

The Unreached

A Valley Bible Church Position Paper www.valleybible.net

Perhaps no objection is more common to the message of the gospel of salvation, that forgiveness of sins comes only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone, than “what about those who have not heard of Christ?” Perhaps no question that skeptics ask cuts deeper to the heart of the gospel message than “are those sincere people in other religions destined for hell?” Perhaps there is no weightier issue with regard to evangelism than “is it possible to be saved without knowing the name of Jesus Christ?”

The reason this is such a debated topic is because the direct teaching of the Bible seems so in contrast to man’s basic assumption of what must be right. The idea that a loving God would condemn anyone who did not have the opportunity to escape condemnation seems unfair to mankind. Yet the Bible gives us the answer to what many are unwilling to accept.

The sphere of God’s judgment

God will judge everyone (Hebrews 9:27). The reason that God will judge everyone is because all people are sinful. Sin is any lack of conformity to God’s revealed will, to either do what He wants us to do or to be what He wants us to be.

The Scripture clearly teaches that there is no person who is righteous or who even seeks for God (Romans 3:10-11). Not only are we sinful because we sin but also because we are born with a sin nature (Ephesians 2:1-3; Jeremiah 17:9).

God will judge everyone regardless of whether they have heard of Christ because everyone is guilty. We are guilty because we are sinful and not because we do not know of Christ. In other words, no one is in hell for not believing in Christ but because they are sinful (Romans 6:23a).

Man’s knowledge of God’s judgment

People are not ignorant of God’s judgment. Creation alone condemns everyone (Romans 1:20). Creation is never described as bringing anyone to faith. Creation only shows them that they are accountable to something higher than themselves. Everyone is without the excuse that they did not know of God because His creation makes His existence plain to all. If God exists then all are accountable to Him.

Furthermore, our conscience tells us we are sinful (Romans 2:15). In everyday life we violate even our own standards of how people ought to behave. We will react negatively to what another person does, only to find ourselves doing the same thing at another time. A good example of this is driving a car. Everyone has his own idea of what it means to be a courteous driver. We are irritated with others who violate our standard and yet overlook our own violations.

If man is not accountable because he is ignorant then why does Christ send us into the world to proclaim the good news? In fact, this would be bad news for it would give people something they must respond to. We ought to then close churches and mission organizations and not tell anyone about Christ or else we risk sending them to hell.

Man is not ignorant. He knows there is a Supreme Being and that he violates even his own standard of morality. We need to realize that the unreached are not as innocent as we may think. They are indeed not innocent at all.

The nature of God's judgment

How can a loving God send people to hell? The answer to this comes from understanding the character of God.

God is just: His judgment must be carried out (Genesis 18:25; Exodus 34:7; Psalm 89:14).

God is loving: He does not desire to punish anyone (Jeremiah 31:3; Romans 5:8; 1 Peter 3:9; 1 John 4:8).

God is holy: He cannot embrace sin (Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8).

God does not send people to hell. Man, if he does nothing, moves away from God. This is evident from Romans 1:21-23. The progression of evil increases to the point where "God gave them over" in the lust of their hearts to impurity (Romans 1:24), to degrading passions (Romans 1:26) and to a depraved mind (Romans 1:28).

The love of God therefore must be balanced by the justice and holiness of God. God's involvement in people going to hell is a passive role and not an active role. That is, He allows them to continue in their sin and their separation from Him for eternity.

The solution to God's judgment

Since the judgment of God rests on all men, the escape comes only from Another. The Bible says that man cannot solve his sin problem himself (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The Bible also teaches that Jesus Christ is God's only provision for man's salvation.

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me." (John 14:6)

"And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. (1 John 5:12)

For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 2:5)

Christ is God's only provision because His death alone paid the penalty for our sin (1 Peter 2:24, 3:18). We can only be forgiven of our sin through Jesus Christ.

This forgiveness is found not by our work of faith but by God's work of grace that results in our faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). With man, salvation is impossible but with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:25-26). God's sovereign grace in salvation is a critical truth that must be embraced if we hope to appreciate the teaching of God's Word concerning the unreached.

The requirement for God's solution

While all Christians will agree that our sin will not be held against us if we believe in Christ (John 3:16; Luke 24:47; Acts 10:43), they may wonder if God's solution is available only through Christianity. Is it possible that we believe in Christ but call Him by another name and worship Him in another religion?

The Bible demands that we hear of Jesus Christ before we can believe in Him. Romans 10:13-15 is the central passage that speaks to this question directly,

For "whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved." How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "how beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!"

