

FR

Is Jesus The Only Route To Heaven?

Most of you, no doubt, without hesitation will answer “yes” to the question in the title above. Although you may wish in your heart that you could offer hope through other routes also, you remember that Jesus stated plainly, “*No man can come to the Father except by me*” (John 14:6).

Will anyone be in heaven who did not believe in Jesus and have a relationship with God through him? Well, yes! In fact, there will be at least three groups in this category. Are you open for a challenge to modify our traditional easy answer that is so exclusive?

1. Most of you will probably concede that the largest part of those populating heaven will be the infants and children who died before they reached “the age of accountability.” Don’t ask me too much about that supposed line of demarcation for the Bible does not speak of such. And there are many other questions about immortality of infants that I cannot answer since they are not addressed.

Many have concluded that David looked forward to being with his dead child in heaven when he stated that he would go to his child but the child could not return to him (2 Sam. 12:25). It is more likely, however, that he was thinking more of death and the grave, for hope of immortality is very dim in the Old Testament history. There was no promise of eternal life offered the patriarchs, or in the covenant with Abraham, or in the Law of Moses.

Our hope for infant immortality has been based more on our reasoning than clear statements from the Scriptures. “*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*” It would be unjust to exclude the innocent. Though a two-year-old may throw a temper tantrum and a five-year-old may lie or deceive, we think they are incapable of understanding right and wrong. So we have no anxieties about the welfare of one who dies in childhood though God has not drawn lines for us.

Granting that the baby is born with immortal soul, could that immortality be revoked by sin when majority is reached? If the child dies in innocence, is that innocence meritorious so that the child can be saved apart from Jesus?

I am not trying to create doubt, but I am intending to show that the answers are not all simplistic. When you get all the answers figured out, send me a copy! Well, on second thought, skip that, for I will not have time to read a discourse of that length!

2. Shall we expect to see Moses, Elijah, David, Daniel, and Isaiah in heaven? Surely! They did not believe in Jesus and had no relationship with him. How could they access the Father without being “in Christ”, for “*No one comes to the Father, but by me.*” Paul gives us an easy answer for that question: “*But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons*” (Gal. 4:5-6). They were saved by the grace of God through the atonement of Christ. Was everyone who lived under the Law of Moses redeemed? Evidently Paul is referring to the salvation of Israel in general terms, not through law keeping, but through Christ, but not necessarily meaning that each one under the Law was redeemed. None were righteous by perfect law-keeping, yet God judged individual righteousness with some connection to one’s efforts to live correctly. How correctly did one have to live in order to be redeemed by Christ? I do not know.

3. “*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*” (Gen. 18:22-33). Abraham appealed to the justice of God in his “bargaining” for Sodom. With his family, Abraham had been separated as a believer in the One God. Evidently, those of Sodom were not believers but were yet pagan, except for righteous Lot who lived there. Would God spare the city if there were fifty righteous persons there? Yes!

Was God answering a purely hypothetical question, or could they have been righteous while not knowing Abraham’s God? If so, by what law or standard? The city was given over to sin. God was holding them responsible for their sin. What law, or laws, had they violated? There is no record of God having given them or anyone else a code of law, not even Enoch, Noah, or Abraham. By what code of law did God judge Nineveh when indicting its citizens as sinners many years later? Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

Repeating the question, could they have been righteous while not knowing Abraham’s God? Do you mean a God with a certain name, like *Yaweh*, or a functioning deity whom they might refer to as The Creator, The Eternal One, The Great Spirit, or The Father of All? If the specific name is of priority, then what is that name? Do you know it? “*God*” is a generic reference to deity, not a specific name.

If they deduced that “*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*” (Rom. 1:20-25), would not they have discovered the same God in whom Abraham believed? True, the people of Sodom, Nineveh, or wherever would not know all about the character of Deity. But neither do I! I won’t speak for you.

Because the Bible deals mainly with redemptive history which involved the bringing of Jesus into the world through Abraham and Israel, we have tended to feel that God left the rest of mankind out with little, or no, concern and provision for them. Although the Bible focus is on one small called-out nation, God revealed himself to all peoples of all times and expected recognition and respect. Pagan and idolatrous concepts distorted and disparaged his true nature, power, and divinity. Paul expressed this forcefully.

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; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him,

but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.”

What Paul was stating applied to mankind in general. The separating of the descendants of Abraham through Jacob still left the rest of mankind in the category addressed by Paul. That would include Abel, Enoch, Noah, Ishmael, Cyrus, Ahasuerus, Nebuchadnezzar, and such. God sent some special revelations to certain individuals and nations before and after the call of Abraham and the giving of the Law of Moses. God expected right living of all of them.

How could the just Judge of all demand the reverence of them? The passage above indicates that they had enough revelation through nature to constrain their moral conduct and produce reverence toward the Creator. Without a code of definitive laws, how would they know any standard of morality? They had a law – not a code, but a principle of action which God has written in the hearts of all who were created in his image.

In Romans 1-2, Paul informs his Jewish readers about God’s dealing with the Gentiles. *“For he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing **seek for glory and honor and immortality**, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for **every one who does good**, the Jew first and also the Greek. **For God shows no partiality**”* (2:6-11).

