

# WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD?

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It's one thing to say that those who knowingly reject Christ do so to their own loss. But what about those who have never been told that Christ died in their place? Is it possible that God would deny heaven to them for not accepting a Savior they had never encountered? How could they be held accountable for what they didn't know?

These are hard questions that need more than theoretical or speculative answers. So with millions of unreached people in mind, we have attempted in the following pages to understand what the Bible itself says about those who have never heard.

*Martin R. De Haan II*

# A GROWING ARGUMENT IN A SHRINKING WORLD

The global influence of Christ is a fact of history. The impact of His life has gone far beyond the streets and neighborhoods of His homeland.

In *The History Of The Expansion Of Christianity*, Yale scholar Kenneth Scott Latourette traces the influence of Christ down through the centuries into our current era. He shows that vast distances have been covered and cultural barriers have been crossed. Around the world, Christ's followers organized first to meet their own needs and then reached out to others in the far reaches of the earth. Yet despite these enormous accomplishments, there are many who have

never heard that Christ died for them.

The unfinished mission of reaching the world raises troubling questions for those who believe that Christ is the only way to God. What about those who die without knowing? Could God possibly say to them, "I'm sorry, but you have not accepted My Son"? If so, will they cry, "But we never knew that He did anything for us! How could we accept what we never even heard?"

These are important questions. They are so significant that some who *have* heard about Christ say that they could only reject a God who would judge people who didn't believe in a Savior they never had a chance to accept.

The debate over the future of unreached people has become more intense in the last couple of decades. Ironically, as the number of people who have never

heard about Christ seems to be shrinking, a growing number of theologians are wondering whether it is possible to be saved by Christ without hearing His name or His gospel.

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***Would a good  
God hold people  
accountable for  
what they have  
never heard?***

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While believing that Christ is the only way to God, many think that it might be possible to come to God through Christ without ever hearing His name. One advocate of this view says, “If the eternal God, who does not necessarily view time sequentially, has applied Christ’s blood to people of faith in the Old Testament who have no knowledge of

Jesus, why can He not do likewise for the unreached person today who has no explicit knowledge of Christ but may believe in the One who raised Jesus from the dead? (Rom. 4:23-24).”

By similar reasoning, some appeal to the fact that many Christians already believe that God will apply the death of Christ to infants who die or to people with severe mental limitations. They go on to suggest that “evangelicals who are lenient toward these ‘innocents’ should extend their reasoning further and embrace ‘the untold.’”

As we take a closer look, we do so with this confidence: If at any point we find ourselves doubting God’s goodness or losing concern for those who have never heard, then we have not understood the Scriptures or the heart of the God who inspired them.

# IS CHRIST THE ONLY WAY TO GOD?

In this age of global culture and pluralism, few issues raise more questions than the claim by Jesus' followers that He is the only way to God. So before we take a closer look at "those who have never heard," let's look at the biblical evidence for why many continue to believe that personal faith in Christ is so important.

**What about the similarities between Christ and other religions?** Some have observed the parallels between the teachings of Christ and other world religions. His emphasis on treating others the way we want to be treated, while seeking peace and purity of soul, is not unique to the Bible.

Yet the comparative

similarities are only part of the picture. Buddhism claims enlightened thinking without making an issue of whether there is a God. Hinduism teaches that there are thousands of gods. Modern Judaism maintains that the long-awaited Messiah has not yet appeared.

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***"It is a stubborn fact that non-Christian religions are radically different from Christianity."***

**J. I. Packer**

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In general, other major world religions emphasize the importance of human efforts to purify the soul. By contrast, the gospel of Christ says that we can't achieve cleanness of heart by our own works but only

by relying on the forgiveness Christ bought for us when He paid for our sins on His cross.

**Where in the Bible does it say that Christ is the only way to**

**God?** The apostle Peter said of Christ, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Peter didn’t come up with such a conclusion on his own. According to the gospel writer John, Peter was with others who all heard Jesus Himself say, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (Jn. 14:6).

