

# OpenTheo

## What Happens to People Who Never Heard of God or the Gospel?

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### #STRask - Stand to Reason

Question about what the Bible has to say about the eternal destiny of people who never got the chance to know the God of the Bible and had no access to the salvation message.

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### Transcript

I'm Amy Hall. I'm here with Greg Cokel and this is the Stantareason #StRAskPodcast. Hello, Greg.

Hi, Amy. This first question, as we previewed in the last episode since you happened to bring it up, this one comes from H.J. Miller. Did you reflect on what the Bible has to say about the eternal destiny of people who never got the chance to know the God of the Bible? For example, Aboriginal's Indians, Pygmies, Living Remote.

He's actually, let me go back because he had something here that I left out. What does Bible have to say about the eternal destiny of people who never got the chance to know the God of the Bible? And then he has parentheses, AD. For example, Aboriginal's Indians, Pygmies, Living, and Remote, both BC and AD, with no access to the salvation message.

Okay, there are two elements he mentioned. One is those who never got to know or know access to knowledge of the God of the Bible and no access to the gospel. Okay, those are two different things.

Well, here is where there's a challenging question. It's entirely fair question. It's challenging.

Gee, it seems the Bible teaches one thing, but then that creates this difficulty that

doesn't seem right. So how do we result? The difficulty. This is one of those cases like a lot of them, where a basic theological understanding is needed to be in place in order to answer the question.

And this is true about lots and lots of things. Okay, so let me just, there was a recent, I think it was May of 2022 that I wrote a piece. Well, actually May was the second installment, so it was January, February, March and May, where I had two installments dealing with this question.

And in that set, I made a couple of points. First of all, the God of the Bible has always been narrow in his requirements for salvation. All right, you look at the Passover.

In the Passover, there are all kinds of Egyptians who had no knowledge really of the God of the Bible. And I mean, it was maybe on the periphery, but they didn't care about that. That's the religion of the slaves.

And even the Hebrew slaves didn't seem to have much sophistication. Remember, Moses caved the Pentateuch after they cut out of Egypt. And so part of the reason is to re-educate them about what their God was like because they had been tutored largely under the ancient Near Eastern pantheon of Egypt.

Okay. So there's the Passover, and the Passover protected only those who had the blood protecting them. It didn't protect anybody else.

And in fact, arguably a lot of people didn't even know anything about it, but the angel of death came through nonetheless. So there's one example when Moses, when the snakes were out biting people because of, as a judgment of their rebellion. I think it's a book of numbers, then Moses puts the bronze snake on the stake and he says, if you look at this, then you will be healed from the venom.

And if you don't, you won't be, you're going to die. So there's another near example. Incidentally, that Old Testament account is referred to by Jesus in John chapter three, just as Moses lifted up the snake on the stake, my paraphrase in the wilderness, so shall the son of man be lifted up so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

Yeah, that's the John 3 16 passage. Read the verse before it. Now, I just make these points and I can give you a lot more illustrations to say that God has always been narrow.

And the narrow message wasn't always communicated to all the Gentiles in all the world. All right. And there's a reason why it's appropriate for God to judge them even if he hasn't given them the message of salvation.

And so I'm going to make another point here that we all know implicitly, just in standard

jurisprudence, that applies here. And that is no criminal deserves a pardon. No governor is obliged to give any criminal a pardon.

And if he gives one criminal a pardon, he has no obligation to give any other criminal a pardon. Now we know this applies in Scripture because Jesus gives an illustration. Well, first of all, the nature of grace is that it's undeserved.

And I think it's Romans 9. You know this bit, Raimi, that where if God wants to give, he gives mercy on who he wants to give mercy. Mercy is his to give as he wants. There is no obligation of it.

Okay. And I don't think his love obliges him to do that. Or other words, it would make sense to say God is merciful to who he wants to be merciful.

All right. That's up to him. And then Jesus gives a parable.

And in the parable, he talks about a bunch of people sent as laborers in the field and the person who went for one hour got paid the same as the person who worked for the whole day and the guy who worked for the whole day complained. And Jesus is saying in the voice of the landowner, the field owner, he says, look, I can't I do what I want with what is mine? If I want to be gracious to somebody else, what is that to you? You get what we bargained for. All right.

You got what you deserve. Now this brings us to another point. What is it that we deserve? I'll tell you what we deserve.

