesus Christ. This is made crystal clear. Our Lord Himself declared in John 14:6, ***“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.”*** Jesus spoke with the authority of God. Because of who He is and what He has done on the cross, it is obvious that there is no other way to God. Only He atoned for our sins. He is the only bridge across the chasm that

separates the highest possible human achievement from the infinitely holy standard of God. Peter left no room for doubt in his flat assertion in Acts. 4:12, ***“And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”*** This places tremendous responsibility on us who call ourselves Christians; we must see to it that those who have not heard hear the gospel.

The final thing to point out to the person who has raised this question is the Bible’s absolute clarity concerning the judgment which awaits the individual who has heard the gospel, as this person has. When he faces God, the issue will not be the heathen. He will have to account for what he personally has done with Jesus Christ. Usually someone will raise the question of the heathen as a smoke screen so he can evade his personal responsibility. We need to answer this question for him. We also need to think it through for our conviction and confidence. But then, as we terminate the discussion, we should focus on the person himself and on his responsibility: What is he going to do with Jesus Christ? *The Case for Christianity* by C.S. Lewis contains a fuller discussion of the moral law inherent in the universe.