If it were not for the rest of His life, those few words would have been long forgotten. The entirety of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, however, show why His followers concluded

that Jesus had a right to make such amazing claims about Himself.

The uniqueness of Christ is carefully developed by another apostle in the first chapter of his letter to the Roman Christians living in the pluralistic city of Rome. Paul wrote:

*<sup>1</sup>Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God <sup>2</sup>which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, <sup>3</sup>concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, <sup>4</sup>and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. <sup>5</sup>Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name (Rom. 1:1-5).*

In these opening words, Paul identified some distinctives that he believed set Christ apart from all other religious founders. The gospel of Christ was deeply rooted in the predictions of Old Testament prophets (v.2). Even though the Jewish prophets didn't know how it would happen, they pointed to a Messiah who would die a substitutionary death for wrongs that were not His own (Isa. 53:1-10; Dan. 9:24-26).

Verses 3 and 4 refer to additional factors that distinguish Christ from all other religious leaders. According to Paul, Jesus was "the Son of God," who possessed both a human and a divine nature. This was something that the apostle had once found impossible to admit. All of his religious training had made him suspicious of any religious idea that even hinted of idolatry. Well

educated in the doctrine and theology of Moses, he prayed daily with the rest of his nation, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!" (Dt. 6:4). As a result of this training, Paul had initially persecuted Jewish countrymen who followed Jesus and declared that He was Lord and Messiah (Acts 9:1-2). Only through a life-changing encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus did Paul become convinced that Jesus was both Savior and God (vv.3-22).

In that moment, Paul became one of the many witnesses of Christ's resurrection—a resurrection that distinguishes the gospel of Christ from all other faiths. If Jesus' body had remained in the grave after His death on a Roman cross, He would have come to the same end as all other religious teachers (see 1 Cor. 15:12-19). Instead, the

evidence of an empty tomb, personal appearances, and witnesses who were willing to die for their claim that they had seen Christ alive after His death all combine to lead many to believe in Christ as the King of kings and Lord of lords.

It is on the basis of such evidence that Paul wrote:

*I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek (Rom. 1:16).*

Paul's enthusiasm was rooted in the conviction that the God of his fathers had revealed Himself in a manner that now needed to be declared to all the world. The apostle did not interpret his experience merely as part of his Jewish heritage. He believed that Christ had provided a salvation that needed to be offered first to his Jewish countrymen and

then to people of every other nation.

### **Could people be worshipping the true God but calling Him by a different name?**

Paul had so much confidence in Christ that he told a group of Athenian philosophers that the God he had come to know in Christ was the God they were worshipping in ignorance (Acts 17:16-33).

This claim that people all over the world have some knowledge of the one true God (Rom. 1:18-21) has been observed by others who have brought the gospel to previously unreached people. Don Richardson, author of *Peace Child* and *Lords Of The Earth*, is known for finding ideas in other religions that can be used to introduce the God of the Bible. He tells of people living in an isolated culture who, when told about the life of Christ,

quickly recognized the God of the Bible as the God they had been waiting for. They told of traditions of a lost holy book and spoke of a Creator from whom they had been separated. When the gospel was presented to such groups, the people responded warmly to the message of Christ.

Richardson's observations suggest that people in unreached cultures may have remnants of knowledge about the one true God that have been passed down from generation to generation. But what about those ancestors who died before hearing about Christ?

**Can a person be saved without hearing the gospel?** Here we must be careful. It's important for us to say as much as the Bible says without adding more. It's clear that until the beginning of the church, repentant individuals who

put their faith in the one true God could find forgiveness even though they didn't have the whole gospel message as we know it (Heb. 11:1-40).

An example of a repentant person who didn't have the whole gospel is one of the two thieves who was executed along with Jesus. The message of Christ's death for sin and His subsequent resurrection had not yet been declared. But one of the thieves found mercy when he confessed his sins and asked Christ to remember him when He came into His kingdom. In response to the dying man's faith and his less-than-complete understanding of the gospel, Jesus said, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Lk. 23:43).