We deserve punishment for breaking God's law. And in fact, there you have it in Revelations 20, the books are open. I call them the books of death because that's what results from what's in there.

Each person is judged by his own deeds. So what is going on in Revelation in the final judgment is that God is looking at each individual no matter where they lived or when they lived and at their behavior. And if it turns out that they are criminals or against their sovereign, then God is fully just in punishing them even if they never heard of the gospel in the language of the question, no access to the gospel.

And so it isn't their lack of faith in Jesus, of whom they never heard, that becomes the defacto reason they get condemned. That's the solution. It's not the problem.

The problem is their rebellion against God. And if God never provides the message of salvation to them in some way, nevertheless he certainly is not unjust in punishing them. Now I want to pause for a moment and make an observation.

Them's hard words for a whole lot of people and I acknowledge that, but that's the truth. And so this is where we conform our beliefs, our convictions, not to our feelings, but to

the facts that are clear in Scripture. The good theology has got to be at the foundation of answering these questions.

I'm giving you a little thumbnail sketch here, but the two articles that I wrote, I think it's called the Heathen and the Unknown God Part 1 and 2, March and May of 22, go through not only the reasoning, but also through the scriptural support for it. Now, the other thing that was mentioned, no access to the gospel, which I acknowledge a lot of people don't have, but that doesn't exonerate them from their evil deeds. This is why I think he's quoted at last show, Amy, Philippians, or rather Ephesians 2, with dead and transgressions and sins without God and without hope in the world.

Why are they without hope? Because they're dead and they're transgressions and sins. They're guilty criminals, but now Jesus has come to give hope, at least to some, some generations. But here's the other thing that's difficult.

The Scripture speaks directly to, and that's the first part of the way H.J. Miller phrased his question. They had no opportunity to know the God of the Bible. I think that was the wording of it.

Well, Paul says that's not true. Romans 1 says, "Even though they knew God, they did not honor him as God." All right, how do they know it? Well, he tells you that too. That which is known about God is evident to them being clear through what has been made, being clear through what has been made.

And it just occurred to me the other day, Amy, as I was thinking about this, when we talk about, say, the Calam cosmological argument, or we talk about teleological argument, we are talking about the things that have been made. And when one looks around this universe and denies that this universe is denied, I'm sorry, designed by a powerful creator, which when I give the Calam argument, it's got to be outside and then what caused the, what, what banged the big bang. It's got to be something outside of the natural order.

It would have to be something really, really powerful, really smart, a person, an agent. And I tick these things off. What am I doing? I'm showing the thing, the characteristics of God that Paul's referring to there in Romans 1 that are obvious based on what has been made.

Okay? But what do people do? They suppress that truth and they worship the creature rather than the creator. It is true, as I say in the piece I wrote, that not everybody has heard about the son. However, everybody has heard about the father through general revelation.

And if they reject the father based on general revelation, the father has no obligation to give them information about the son through special revelation. There's more that can

be said about that, but those ideas form the foundation, I think, of our answer to that. And I would just add this too.

There is nobody who's genuinely seeking for God that's not going to get the message that he needs to be saved. How do I know that? Because no one is genuinely seeking for God unless God himself is drawing him. This is John chapter 6. No one can come to me, Jesus says, unless the father draws him.

So why would the father draw someone in a powerful way to turn their head towards him and then not give the necessary information for them to respond? That's silly. And in fact, there are many examples of exactly such a thing. In the Old Testament, Rahab, for example, New Testament, Cornelius X, chapter 10, and lots of modern examples too, I quote one of a Hindu.

I cite that in the article of a Hindu. The death of a guru is the book. And I know lots of other examples of this, Don Richardson has written about this too, about crazy things that God has ordained, getting the message back in the jungles to the people who are deeply seeking God.

It happens. Well, I just want to expand on one of the things you said, Greg, that's all really helpful. But one thing about this question, and I think this kind of reveals a mindset that I think most people have, the thing they really have to grapple with on this, because he says, what about the people who never got, quote, the chance to know the God of the Bible? Now that assumes that there are people out there, and this touches on the last thing you said also, but there are people out there who would choose God if they only heard.

Right. And that God's not being fair to them because they are the kind of person who would want God. They're going to hell due to a geographic anomaly.

But as you pointed out, Greg, that God has to draw them. So it's not that they're just out there and they have not, and they would want God. So you mentioned this passage in Romans 9. So I just want to read through this.

