

QUESTION #9: “WHAT HAPPENS TO SOMEBODY WHO HAS NEVER HEARD ABOUT JESUS?”
(Hebrews 11:1-6)

7.7.19

INTRODUCTION

How many of you like doing puzzles? My maternal grandfather loved puzzles.

Our question today: “What happens to somebody who has never heard about Jesus?” So what do puzzles have to do with that? Did you hear what [Kenzie] read? What was the unique item of worship the Athenians had erected? It was an altar that had an inscription on it that read: **TO AN UNKNOWN GOD** — *Acts 17:23a*. Apparently the Athenians wanted to have all their religious bases covered, so they put up a monument to any god they might have missed somewhere down the line. Who knows? Someday that might be important. I mean, if that particular god ever comes calling, we can show him that, even if we didn’t know about him, we thought about him — sort of.

Now, there is a sense where God is unknown, where he is, and likely always will be, a puzzle. A lot of times, God is a puzzle where we can see a lot of the pieces, but we’re not sure what the picture’s supposed to look like. Well, here’s the problem: We are finite creatures trying to wrap our heads around an infinite God. And to a point, from no less an authority than God himself, when it comes to God, there are indeed some things that will always be “unknown”; as he himself said through the prophet Isaiah: **“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts”** — *God speaking, Isaiah 55:8-9*. When it comes to God, there will always be puzzles — things with which we struggle to have some level of understanding. I mean, we’re in the middle of an entire series devoted to questions about God — and hopefully getting some level of answers. Obviously getting to know and understand God is a lifetime journey — probably right on through eternity.

According to Christian apologists, the question we’re looking at today is one of the most difficult “puzzles” to deal with. It is also one of the best examples of the type of question that I have a term for: “distraction reaction.” What is that? Well, sometimes, particularly if nonbelievers are beginning to feel the tug of conviction, they will throw up roadblocks to their coming to faith in Christ. They will throw out questions as a means of distraction, redirecting the conversation, that are really meant as not a whole lot more than delaying tactics — or the idea that, if a Christian can get stumped by a question, maybe their faith isn’t valid. Some of these questions we’ve already looked at, though not necessarily in that context:

- 1) How can a God of love send somebody to hell?
- 2) How can an almighty God allow pain and suffering?
- 3) My personal favorite: What about people on other planets? (Yes, I’ve actually had that one.)

Sometimes these questions are sincere attempts to learn more about God. But often, they are meant with no other purpose other than to stop a “too-close-for-comfort” conversation by stumping the Christian believer in the hopes that the spiritual spotlight will shine on the difficulty of the question instead of the heart of the unbeliever. And this one is one of the “champs” in that department. So how do we answer this question? Well, we’ll begin by looking at some pieces of the puzzle, to get familiar with them, and maybe start to see something of what the picture, the end result, might look like. So here we go!

PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

First let's look at some of the difficulties — difficulties often tied to what seem to be, at least on the surface, contradictory biblical truths in the areas of God's standard of holiness, man's failure to match God's holiness, God's perfect justice and, at the same time, his desire for the salvation of mankind, and his insistence on Jesus being the only pathway to that salvation. Sounds like something of a puzzle to me. OK, so let's start looking at some of the pieces to that puzzle. The first place to start:

God's Standard of Holiness:

"There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God" — Hannah (mother of Samuel), I Samuel 2:2.

As for God, his way is perfect: The Lord's word is flawless; he shields all who take refuge in him — David, Psalm 18:30.

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" — Jesus Christ, the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:48.

Simply put, God is unmatched in holiness and perfection. He is completely and fully holy. Everything he does reflects the holy everything he is. God himself is the standard of holiness. And because God is holy, as A.W. Tozer wrote in his book, *The Knowledge Of The Holy*, "He has made holiness the moral condition necessary to the health of His universe. Sin's temporary presence in the world only accents this. Whatever is holy is healthy; evil is a moral sickness that must ultimately end in death. . . . Since God's first concern for His universe is its moral health, that is, its holiness, whatever is contrary to this is necessarily under His eternal displeasure." That brings us to the next piece in this cosmic puzzle, a piece with which we should be familiar, because it's us:

Man's Failure to Match God's Holiness:

The Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned away; all have become corrupt. There is no one who does good, not even one — David, Psalm 14:2-3.

Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins — Solomon, Ecclesiastes 7:20.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all — Isaiah 53:6.

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you — Isaiah 64:6-7a.

[A]ll have sinned and fall short of the glory of God — Paul, Romans 3:23.

[S]in entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned — Paul, Romans 5:12.

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it — James 2:10.

To say that mankind has failed to match God's holiness, to follow his commands to be holy because he is holy, would be an understatement that would be impossible to measure. From Adam and Eve on down, we have failed. But the scary thing is, mankind has largely gotten used to, even comfortable with, failing to live pleasing to God. Instead of being shattered by seeing sin in the presence of God's holiness, mankind responds with, "I'm doing the best I can," or "I'm

basically a good person,” or “C’mon, God; I’m only human. As a result, sin remains, and that runs us into the next piece of the puzzle:

God’s Perfect Justice:

[T]he word of the Lord is right and true; he is faithful in all he does. The Lord loves righteousness and justice — Psalm 33:4-5a.

[T]he Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice — Isaiah 30:18.

“I the Lord love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing” — God speaking, Isaiah 61:8a.

“He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he” — Moses, Deuteronomy 32:4.

“Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” — Abraham, Genesis 18:25b.

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you — Psalm 89:14.

“Now let the fear of the Lord be on you. Judge carefully, for with the Lord our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery” — King Jehoshaphat, II Chronicles 19:7.

God is a righteous judge — David, Psalm 7:11a.

“Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight” — God speaking, Jeremiah 9:23-24.

Simply put, sin has to be dealt with; God by means of who he always has been and always will be — a God of infinitely pure holiness who measures the health of the universe by that holiness that is a complete and irreversible part of his character — cannot allow his universe to be corroded by sin. What we call God’s “wrath” is God being God, working within his character to preserve the moral health of his universe. God is utterly intolerant of whatever degrades and destroys, and he will do whatever is necessary within his perfect holiness and justice to restore his universe back to health. Mankind often sees God’s wrath as an independent (and often random) part of how he goes about his business. But the fact is that God’s holiness, wrath, justice, and the health of his creation are inseparable. And that seemingly dark and dismal place brings us to the next piece of the puzzle — an amazing piece that arrives from that same holy and pure God:

God’s Desire for the Salvation of Mankind:

“Come now, let us settle the matter,” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool” — Isaiah 1:18

“I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die . . .? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live! . . . As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways. Why will you die . . .? — Ezekiel 18:30-32, 33:11.

[God our Savior] wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth — Paul, I Timothy 2:4.

[The Lord] is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance — II Peter 3:9b.

Despite the destruction of the initial relationship God fostered with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, his desire for relationship remains uppermost in his plans and purposes for us. But here's the hook (borrowing from *The Knowledge Of The Holy* again): "Until we have seen ourselves as God sees us, we are not likely to be disturbed over conditions around us as long as they do not get so far out of hand as to threaten our comfortable way of life. We have learned to live with unholiness and have come to look upon it as the natural and expected thing." The key to seeking God is to see ourselves as he sees us, and knowing that our only hope for remedy and relief comes from him. Which brings us to the next piece:

God's Plan that Jesus Christ Be the Only Means to Salvation

"I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved" — Jesus Christ, John 10:9a.

"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die, and whoever lives by believing in me will never die" — Jesus Christ, John 11:25-26a.

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" — Jesus Christ, John 14:6.

"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" — Peter, Acts 4:12.

"[God] commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that [Jesus] is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" — Peter, Acts 10:42-43.

[F]or us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live — Paul, I Corinthians 8:6.

[T]here is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people — Paul, I Timothy 2:5-6a.

[T]his is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life — I John 5:11-12.

