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# WILL THE AFRICAN ANCESTORS BE SAVED?

**Richard J. Gehman**

*AJET would like to encourage articles written on various theological issues which draw forth further responses from readers in well researched articles. As evangelicals we accept the Scriptures as our final authority in faith and practice. But we all know that Scripture does not address all our questions specifically or systematically. As a result, various evangelicals reach different conclusions. In the past evangelicals have been united in believing that a personal faith in Jesus Christ is essential for salvation. Because of this belief the Christian Church has invested many lives and extensive effort to bring the Gospel to all peoples. But the erosion of this historic Christian belief can be found in many places. Following is a brief article on a difficult question which needs more extensive treatment by evangelicals in Africa who will explore carefully the whole question of salvation of those who have never heard the Gospel.*

## INTRODUCTION

A burning question that will not go away is this: "Will any of the forefathers in Africa, who never heard the Gospel, be saved?" This question arises repeatedly. "What will happen to our fathers who lived before the Gospel was brought to Africa? Will they spend eternity in hell?" This is a difficult question that brings much pain and concern. The problem becomes even more difficult when you think of the impossibility of people believing the Gospel when no Christian Gospel had ever been preached to them.

J.N.D. Anderson phrases the problem well.

If the only way to God is through Christ, and the only basis of forgiveness and acceptance is the atonement effected at the cross, then what about all those countless millions of people in the world today - to say nothing of the millions who have already lived and died - who, through no fault of their own, have never heard of the only mediator and only Saviour? Are they utterly without hope? (Anderson 1970:100).

There is no possibility of giving a thorough answer to this question in this brief article. The purpose of the author is to explore from the Scriptures the various elements which should help determine our approach to this vital subject.

## CONFIDENCE IN THE GOD OF JUSTICE AND MERCY

We face many questions in life for which we do not have an adequate answer. The Bible simply does not answer all the particular problems we raise. Many of these questions deal with the justice and fairness of God. For example, what will happen to small infants and tiny children if they die? Will they go to heaven or hell?

The Roman Catholics teach that all unbaptized children are lost and enter a place called Limbus Infantum, a place on the edges of hell, separated from the presence of God but without any suffering (Jackson 1959:VI,490). But this is speculation without any support from Scripture.

The Westminster Confession teaches that the "elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth"(Westminster Confession X,3). By implication it teaches infants not elected will not be saved. But where does Scripture teach such a doctrine?

According to Charles Hodge, "the common doctrine of evangelical Protestants is... [that] All who die in infancy are saved" (Hodge 1952:1,26). In fact, many Calvinist theologians today teach that all those children who die as infants will be saved. Many Protestants would suggest that babies are innocent before they reach the age of knowing right from wrong and therefore will go to heaven. But does not the Bible teach that all are born in sin and are sinful by nature? (Ps. 51:5; Rom. 5:12-21). Hodge further argues,

The Scriptures nowhere exclude any class of infants, baptised or unbaptised, born in Christian or in heathen lands, of believing or unbelieving parents, from the benefits off the redemption of Christ (Hodge 1952: 1,26).

How can infants be saved without knowing or understanding their sin and the offer of salvation through Jesus Christ? Buswell suggests a novel idea by *postulating*,

that the Holy Spirit of God prior to the moment of death, does so enlarge the intelligence of one who dies in infancy (and I should make the same postulate to cover those who die in imbecility without having reached a state of accountability), that they are capable of accepting Jesus Christ (Buswell 1979:II,162).

But which Scripture teaches this? Theologians would do well to remain silent where Scripture is silent. In too many instances, we generate a theology without any clear teaching from Scripture.

In questions like these we must rest in the confidence that "the judge of all the earth" will do what is right. Our attitude should be one of a child with simple trust in our heavenly Father. The testimony of the believer should be that which was spoken by Abraham, the father of all that believe. "Will not the judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25). Whatever the final decision will be concerning the future destiny of those who never heard the Gospel, we can rest in God who is righteous and just. Our faith rests in God who is fair and not in doctrine or theological statements without any biblical base.