Note: The word "preach" in the New Testament is always used to refer to the proclamation of the gospel.

In order for anyone to obtain salvation he must hear the gospel message ("good news"). This message is delivered by means of a person. There is no scriptural evidence that God ever brings anyone to Himself apart from the ministry of His people. Even in the classic example of the salvation of the Apostle Paul God sends Ananias to him (cf. Acts 9). God, by choosing to limit the communication of His message to humans, is not limited because He is still able to guide His people to deliver the message and often does so.

"So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ." (Romans 10:17)

The need for our response to God

The truth can become emotionally charged, causing people to ask, "So if someone is on an island and really loves God, he is hopelessly lost because no Christian has landed there to tell him about Christ! Does my salvation depend on the obedience of another?"

There are two fallacies in this point of objection. First, man, in himself, does not love God (Isaiah 53:6; Romans 3:10-11). Secondly, no one is lost because they are ignorant but because they are sinful.

For the sake of discussion, let's assume the person really does love God. His love for

God does not spring from himself but is rather evidence that God is working in him (James 1:18). If anyone is willing to do the will of God, Christ indicates that he will learn of the gospel (John 7:17). There are at least two examples in the Scripture demonstrates this, Cornelius and Peter in Acts 10 and the Ethiopian Eunuch and Philip in Acts 8.

Understanding follows obedience. If we respond to the limited revelation that we have, God will provide us with a deeper understanding. Conversely, if we fail to respond to what we already know God will not reveal any more to us. All people can apply this truth (cf. Matthew 21:23-27, Psalm 119:100). If God is able to bring salvation to us, He is also able to guide someone to one of His people to communicate the message by which we can be saved.

The judgment of God on the unsaved

While the unsaved are judged, their knowledge does play a part in God's judgment. God will judge the unsaved according to their deeds (Ecclesiastes 12:11-12; Romans 1:18-32; Matthew 7:23). God will also judge the unsaved according to the knowledge that they rejected.

“And that slave who knew his master’s will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will shall receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. And from everyone who has much shall much be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.” (Luke 12:47-48)

“Nevertheless I say to you, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you.” (Matthew 11:20-24)

God is not unfair in His judgment of the unsaved. They will be judged on the basis of how much they know and reject (cf. James 4:17, John 15:22, 24). They will not be judged on the basis of what they did not know. In other words, those who have never heard of Christ will be judged less harshly even though they may have done the same wicked deeds as those who have heard. Our Lord leaves the details of this judgment undefined for us.

The impartiality of God in judgment

There is a deep-seated belief within man that God is fair and fair in the way that we understand fairness. The Bible describes God as being impartial.

The impartiality of God means that God does not favor people because of their heritage, regardless of whether a Jew or a Gentile (Romans 2:11) and regardless of their nationality (Acts 10:34).

The impartiality of God means that God does not favor people because of the heritage of their position in life, regardless of whether a slave or a master (Ephesians 6:9), regardless of their reputation (Galatians 2:6).

The impartiality of God means that God does not favor people because of their material wealth (James 2:1).

The impartiality of God means that God does not favor people because of their works. The good works of believers will be judged impartially (1 Peter 1:17) and the evil deeds of the unsaved will be judged impartially (Colossians 3:25).

However, the impartiality of God does not mean that God treats everyone the same. It furthermore does not mean that God cannot be generous to some (Matthew 20:1-15). It certainly does not mean that we can impose our idea of fairness upon God.

Paul answers the charge that God is to be faulted in anyway with an emphatic “May it never be!” in Romans 9:14. Paul makes it clear that God has mercy on whom He desires and God hardens whom He desires (Romans 9:16,18). The problem that Paul sees in not with correct understanding of the question but rather with the attitude of those who question God. How can the clay question the Potter (Romans 9:19-24)?

We can declare that God is impartial only to the extent that He Himself has declared Himself impartial. God can only be charged with partiality if the sinner has a just claim against Him but he does not. We must be thankful that God is not “fair” (our idea of fairness) else we, who are completely undeserving, would not have received His mercy.

Applications

This teaching has deep application on our thinking about:

- Salvation and its scope...understanding the need
- Christ and His redemption...thanksgiving
- Man and his condition...concern for the unsaved
- Sin and its impact...hatred of sin
- The future and God’s judgment...healthy fear of God
- The church and our responsibility...motivation for ministry

This teaching also has deep application on our actions:

- Greater involvement in missions
- Greater effectiveness in evangelism
- Greater edification of believers

There is no doubt that a correct understanding of the exclusive nature of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone is absolutely essential to a healthy Christian life.

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