What we know from this passage is that Christ offered "deathbed assurance" to a man who acknowledged his own sin and asked the right

Person for help. What we don't know for sure is to what extent we can apply this example to others who recognize their sin and appeal to the one true God for mercy, even though they've never heard the full gospel of Christ. This raises another question.

**Will God use the death of Christ to forgive everyone?** In a desire to see everyone benefit from the salvation provided by Christ, some believe that because of Christ's death on the cross, God will eventually forgive all people regardless of whether they have heard of Christ or whether they have believed in the gospel. They go on to say that because Jesus paid the price for everyone's sin, He could, on that basis, follow through on His own desire when He prayed from His cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Lk. 23:34).

The problem with such a view is that it is not supported by some of the most foundational biblical texts. Consider, for instance, these well-known words of Jesus:

*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil (Jn. 3:16-19).*

Both Old and New Testaments follow this pattern of offering spiritual forgiveness only to those who acknowledge their sin and accept God's terms of forgiveness.

Our own systems of justice follow a similar path. Little mercy is extended to hardened criminals who show no apparent conscience, remorse, or even acknowledgment of wrongdoing. Yet something different happens to those who come to terms with the harm and pain they have caused others. When justice allows, leniency can be extended within the boundaries of the law. Even when prison terms and death sentences are legally mandated, there is a level of human reconciliation that is possible when individuals show a willingness to face the harm they've done.

In a similar way, the

Bible shows that God sacrificed His own Son to assure that the balance of justice was met, but He offers His mercy only to those who are willing to come to terms with their own wrongs.

**Why isn't it enough to be sincere?**

The prophet Jeremiah, speaking on behalf of God, wrote, "You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart" (Jer. 29:13). His words show

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***"You will seek  
Me and find Me,  
when you search  
for Me with all  
your heart."  
Jeremiah 29:13***

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that an honest heart is important. Jeremiah clearly acknowledged that God

honors those who seek Him with their whole heart.

But honesty of heart is only one part of the picture. From Genesis to Jesus, the Bible also shows that God wants sincere people to know the truth about Him. The God of the Bible expects something all of us can relate to. Just as we don't want others to believe false and dishonoring rumors about us, so the God of the Bible insists that those who worship Him do so on the basis of what is true.

Expressing His concern that people worship God in both sincerity and truth, Jesus said to a skeptical, non-Jewish woman:

*You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is*

*seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth (Jn. 4:22-24).*

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***“God is Spirit,  
and those who  
worship Him must  
worship in spirit  
and truth.”***

**John 4:24**

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Here Jesus spoke of worshipping “in spirit” in the sense that God is looking for those who will respond to Him from their heart. But He also said that God is looking for those who will worship Him in *truth*. That one word adds profound implications.

The requirement of truth can be both comforting and deeply troubling. On one hand, believing reliable

information about God brings great assurance to those who accept Him as He is. But that same knowledge can also fill us with deep concern for those who still don't have an adequate understanding of what they need to know.

The apostle Paul's letter to the Romans shows that he was heartbroken over his countrymen who didn't understand that they needed to rely on God's mercy rather than on their own merits. Even though Jesus Himself declared that "salvation is of the Jews" (Jn. 4:22), Paul knew that many zealous Jewish worshipers were rejecting the part of the truth they needed to be saved. So the apostle wrote:

*Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not*

*according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom. 10:1-4).*

Paul's words in verse 3, "seeking to establish their own righteousness," remind us why everyone needs to hear the gospel of Christ. The Jewish family, friends, and neighbors Paul cared so much about were not much different than the rest of us. We are all inclined to rely on our own accomplishments. There is something within all of us that believes we deserve not only the good things God gives us, but also His forgiveness and eternal life.

## WHAT CAN WE KNOW FOR SURE?

Imagine asking the apostle Paul the question we are considering in this booklet. “Paul, what about those who have never heard?” What if we followed up with a second question: “Paul, do you think it’s possible for someone to respond to the light he’s been given and to be saved by Christ without ever hearing His name?”