Then Paul tells us the basis of judgment: *“When Gentiles who have not the law **do by nature what the law requires**, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that **what the law requires is written on their hearts**, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus”* (2:14-16). Please read those two chapters. The Gentile was not condemned because of lack of circumcision or sabbath keeping, or lack of baptism or participation in the communion. He was a sinner because of his dishonoring Deity and his fellowman. Notice the listing that Paul makes of those sins.

Every sane person realizes there is a Creator. Each person realizes that he should respect his Creator and his fellowman. The two ageless principles on which all of God’s law is based are the **principles of action written on our hearts – the First and Second Commandments – to love God and man**. These govern our relation to God (spiritual) and to man (moral). No man can plead ignorance of God’s principles of action.

There could be righteous persons in Sodom and every other place on earth in any age if they did by nature what the law requires, that is to reverence God and man. Could any person keep those laws sufficiently to merit salvation? No. Neither could one keep the Law of Moses so as to merit salvation. Can we claim perfection in keeping those two laws, or any other supposed code of laws? No. None can be sufficiently righteous but evidently God favors righteous intent. Because all lack perfection does not mean that no

one in any of these settings could be saved by grace. Jesus assures, *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied”* (Matt. 5:6).

Beginning in Chapter 3, Paul tells the good news of grace through the atonement of Jesus through which we may receive the gift of righteousness. It could save the Jew who kept the Law of Moses imperfectly, the Gentile who kept the law written on the heart imperfectly, and present disciples who keep it imperfectly.

The child who did not live to believe in Jesus or God could reap the benefit of Jesus’ triumph over sin and death. The Israelite who never believed in Jesus but kept the law imperfectly could be a beneficiary. The Gentile who did not believe in Jesus but kept the law written in his heart even imperfectly could be redeemed also. And the persons since the coming of Christ, like the Aztecs or Australian natives, who have kept the law written on the heart, though they had no opportunity to know about Jesus, may benefit from the atonement. Thus, all came/come to the Father by Jesus Christ. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right, demanding nothing impossible of infants, erring Jewish law keepers, Gentiles in all ages reaching for God but limited in knowledge, and disciples who have no perfect record?

How can this be true when we know that Jesus declared, *“He who does not believe will be condemned.”*? Let us look at the Great Commission again, not looking for loopholes but looking for harmony. *“And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned’”* (Mark 16:15-16). The hope of any individual through the gospel was contingent upon his hearing it. Jesus placed proclamation and hearing as conditions for responsive faith. The gospel is good news, not bad news of condemnation. This announcement did not spell immediate condemnation for the Mayans or Australian natives.

A distinction must be made between unbelief (non-belief) due to lack of information and disbelief due to rejection of the information. The preaching came first, then the response of saving faith or of rejecting, condemning disbelief. The American native who worshipped the “Great Spirit” was not demonstrating rejecting disbelief for he heard no message of the gospel.

When Jesus warned, *“You will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he”* (John 8:24), he was not addressing the Cherokee tribe. He was speaking to Jews who were not favoring the evidences that Jesus was the Messiah. The Cherokees were non-believers but the ones Jesus addressed were disbelievers. When Jesus would return in vengeance upon that rejecting generation, they would be among those *“who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus* (2 Thes. 1:5-12) because of rejection rather than lack of information.

Again, Jesus said, *“No one comes to the Father but by me”* (John 14:6). We must consider here that *“No one can come to me unless the **Father** who sent me **draws him**; ... And they shall all be **taught by God**. Everyone who has **heard and learned from the Father comes to me**.”* (John 6:44-45). One is not yet called if the message is unavailable. *“But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?”* (Rom. 10:14f). Man is not accountable to information beyond his reach.

The Athenians, through observation of nature, were like blind men groping after God in their search. They had an altar dedicated to the “unknown god.” Paul offered no censure for that but proclaimed the nature of the deity they saw in the creation. Then he declared that they could no longer plead ignorance but must come to repentance (Acts 17:22-31). However, they had not been commanded to repent previous to Paul’s speech, for they had not yet been called through hearing. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

Someone is sure to ask, “Then why preach the gospel if persons may be saved without it?” It offers a revealed assurance of hope of eternal life. It offers motivation. It is God’s call to encourage universal response. Without that message, those who endeavored to keep the law on the heart would be doing so purely on that principle of action without the motivation of the great promises of the gospel..

If the untaught can receive the benefit of the atonement without assemblies, rituals, forms, and quotas, then of what value are those things? None of those works have merit to take away sin or “to send bricks up to build our mansion.” Those activities are for the propagation of the message, mutual maintenance of faith, and the upbuilding of spiritual strength. You can certainly elaborate on the values of “body life.”

Other points relating to this subject may be read in Chapter 18 of *Free In Christ*. Your standing as a disciple is not affected by whether you agree or disagree with this treatise, however, the justice of God is made more evident by these truths. “*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*”

Is Jesus the only route to heaven? Yes, for no other has conquered death and atoned for sin. []

(Cecil Hook; May 2004. First published in FR 33, November 1998)