So where does this leave us? With a holy perfect God, with a mankind who is wholly imperfect, a God who in his holiness must judge anything that doesn't match his standard, but a God who at the same time continues to want relationship with that wholly imperfect humanity, and a holy God who in his holy, perfect grace provided a remedy for man's failure with the wholly perfect life of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. All Christians know that sequence: It is what they have all experienced by learning of the gospel. And how was that gospel communicated? According to Paul in his letter to the church at Rome: ***[F]aith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ — Paul, Romans 10:17.*** That is one of the great blessings of living in the United States. We live in a place that has allowed us virtually unlimited access to Bibles, testaments, studies, schools and seminaries, where the truth about God can be learned, understood and, by means of the Holy Spirit, claimed.

All of which brings us to today's question. The fact is, for many people throughout the world, there is still an "unknown God" of which it would appear they know nothing. And Paul crystallizes the issue: ***There is no difference between Jew and Gentile — the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone***

preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? — Paul, Romans 10:12-16a (quoting Joel 2:32).

All of a sudden, it appears that we're stuck — looking at an incomplete picture and not sure of what the next piece is. And there are some numbers out there which really illustrate the difficulty in solving this particular puzzle:

Language/Outreach Statistics (7.715 billion people as of 07/07/19):

There are about 6,500 languages spoken throughout the world. However, that needs to be qualified: Roughly 2,000 of those languages are spoken by less than 1,000 people (meaning that, at a practical level, there are 4,500 spoken languages in the world).

Bible availability (October 2018 — Wycliffe Bible Translators):

Full Bible	683 languages	5,714,000,000 people (in language they know best)
New Testament	1,534 languages	699,000,000 people
Selections/stories	1,133 languages	424,000,000 people
Nothing	2,163 languages	250,000,000 people
No full Bible		1,500,000,000 people (in language they know best)

As of April 2019, approximately 56.1% of the world had internet access; 81% of the developed world boasted internet service. As of 2012 (last available year of data), 11.7% of the world's population (some 821 million) lived outside of mobile (cell phone) coverage areas. Some 92% of that total was found in rural areas — predominately sub-Saharan Africa, and South, East and Southeast Asia. Some of the poorest people in the world live in these areas, and often geographical issues aggravate the implementation of services to these people. All of this makes these people some of the most difficult to reach with the Gospel. So are those people simply lost? Let's go back to God's word. There must be some pieces of the puzzle we haven't looked at yet. And what do you know? There are. The fact is, beyond being able to be in a place where the word of God can be heard and read and otherwise communicated, God has made his presence, his love and his grace known. Those pieces look like this:

God's Communication Pieces:

Nature. God communicates his existence, his greatness and his glory through the world he has made; even while it may be a fallen world, nothing can obscure what his creation has to say about him. It is a message found in both testaments of God's word:

From the OT: *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world — David, Psalm 19:1-4a.*

From the NT: *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 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 people are without excuse — Paul, Romans 1:18-20.*

Humanity. God communicates his existence and his attributes (his character traits) through how he made us. The fact that everyone everywhere has a concept of right, wrong, love, justice,

compassion, creativity and so on all points to our being created with one overriding common denominator: We all have the same Creator — God.

God created mankind in his own image — Genesis 1:27a.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made — John 1:3.

Conscience. God in creating us has inscribed himself on our hearts. It is a part of how he made us. The manufacturer essentially signed his name onto his work. Both testaments point to this ID of God as well:

From the OT: ***[God] has also set eternity in the human heart — Solomon, Ecclesiastes 3:11a.***

From the NT: ***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. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (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. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them) — Paul, Romans 2:12-15.***

Other. God has commanded us through his Son Jesus to reach out to the entire world; as Jesus famously said at the end of his earthly ministry to his disciples: ***“[G]o and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 28:19.***

But that being said, God is in no way limited to pastors or missionaries — which is a really good thing. For instance, I have always been drawn to and had a heart for the people and Christians in North Korea. Could I have an opportunity to witness there? Probably not. Neither could anybody else. But God in his mercy and grace has an active body of believers even there, probably underground, but working for the kingdom. Even in that sadly closed land, we can be confident because God cannot be closed off. He cannot be chained; he cannot be shut down; he cannot be denied entry. In the Bible we find instances where God revealed himself through dreams, visions, miracles, angelic messengers, and even an audible voice. Obviously God is fully capable of revealing himself by any means necessary.