If we use Paul’s letters to try to guess how he would answer, we might conclude that he would encourage us to leave those answers in God’s hands. He wrote as one who believed that God would be a fair judge to all (Rom. 2:1-11), without saying how God would deal with persons who respond in faith to the light they’ve been given.

### Whom was Paul most concerned about?

Instead of answering such questions, Paul showed that he was far more concerned about those who turn away from what God has revealed about Himself through both nature and His messengers.

The man who saw himself as “the apostle to the Gentiles” was concerned about people of all nations who, without intervention, would continue to run from the light of God. His letter to the Romans shows that he saw all people, Jew and Gentile alike, as entangled in their own tendency to avoid, suppress, and deny the truth that was self-evident even in the natural world (Rom. 1:18-21; 3:10-23).

This universal tendency to deny personal accountability and error is a human trait that Paul did not underestimate. What he said about human nature

seems to parallel a story that showed up in our local newspaper. It described the actions of a couple of men who tried an unorthodox method of trimming a row of bushes. Since they didn't have hedge clippers, they tried lifting a lawn mower and using it like a trimmer. Unfortunately, one man was seriously injured when he lost his grip on the mower. Their misfortune became a part of the daily news when the injured man tried to sue the manufacturer for failing to label the machine with a warning against using it as a hedge trimmer.

Blaming others for our own irresponsibility is something we all are inclined to do—especially when it comes to our relationship to our Creator. Just as our first parents tried to shift blame after their first act of disobedience (Gen. 3:8), we are all prone to try to avoid the consequences of our

own choices (Gen. 3:12-13). Thoughtful reflection shows that we are all wrongdoers who need the forgiveness of God.

Paul saw all of humanity in this category (Rom. 3:23). He was not content, however, to prove the liability of guilty people. Instead, the apostle was deeply concerned about those who needed to hear that Christ had died for their sins (Rom. 9:1-3; Phil. 1:12-18).

**Did Paul believe there was anyone who had never heard?** In Romans 10:18, the apostle asked this question and then answered in a way that might surprise us. Instead of acknowledging that there were many who had not yet heard the gospel of Christ, he continued a theme that he began in chapter 1. Asking and answering his own question, he wrote:

*I say, have they not*

heard? Yes indeed:  
“Their sound has gone  
out to all the earth, and  
their words to the ends  
of the world” (v.18).

It’s important to see how  
Paul answered his own  
question. He didn’t write as  
if there were a fairness issue

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**People of all  
nations are  
accountable not  
for what they  
don’t know  
about Christ but  
for what they  
do know and yet  
turn away from.**

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at stake. Instead, he quoted  
from a Psalm that speaks of  
the evidence God has left  
of Himself in nature. In  
Romans 10:18, Paul referred  
to Psalm 19, which begins:

*The heavens declare the  
glory of God; and the  
firmament shows His  
handiwork. Day unto  
day utters speech, and  
night unto night reveals  
knowledge. There is  
no speech nor language  
where their voice is not  
heard. Their line has gone  
out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end  
of the world (vv.1-4).*

By quoting these words  
of King David, the apostle  
repeated here what he  
emphasized in 1:18-21.  
Once again he reminded his  
readers that the Creator has  
revealed enough of Himself  
in the natural world to hold  
all people everywhere  
accountable for their lack  
of heartfelt worship and  
gratefulness (1:21).

