

# Salvation of the “Heathen”—Part Three

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***A Vindication of God’s Justice.*** Is it fair for God to send people to hell who have never heard the only Gospel by which they can be saved? This question is really several questions in one. They will be broken down and analyzed one by one.

*Are The Heathen Lost?* The biblical answer to this question is clear: All human beings are born in sin (Ps. 51:5 KJV) and are “by nature the children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3 KJV). For “... just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned [in Adam]” (Rom. 5:12). Addressing explicitly the heathen who have only general revelation, the apostle Paul declared, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, *so that men are without excuse* (Rom. 1:20). Likewise, he adds, “All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law” (Rom. 2:12). Then, summing up his conclusion from the whole section, Paul pronounces, “There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:22-23). Yes, sinful rebels from God remain lost apart from knowing about Christ.

*Is There Salvation Apart from Christ?* All orthodox Christians agree that there is no salvation apart from Christ’s redemptive work. Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). The apostle Paul added, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). Further, the writer of Hebrews agreed, affirming that “Christ... has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb. 9:26). And “this priest [Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God... because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (Heb. 10:12, 14). Literally, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

*Is It Fair to Condemn Those Who Have Not Heard?* Yes, it is just to condemn those who have never received God’s special revelation. First, through general revelation they know about his “eternal power and Godhead” (Rom. 1:20). They are aware that he “made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them” (Acts 14:15). They are aware that God “has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons (Acts 14:17). Although they do not have the Law of Moses, “All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law.... Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law [of Moses], since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts” (Rom. 2:12-15).

Even though God has revealed himself to the heathen in creation and in conscience, fallen humanity has universally rejected that light. Hence, God is not obligated to give them any more light, since they have turned from the light they have. In fact, although they have the truth, “the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom. 1:18). Someone lost in the darkness of a dense jungle who sees one speck of light should go toward it. If that person turns away from the little light and becomes forever lost in darkness, there is only one person to blame. The Scriptures say, “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19).

If any unbeliever truly sought God through the general revelation, God would provide the special revelation sufficient for salvation. After God led Peter to the Gentile Cornelius, Peter declared: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:35). The writer of Hebrews tells us that those who seek, find. “He rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Heb. 11:6).

God has many ways at his disposal through which he can get the truth of the Gospel to lost souls. The normative way is through preachers of the Gospel (Rom. 10:14-15), whether in person or on radio, TV, or some recording. On one occasion God will use an angel to preach the Gospel “to every nation, tribe, language and people” (Rev. 14:6). Many people have been given a Bible, read it, and been saved. Others have been saved through Gospel literature. We have no way of knowing whether God has conveyed special revelation through visions, dreams, and in other miraculous ways. The truth is that God is more willing that all be saved than we are. For “the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). God’s justice demands that he condemns all sinners, but his love compels him to provide salvation for all who by his grace will believe. For “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:13).

One thing is important to keep in mind. To send people to hell who have never heard is not unjust. To think so is like claiming that it is not right for someone to die of a disease for which there is a cure of which he or she has not yet heard. The crucial question is how one got the disease, not whether he or she has heard of a cure. What is more, if one desires neither to know there is a cure nor to do what is necessary to get cured, then he or she is most certainly culpable.

*Will There Be People Saved from Every Nation?* Those who reject the view that special revelation is necessary for salvation generally point to those in non-Christian lands. What about China, India, Africa, and many formerly Communist countries? Surely it is not fair to have so many in heaven from Western countries and so few from Eastern lands.

There is no reason why the percentage of people saved must be the same from all countries. Who is saved will depend on who believes, and that will vary from place to place. Just as in farming and fishing, some areas are more fruitful than others. The Scriptures assure us that there will be “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9a). Indeed, while the percentage may understandably vary, it would seem strange if there were no one from one country that desired to be saved (just as it would if everyone from another country wanted to be saved). People have free choice, and free choice is exercised freely. Some will believe and some will not.

There are ways by which people might go to heaven, even where the Gospel has not gone out. Perhaps all (or at least some) children who die in infancy are saved. Others may come into contact with the Gospel through Christian radio, literature, or recordings. Perhaps God reveals himself in miraculous ways. A window might be opened for the Word. Countries with a large percentage of Christians were once pagan.

*Is There a Second Chance?* A few Christian apologists and many cults believe that God will give a second chance after death to those who never heard the Gospel. Orthodox Christians reject this. The Bible declares that “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (Heb. 9:27). The urgency with which Scripture speaks of making one’s decision now in this life (Prov. 29:1; John 8:24; Heb. 3:7-13; 2 Peter 3:9) is strong evidence that there is no second chance. The fact that people immediately go to either heaven or hell (Luke 16:19-31; 2 Cor. 5:8; Rev. 19:20) indicates that a decision must be made in this life. Since God has so many ways to reveal himself to unbelievers before death, it is unnecessary that he do so after they die. Belief in a second chance undermines the missionary mandate. Why have the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20), if people can be saved apart from receiving Christ in this life?

Interpretations of Scripture used to support second-chance salvation are, to say the least, highly disputed (for example, 1 Peter 3:18-19). Clear texts are unambiguous in teaching that hell awaits the unrepentant. There is no real evidence that God will give anyone a second chance to be saved after death. Jesus said, “I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am [the one I claim to be], you will indeed die in your sins” (John 8:24).

## **Sources**

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