What we can count on to be true about God, that apply to every living person on the face of the earth, is:

- 1) God does not operate in secret: ***“I have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness; I have not said . . . ‘Seek me in vain.’ I, the Lord, speak the truth; I declare what is right” — God speaking, Isaiah 45:19.***
- 2) God's purpose for mankind is worldwide:
 - a) ***“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” — Jesus Christ, John 3:16-17.***
 - b) ***“God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right” — Peter, Acts 10:34b-35.***
- 3) God's purpose is to be found, a purpose statement found in both testaments:

- a) From the OT: ***“[Y]ou will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” — God speaking, Jeremiah 29:12-13.***
- b) From the NT: ***“From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us” — Paul, Acts 17:26-27.***

And, as if we needed further proof of God’s love and perfect justice, the Bible does seem to teach that there will be levels of heaven, degrees of punishment if you will, in hell. God is obviously very well aware that, while people in America have incredible opportunity to learn about him and understand what is necessary for relationship, people, say, in sub-Saharan Africa, may have precious little opportunity to learn even the most basic things about God and his Son. God in his perfect justice will acknowledge those differences in the day of judgment. A couple of texts support that:

- 1) ***“The servant who knows the master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” — Jesus Christ, Luke 12:47-48.***
- 2) ***Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. . . . And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. . . . each person was judged according to what they had done — Revelation 20:11a, 12, 13b.***

And how detailed are those “books” to which John refers? Again, both testaments weigh in:

- 1) From the OT: ***“[T]he Lord searches every heart and understands every desire and every thought” — David, I Chronicles 28:9a.***
- 2) From the NT: ***“There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs” — Jesus Christ, Luke 12:2-3.***
- 3) ***Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account — Hebrews 4:13.***

So, after all this, does someone who has never heard of Jesus have any chance of salvation? Does the Bible give any assurance that people beyond our reach still have opportunity to spend eternity in the same heaven as those of us who have surrendered our lives to God through Jesus Christ? That answer is an absolute YES! The Bible actually tells us of a whole lot of people who never heard the name of Jesus, yet I know I will see these people in heaven. Who are they? How about Abel and Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, Joseph and Moses, Rahab, Gideon and Barak, Samson and Jephthah, David and Samuel, all the OT prophets. How do I know I’ll see them in heaven? Because of what I find out about them in the Bible — specifically, in Hebrews 11, one of the great chapters in all of Scripture. Hebrews 11 is sometimes called the “faith hall of fame” due to the roll call of people whose names reside there — all people from the OT who are commended by God, not for their claiming of Jesus Christ (they lived centuries before Jesus arrived), but for their placing their faith in God to such an extent that he credited it to

them as righteousness, a righteousness by faith that was pleasing to him. As the author of Hebrews wrote: *Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. . . . And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. . . . All these people were still living by faith when they died . . . admitting they were foreigners and strangers on earth. . . . They were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them — Hebrews 11:1-2, 6, 13, 16.*

CONCLUSION

So — back to the beginning: Remember when I brought up the phrase “reaction distraction,” using this question like some kind of roadblock to keep conversations about Jesus from going any further? Well, don’t let it. If somebody brings it up, respond that that’s a very good question but really has nothing to do with them — they ain’t in Africa or Southeast Asia or wherever. The question is, here and now, what about them? They have heard about Jesus. What’s that mean for them?

You see, at the end of the day, for everybody, it is responding to what God has revealed to us. Now to be sure — there absolutely WILL be a judgment, for everybody on the planet. Everybody will stand before his throne; everybody will be required to give account for their lives. For those who may not have the amazing resources we do, God will show himself in other ways — all of them sufficient to bring someone to faith who sees their need for God and seeks after him. Nobody will find themselves in hell due to ignorance or a lack of intelligence. God, who knows and sees everybody, will provide sufficient opportunity and sufficient revelation for people, no matter where they are, to be able to respond to him. His justice, as always, will be perfect, and perfectly applied to everybody.

God loves his world, and the people who live there. There’s not one person he can’t reach. And there’s not one person he won’t try to reach. Let’s pray!