Yet Paul didn’t use  
the truth of Psalm 19  
as an excuse to stop  
caring. Instead, he went  
on to write about his  
own Jewish countrymen:

*Did Israel not know?  
First Moses says: "I will  
provoke you to jealousy  
by those who are not a  
nation, I will move you to  
anger by a foolish nation."  
But Isaiah is very bold  
and says: "I was found by  
those who did not seek  
Me; I was made manifest  
to those who did not ask  
for Me." But to Israel he  
says: "All day long I have  
stretched out My hands to  
a disobedient and contrary  
people" (Rom. 10:19-21).*

If Paul believed that someone could have saving faith in response to natural revelation, that's not where he focused his attention. Neither did he use a lot of ink expressing fear that God would not be fair in judgment. Instead, the dominant emphasis of his letters is on the tendency of human nature to reject the God behind natural creation and to worship the creation instead of the Creator. As a

result, Paul spent his life doing what he could to make sure that as many people as possible heard what God had done for them through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

**What did Paul see as the greatest danger?** In Romans 1:18-25, the apostle wrote:

*The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him*

*as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. . . . [They] exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.*

Here Paul described a process that could be called “the death spiral of human history.” By their own choices, morally responsible people end up worshiping creation rather than the Creator.

Paul’s explanation is based on the Old Testament record that ever since Adam and Eve started down a path

of spiritual independence, their children have inherited an aversion to the truth. Like nocturnal animals who naturally avoid the light, all of Adam’s children are born with an uncomfortable sensitivity to light.

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***Ever since Adam and Eve started down a path of spiritual independence, their children have inherited an aversion to the truth.***

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All who inherit the legacy of such human nature find many ways to reject Christ. Not believing the gospel is only one of them. The Lord Jesus Christ is more than the Messiah who died on

the cross for our sins. He is also the Creator who is constantly revealing Himself through the natural world (Jn. 1:1; Col. 1:16-17).

Here, though, we need to consider an important question.

**Does the Bible say there is more than one way to accept Christ?**

If Christ is not only the Savior who died for us but also our Creator and Sustainer (Jn. 1:1-3; Col. 1:16-17), is it possible to accept Christ by receiving Him in any one of the ways He reveals Himself? Is bringing a repentant heart to our Creator the same as accepting Him as Savior if we have no knowledge of the gospel?

The Scriptures plainly show that before Christ's death on the cross, people were accepted by God when they responded in faith to what He revealed to them about Himself and about their sin. Hebrews 11 shows

that in many different ways, God has taken the initiative to reveal Himself and to receive those who respond in faith to His messengers.

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*The Scriptures plainly state that before Christ's death on the cross, people were accepted by God when they responded in faith to what He revealed to them about Himself and about their sin.*

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Abraham is an example of someone who was saved not by hearing the gospel as we know it today, but rather by believing God when He promised to give him a child

and a legacy in his old age (Gen. 15:5-6; Rom. 4:1-5; Heb. 11:8-19).

The author of Hebrews began his New Testament letter by saying that throughout history God revealed Himself in many times and in many ways (1:1-2). His point was that all of this self-disclosure was moving toward the day when His own Son would step into history to reveal the love of God and then die for our sin (v.3).

At that point in time, the breaking news was that the Creator Himself had personally visited our planet (Jn. 1:1-3,14). After Christ died for our sin and rose from the dead to prove it, He sent His followers out into the whole world with the message that God the Father had sent His Son into the world, and that all who believed in Him would be saved.

A New Testament

example of this unfolding story is seen in the life of a Roman military officer named Cornelius. In Acts 10, he is introduced to us as a devout man of prayer who feared God and gave to the needs of others (vv.1-2).

One of the reasons that Cornelius is important to this study is that he is an example of a Gentile who had not heard about Christ and yet was known by God. He was called “one who feared God” (v.2), which was a term used of Jewish proselytes. So it appears that he was a Gentile who first responded in faith when he came in contact with the God of the Jews. Then sometime after the death and resurrection of Christ, an angel from God appeared to Cornelius in a vision and said, “Cornelius! . . . Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God” (vv.3-4).

In the events that

followed, the Scriptures describe how God sent the apostle Peter to Cornelius and his family. Peter explained to the Roman officer that the God he had been worshiping had revealed Himself in Christ. Cornelius and the rest of his household heard Peter say, “To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43).

This is just one example of what is seen elsewhere in Scripture. Cornelius shows God’s willingness to use supernatural means, if necessary, to respond to those who want to know Him.

