

How Will They Believe?

The question pops up again and again. What about people who never had the opportunity to hear the Gospel? Must they be lost, damned? Is there no possibility for them to be saved?

Can a person be saved without having heard the Gospel? Paul says it all in Romans 10: *“For whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”* How then are they to call on Him in whom they have not believed? Moreover, how are they to believe in Him of whom they have not heard? How are they to hear without a preacher?” (Romans 10:13-14; see Joel 2:32).

If we ask more questions in this area, we quickly get into matters which are beyond our understanding (Romans 11:33). The whole matter must be left up to the will of God. We must not, dare not, accuse God of being unfair to those who died without having heard the Gospel. We cannot know why God did not provide more intense preaching for Tyre and Sidon, Sodom and Gomorrah (Matthew 11:21-24). We still know that He wants everyone to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). We must leave it at that.

Some people have tried to say that such people could have believed without having heard. That is contrary not only to Romans 10 but also to the whole discussion in the first two chapters of 1 Corinthians. There is no faith in Christ apart from the Gospel of Christ (Romans 10:17; 1 Peter 1:23-25). We should remember that the Word in general has gone out to the whole world - if not the Gospel, then the Law, so that there is no excuse for sin (Psalm 19:1-4; Romans 2:1-15; 10:18). We should also remember that at two different times, everyone in the world was a Christian - right after God converted Adam and Eve, and when only Noah's family was left alive on earth. There has been a great deal of Christian missionary work, stretching far and wide, especially at the time of the Apostles and as a result of the Reformation.

All attempts to say that there is salvation apart from the Gospel must end up in works righteousness. It is usually phrased in such a way that one doubts (by human reason!) the damnation of non-Christians who were “good” people. That was true when Zwingli, one of the fathers of the Reformed, said that he expected to see Socrates and Plato and others in heaven. It is true when modern Romanists try to claim that “good” non-Christians are “anonymous Christians.” The idea is that salvation comes to people because they are good, not because Christ was good for us and in our place-keeping the laws we have broken and dying for our breaking them. The only hope for salvation is hope in Christ-specifically and by name (Acts 4:12).

Biblically, we have no reason to expect to see anyone in heaven except those who have been brought to and kept in faith in Christ by means of Word and Sacrament, the Gospel by itself and in connection with the water in Baptism and the elements in Communion.

We really ought to stop asking about those already dead. It is not a practical question. It has nothing to do with our task in mission work. We can do nothing to help those already dead. We have no responsibility for them. What is practical is that we still today have the requirement, the duty, the task, the labour, the joy of preaching the Gospel to all people now alive! There is nothing more urgent than spreading the Word of God. For there is no other way for people to be saved than by Christ through the Gospel. That is the point of Romans 10 and many other sections in the Bible.

It is a waste of time and energy to think about our ancestors in Africa or America, Asia or Europe, before missionaries reached them. But it is important and urgent that we spend our time and energy bringing the Word of God, Law and Gospel, to those alive in this world today and preserving the Gospel for future generations (if there are such before Christ returns). We cannot do or accomplish anything toward this goal on our own. But Christ can do everything through the Word which He wants us to spread and proclaim.