What Paul's talking about here, he's talking about, he's talking about the twins of Isaac, okay? Jacob and Esau. And he says, though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to his choice would stand, not because of works, but because of him who calls, it was said to her, the older will serve the younger, just as it is written, Jacob, I loved, but Esau hated. Okay.

So here you have God saying, I'm going to bring about this promise through Isaac and not, I mean, through Jacob and not Esau. So what's the very next thing Paul says? This is everybody's response. What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God is there.

So is God being unjust by going through Isaac? Favouring. Yes. Born over the other.

Or sorry, going through, I keep saying. Well, you're right. With through Isaac also.

So here's what he says, may it never be for he says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. So in other words, the issue is not the chance.

The issue is God's mercy. The issue is will God have mercy on that person or will God not? And now we come to why you say this is such a difficult issue because you have to understand that mercy is not deserved. God doesn't owe that mercy.

So the problem again is not the chance that the issue is God chooses to have mercy on whom he will have mercy and he chooses to show his justice, which is also a good thing on others. And there's nothing wrong with that, but that's the thing that we have a trouble understanding. And I think it's because of two things.

First, we don't understand God's righteousness. And second, we don't understand our own sin. There's also this assumption built in there that I do address in the articles that there is this kind of Rousseau's version of the spiritual version of the noble savage, this one that is in innocence and in genuinely seeking, but because of geological geographical anomaly, they can't get the message they really want.

And that's not right. But Scripture tells us differently. What it says is that humans run from God.

They are not running towards God. There is none right, just there is not even one. There's none that seeks after God, not even one.

It's Romans chapter three. And there Paul is actually quoting from the Old Testament and invoking it here in New Testament times. This is the condition of man.

God beings run from God. They don't run towards God, not the true God. Okay.

But what does God do? God pursues them out of love and in grace and mercy. God pursues them. So that's just another theological verity that needs to be in place to inform how we respond to these questions.

You know, Greg, they've done studies on, I read the study on prisoners. I'm sure I've mentioned this before, but they studied how there, if they were accurate in assessing their own goodness and surprise, they were not accurate. Because they all thought they were pretty good.

They all thought they were pretty good. So we have a really hard time recognizing our own fallenness. And that I think is what makes this so difficult to understand.

We think of course God should forgive us. Of course God should take us to be with him,

but the truth is justice is a good thing. And we are very sinful and we have no idea.

I mean, just look at when Isaiah has a vision of God and he falls on his knees and says, whoa, who's me? And that's Isaiah. Right. And Peter as well, you know, the miracle of the fish and the net and everything at the early part of Jesus ministry.

Now I think this is characteristic of people who grow, genuinely grow in Christ. They have a deeper sense of their own, their, their own sinfulness. And I, Paul, I think it was in maybe first Timothy, not second Timothy, but first Timothy.

I get to mix up sometime, but it certainly towards the ends of his life where he acknowledges, I was the greatest of sinners because I persecuted the church of God. And so as, as time goes on, I think we do have a deeper sense of this. Ironically, this isn't true of unregenerate people, something like 65 or 70% of Americans believe there's a hell and there's almost no one who thinks they're going there because they all think they're going to escape because they're basically good people.

Another example of what you're talking about. All right. I'm trying to see the time here.

I think we're out of time. I just want to say, and we haven't said this yet, but we have a new way to ask questions and we've tried to make it easier for you to ask a question on our website. If you go to our website and you look at the top of the page, you'll see podcasts as one of the choices, just click on podcasts and choose hashtag #STRAsk.

And then you'll see a link there that says submit a question. So if you would like to submit a question, you don't have Twitter, we still accept them on Twitter with the hashtag #STRAsk. But if you don't have Twitter, you can go to our website, click on submit a question on the hashtag #STRAskPage and that will take you right to a form.

But just remember, you have to keep it short. Twitter link is only two, three sentences. So those are the questions that we will consider and we're just trying to make it easier for you because we love hearing from you and we hope that this will open it up to more people because the more questions the better.

That's right. I really try to choose different questions so we don't hit the same topic over and over so the more we get, the better. So we'd love to hear from you.

Thank you for those of you who have already sent in questions and if you've been holding out on us, now's the time. Well thank you so much for listening. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cockel for Stand to Reason.

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