**How will those who have never heard the gospel of Christ be judged?** While the Bible does not tell us everything we would like to know about how God will judge those who have never heard the

gospel of Christ, some things are clear. We’ve already seen that people will not be condemned because they have not heard about the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Those who are condemned will be judged because they have not responded to what God *has* revealed about Himself through conscience and the eloquent witness of nature (Rom. 1:18-21; 2:12-16).

In addition, it’s important that we don’t make the mistake of thinking that all lost people will suffer the same punishment. The Bible shows that even though no one can earn his way to heaven, the rewards of believers (2 Cor. 5:10) and the punishments of unbelievers (Rev. 20:13) will be a matter of degree based on works. Jesus Himself taught the principle of judgment by degrees when He said:

*That servant who knew*

*his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more (Lk. 12:47-48).*

Justice, by its very nature, calls for varying degrees of reward or punishment.

**What if we find ourselves struggling with issues of fairness?**

Some of us will undoubtedly find ourselves struggling with the thought that God has not given everyone an equal opportunity to hear the message of Christ. We may be deeply troubled by the fact that not everyone has had a chance to hear the gospel.

If this is our concern, then we might also be troubled by the fact that many people live with profound mental retardation or disease that makes it impossible for them to hear and consider the good news of Christ. Others die at a very early age. We all come into the world with differing abilities and opportunities.

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**God's love  
must be just  
and His justice  
must be loving.**

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Even among those who do hear the gospel, there are profound differences. Some hear clearly about the love of Christ from loving parents or godly spiritual leaders. Others hear the message of Christ from those who abuse their power and exploit their followers.

This is when, once again, we must trust the Judge of all the earth to do what is right (Gen. 18:25). We don't have it within ourselves to resolve such problems. God alone knows how to deal with people in a manner that allows for the choices they had in light of what they knew or didn't know about Him.

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*People desperately need to hear that Christ died for them, that He rose from the dead to prove it, and that He offers forgiveness of sins and everlasting life to all who will believe and trust Him.*

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## HOW CAN WE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

As we consider the question "What About Those Who Have Never Heard?" there is another important question: What can we do to help others once we know what Christ has done for us?

Thankfully, we are left with more than just the statistics about those who have never heard. There is much that we can do. Let's consider, for instance, four practical ways we can make a difference.

**By Praying For Unbelievers.** The first way we can make a difference is by praying for those who do not yet believe in Christ. Once again we can learn from the apostle Paul when he wrote:

*Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and*

*giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:1-4).*

Paul wrote this while giving counsel to a young pastor named Timothy. In the process, the wise and seasoned apostle described several kinds of evangelistic prayers. We are to offer:

- “supplications”—prayers arising from a sense of need as we realize the desperate condition of the lost.
- “prayers”—a general word for prayer that conveys an attitude of awe and respect for God, recognizing that the salvation of the lost

brings honor to Him.

- “intercessions”—a word of involvement, sympathy, and compassion for those who do not know God.
- “thanksgiving”—a spirit of gratitude to God for the saving gospel of Christ that can be proclaimed to those who do not know Him.

The apostle understood the influence of government on the mission of Christ. As a result, he urged Timothy to maintain well-balanced prayers both for leaders and those living under authority, so that the people of God “may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.”

Then, almost as a surprising afterthought, Paul made the statement that God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (v.4).

What did Paul mean by this comment? Was he

saying that all people will be saved because that's what God desires—even if they don't believe in Christ?

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*“For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”*

*1 Timothy 2:3-4*

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Such an interpretation would not fit the rest of what Paul wrote. Instead, the apostle was referring to the heart of God. The God of compassion wants His own people to live in peace. But He also has a deep love for those who have not come to know His Son. That

compassionate desire will never override the human responsibility to respond. God wants everyone to say “yes” to Him, but many will say “no” instead.

As we pray, God wants us to reflect His desire for all people to be saved. He wants us to pray not only for ourselves but also for those who don't yet know Him, and for anything that would enhance their receptivity to the gospel.

