

What About Those Who Never Heard The Gospel?

In discussions on the topic of salvation, the question is sometimes raised: "What happened to the Gentiles who lived before Jesus Christ or everyone who lived after, who died having never heard the gospel?" Here is my answer to that question.

Ancient man, if he sought the truth, was acutely aware that he was a sinner. If he relished in a lifestyle of departing from the truth, then he was no different from the man today who reads the gospels, but still rejects Jesus. *The truth is the same yesterday and today and forever.* If he embraced the truth, his way of escape from his sinful condition was no different.

The environments and living conditions of man have varied greatly over time, but the makeup of the soul has not. Every man is created with a soul and every man's soul is not able to escape interaction with the truth. Every man has to accept or reject it by faith. Faith is the inward spiritual decision to accept the revealed truth of God, followed by an outward physical response that confirms the reality of the internal commitment. God looks upon this decision intently. He is faithful to give more light to those who respond positively. He desires to reveal himself to man.

Salvation from eternal damnation has always come through faith. It did not matter whether it was the Hebrews or Gentiles. The apostle Paul touched on this when he wrote:

For all who have sinned without the law [gentiles] will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law [Hebrews] will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, *by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their*

hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (Romans 2:12-16; emphasis mine)

The Ancient Gentiles did not have to have a written copy of the law to carry out its intent. When Paul said they “by nature” do it, he was referring to the fact that they recognized the truth—and by so doing acknowledged the existence of wrong (sin). It would not take those who had the law written on their hearts long to realize they needed forgiveness for their mistakes. The gospel of Jesus Christ brought to light this whole process with intense detail. It provides the ultimate solution for life.

Our knowledge of God has been dominated by the Hebrew experience, because that was His chosen pathway, however, we neglect to appreciate the realities of the ancient Gentiles, especially those in Scripture. Job, whose book is likely the oldest in the Bible, stands as our shining example. The very first verse tells us he was “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.” Here is our answer. Job had no written commandments to follow. God designed man to carry His own commands.

The question for Job and ancient man was, “Did he respect God?” and “Did he reject sin?” In other words, did he embrace humility and truth and did he reject pride, falsehood, and sin? The prophet Micah explained, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (6:8)” Centuries before King Solomon wrote proverbs about “the fear of the Lord,” Job himself declared that God *said* to man, “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding. (28:28)” God’s Spirit was already speaking Scripture to these ancient Gentiles, shining more light on those who shunned evil.

Finally, Job had enough knowledge of God to make this stunning declaration, “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth” (19:25). Job had faith in Christ.

The great fallacy of the initial question is the perception that God did not speak to ancient man and, more broadly, the viewpoint that He does not communicate with man. Man has always lived in communication with God or gods (i.e., demonic powers). Those who feared God, listening to their conscience—the voice of their human spirit—and turned away from sin were brought to the gates of wisdom and often heard the voice of God. The 20th chapter of Genesis provides a classic example of this:

And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah [Abraham's wife]. But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife." Now Abimelech had not approached her. So he said, "Lord, will you kill an innocent people? Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' *In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands* I have done this." Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her. Now then, return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not return her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours." (20:2b-7; emphasis mine)

Abimelech was a Philistine king. He did not seem the least bit surprised when God spoke to him in his dream. He simply carried on a regular conversation with him. Furthermore, he arose "early" the next morning and immediately acted on it, as if hearing from God was a regular way of life. This is also an example of God giving more light to someone who had recognized the law of God—that it was wrong to take another man's wife—and had it written on his heart.

This passage also highlights the neglected fact that God also commonly communicates through dreams. His Spirit does not just speak to man's spirit during the day. He often communicates with man through dreams in the night. The Bible is full of examples of God communicating with

Gentiles through dreams (e.g., Nebuchadnezzar and Pilate's wife) and it continues. In more recent times, it has been **common** for Muslims to have dreams about Jesus Christ. Many of these Muslims live in regions of the world, such as the Middle East, where the gospel is rarely preached.

We underestimate the influence of the modern religion of science to deceive in this realm. Lacking truth and blindly clinging to atheism by faith, many modern scientists have abolished God's six-day creation, with its divinely orchestrated cycles, and established their own scientific religion based on time and chance. The deception has caused multitudes to miss the fact that they were not only designed and created by God, but they were designed by God to have communication with Him. Even before I was walking with the Lord, I did not believe in evolution. I realized the intangible thoughts and desires of my heart (soul) could not have come from matter alone. They were planted by God.

No matter how you frame it, it comes down to the fact that each individual person must have a response of faith. Those who have been blessed with all or a portion of God's written word in their lives must make the same response as those who have not. This response of faith comes no easier for those who do have it. This is drawn out in Jesus' account of the rich man and Lazarus. From hell, the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to his father's house to warn his five brothers about it. What was Abraham's response? "They have Moses and the Prophets [i.e., most of the Old Testament]; let them hear them" (Luke 16:29). The rich man then said, "No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." Abraham responded, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead." Abraham's point is clear. If they did not respond to the hearing of God's Word, then they would not respond when His Son rises from the dead.

Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve plunged man into the fallen state of sin, the dilemma has been the same. Every person who has reached the age of accountability has had to face the reality of their sinful condition in

the presence of an omniscient God. Jesus once declared, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). He has always been and He has always been speaking, as Isaiah declared centuries before His first coming:

"Who among you fears the LORD and obeys *the voice of his servant [Jesus Christ]*? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God" (50:10; emphasis mine)

Jesus has always been "the way" out of man's dilemma. He has always been "the truth" that they have faced in their sinful condition. Those who have responded affirmatively to His voice have escaped, experienced His "life," and will do so forevermore.

The problem with the question, "What happened to the gentiles who lived before Jesus Christ or everyone who lived after, who died having never heard the gospel?" is that it is posed from the darkness and not the light. God has always been speaking and drawing men to Himself to escape the penalty of their fallen condition.