### **By Helping To Bring In The Harvest.**

The Lord Jesus spoke of the mission of world evangelism in terms of the team effort it takes to harvest a crop:

*Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest! (Jn. 4:35).*

*The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His*

*harvest (Mt. 9:37-38).*

We are not called to carry out His mission alone. Bringing in the harvest is a team effort that God Himself is deeply interested in. Therefore, He encourages us to look to Him for the additional people and help that are needed to supplement our own prayers, interests, and efforts. And in the process, our Lord wants us to have an attitude that is far more inspired than overwhelmed by the task before us.

### ***Sowing The Seed.***

Mark 4:26-29 adds another word picture to the illustration of harvesting a crop, which helps us to think in even more basic and strategic terms. Speaking of our role in bringing the gospel to our friends, the Lord said:

*The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, and should sleep by night and*

*rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head. But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.*

This simple story reminds us that growth of the seed to maturity is similar to the growing receptivity within the heart of an unbeliever. Responsiveness to the gospel takes time. As we continue to think about those who have never heard, we need to remember that a person usually doesn't understand the gospel in one hearing. This gives us reason not only to provide a one-time witness to our friends but to invite them into other environments, where over time they can hear the good news of Jesus Christ in different contexts.

### ***Working And Waiting.***

In verse 27, Jesus reminded His followers that the sower is not the one who brings about new life. Rather, he is one who “should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how.”

Time can be an ally rather than an enemy to the farmer. The growth process occurs as he does what he can and then waits on the normal processes of nature. He goes home at night and goes to sleep. Early in the morning he rises and takes care of other daily responsibilities. As he waits, the days turn into weeks and the weeks into months.

During that time he removes hindrances to the growth of his crop. He puts fertilizer on the earth to enrich its natural fertility and he removes stubborn weeds that rob the plants of food and moisture. But

he doesn't dote over the field. He attends to other responsibilities, trusting in time as his ally.

As we share our life and faith with friends, time is our ally as well. It often takes time for nonbelievers to begin to grasp what the gospel means. Think of all the experiences you have gone through to develop your values and current view of the world. Yet sometimes we expect unbelievers to change their entire outlook on life after hearing the gospel only once. Most people need more time to come to an awareness of their need and to a confidence in what Christ has done for them. Usually, the Lord of the harvest takes time to cultivate and grow such a conviction in those who are moving toward Him.

***Honoring The Source Of Growth.*** In verse 28, the Lord said that “the earth

yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head.”

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***Sometimes we expect unbelievers to change their entire outlook on life after hearing the gospel only once.***

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The word translated “by itself” is *automatos* (from which we get the word *automatic*). This implies that good seed depends on good ground. The open heart is the good ground that produces fruit. The word for “blade” refers to those first appearances of a crop that indicate growth is taking place. This process of natural growth seems to

illustrate the initial signs of spiritual life within the human heart. A genuine conversion is never just the independent response of an individual. At the heart of the process is the convicting and calling ministry of the Holy Spirit, who makes the Word come alive and stirs the heart of the unbeliever. God the Holy Spirit will germinate the seed of the Word, though to us it looks like it produces “all by itself.”

The ultimate sign of ripe grain is the development of the “full grain in the head.” If the farmer harvests too soon, he will have an unripe crop. If he waits too long, it will rot in the field.

### ***Timing The Harvest.***

Verse 29 continues, “But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”

Just as the plant shows the farmer when it’s ripe

enough to harvest, so unbelievers send signals that they are ready to respond.

In the ancient world, when the farmer saw the ripe grain beckoning to him from the field, he immediately ordered the harvest to begin.

This reminds us that as we do our part by waiting on God, we also need to be alert and sensitive to the right time to encourage people to make a decision to accept Christ. If we try to force their decision, we can do damage. But if we continue to show them that we care, and look for times to ask appropriate questions, God Himself will give us the wisdom we need to help them make the most important decision of their life.

We've just been talking about what we can do to help those within our own sphere of influence who haven't heard or who may

need to hear again. But beyond our neighborhood is a world of other fields,

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*Reaching those who have never heard begins with a down-to-earth, caring interest in those who are the closest to us.*

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other teams of workers, and other strategies of outreach. Here too we have an important role.

### **By Developing A Global Perspective.**

Just before Jesus ascended to heaven, He told His followers:

*You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and*

*to the end of the earth*  
(Acts 1:8).

The cause of Christ has been a global enterprise from its beginning. The strategy outlined by our Lord is simple but not easy. We are to depend on the Holy Spirit's power as we witness to the life-changing claims of Christ. Some of us will carry this out locally in our own sphere of influence (Jerusalem). Some of us will extend our witness to include a nearby region (Judea). Others will go to people of a different culture (Samaria). And still others will go to the "end of the earth."

The largest concentration of people who haven't heard the gospel of Jesus Christ are located in a part of the world often referred to as "The 10/40 Window"—a region 10 degrees to 40 degrees north of the equator, stretching from West Africa to East Asia.

Organizations have been set up to assist in sending a larger number of missionaries to this very needy part of the world. By giving, praying, or even going, you too can help accelerate this important outreach to "those who have never heard."

We care about these people because all who have not heard and all who have heard without believing will eventually give account of themselves to God.

**By Trusting In God's Character.** In the last book of the Bible, the apostle John wrote:

*Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the*

*Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. . . . Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:11-12,14-15).*

A loving, all-wise God is the only One who has the character to carry out such judgment. He alone knows all that we could have done and all that we actually did. He alone understands the mitigating circumstances of each act. And He alone is a God of complete justice as well as mercy.

Once human independence has been looked at under the blinding searchlight of God's scrutiny, all will realize they have been treated fairly.

In their own moment of accountability, believers will

be rewarded according to their faithfulness (1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Cor. 5:10), and unbelievers will be given appropriate punishment for

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***Once human independence has been looked at under the blinding searchlight of God's scrutiny, all will realize they have been treated fairly.***

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the lives they have led (Rev. 20:13). Eternal life can be received only as a gift, but both believers and unbelievers will be held accountable to God for how they responded to Him.

## HAVE YOU REALLY HEARD?

**W**hen we were children, many of us heard frustrated parents asking if we really heard their reminder to finish an unwanted chore. We may have claimed to have heard, but our attitude and actions said otherwise.

As you have read this booklet, you may have thought about your own response to the gospel. Have you heard it? And if so, how have you responded?

It's easy to put off making a decision. And this becomes an even greater tendency when eternal consequences are at stake. But God wants us to make a decision about His Son.

The gospel is a simple but heart-penetrating truth. The Bible tells us that all of us have sinned and fallen short of God's perfect

standard of righteousness (Rom. 3:23). The terrible consequence of this is that we are separated from a holy God (Rom. 6:23). But the Bible also says that because of God's deep compassion for us, He

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***“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God . . . . For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”***  
**Romans 3:23; 6:23**

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became a man and allowed Himself to be nailed to a cross to pay the penalty for our sin (1 Pet. 3:18).

It's not enough just to know these great truths. We must respond to them

by personal choice. The Scriptures tell us, “As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name” (Jn. 1:12).

Will you respond to this spiritual light God has placed before you? Right now you can go to God in prayer and express the desire of your heart. Receive the Savior’s forgiveness and His gift of eternal life with Him.

It can be expressed in a simple prayer like this:  
Jesus, I know I’m a sinner and can’t save myself. Thank You for dying on the cross to pay the penalty for my sin. I receive You as my Savior and Lord. Take control of my life and make me the kind of person You want me to be.

Did you pray that prayer? Were you sincere? If so, you can have the assurance that

Jesus Christ has come into your life and given you the gift of eternal life (1 Jn. 5:12-13). Can you think of anyone you’d like to share your new discovery with?

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***“He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.”***

**1 John 5:12-13**

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Remember, there are people all around you who still haven’t heard the saving gospel of Jesus Christ.

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