Let us remember this. God has not been pleased to give clear answers to all our questions. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever..." (Deut.29:29). We rejoice in what God has revealed. But we also trust Him for those things not yet revealed.

What follows does go beyond a mere agnosticism on this question. The Bible does give some real guidelines to this problem, whether a person without a knowledge of the Gospel will ever be saved. But if the following answer does not satisfy everyone, we should search the Scriptures more thoroughly. However, in the end we must leave the matter to God who is just and loving and will do what is right.

### **SCRIPTURE OFFERS NO HOPE TO THE CLASS OF PEOPLE WHO NEVER HEARD THE GOSPEL**

Boettner says, "The Christian Church has been practically of one mind in declaring that the heathens as a class are lost" (Buis 1957:142).

Men and women, outside of Christ, are dead in sin, walking according to the ways of Satan and are by nature children of wrath (Eph. 2:1-3). Men and women are separated from Christ, strangers to the promises, without hope and without God in this world (Eph. 2:11, 12). People without Christ are without hope (I Thess. 4:13; 5:6). When those following other religions offer sacrifices to their gods, they are serving demons without knowing it (I Cor.10:20, 21). Romans 1-3 reveals the spiritual condition of those who have never heard the Gospel.

The following Scriptures speak directly to this problem, whether people will be lost forever who have never heard the Gospel. "All who sin apart from those who never had the law of Moses nor the gospel of Jesus Christ will nevertheless "perish part from the law."

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 they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news' (Rom. 10:13-15).

The fact is that the Scriptures cited above were a primary motivation of evangelical missions through the centuries. Those pioneering missionaries who left the comforts of their own homes to venture forth into unknown lands were moved by the deep conviction that without the Gospel of Jesus Christ, those people would be lost.

Indeed, Christ said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one goes to the Father except through me" (Jh. 14:6). The early church taught that Christ was the only way of salvation (Acts 4:12). If we can trust Christ as our Saviour we must also trust him as our teacher and Lord. The early church followed Christ in faith and so must we.

It is no surprise that those churches who have lost confidence in this biblical truth have declined in their missionary zeal. Today there are more missionaries serving with the Wycliffe Bible Translators (translating the Bible into those languages which do not have the Scriptures) than all those missionaries from the mainline Protestant Churches in America affiliated with the National Council of Churches. To surrender the historic Christian belief in the lostness of men without the Gospel will result in loss of zeal for the evangelism of those without a knowledge of Christ.

## **THE SINFULNESS OF SIN AMONG ALL PEOPLE**

Those who doubt the doctrine of eternal punishment, because they feel sympathy toward the lost, have forgotten the biblical teaching of sin and the need for salvation. Many teach that human nature is essentially good. It is through the influences of the environment men become wicked.

But the Bible teaches that all people without exception were born sinners and are sinners by nature because we are all sons and daughters of Adam and Eve (Ps. 51:5; Rom. 5:12-14). In fact, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure" (Jer. 17:9). Men may try to change and reform their ways, but they cannot. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil" (Jer. 13:23). Being right before the Lord is more than doing the right things. We have "hidden faults" not seen by others (Ps. 19:12). God desires "truth in the inner parts" (Ps. 51:6) and He is the one who searches the heart "and examines the mind" (Jer. 17:10). And God's conclusion is this.

"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Rom. 3:10-12).

When considering the destiny of those who never heard the Gospel, the suggestion is often made that we find much virtue and morality among those people. Yes, indeed we do. This is because of God's common grace given to all men and women. However, the truth remains the same, as we have stated above. "There is no one who does good, not even one," when the motives, attitudes and heart are examined.

No one, not even the unevangelised peoples of the world without the gospel, can be saved because of their virtues and morality. For people are not saved by being good. No one can be good enough. A son of Abraham asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" When Jesus listed various commandments, the man answered honestly, "All these I have kept since I was a boy" (LK. 18:18, 21). But Jesus looked into his heart and knew that he did not love God with all his heart. For his love for money took first place in his life.

As the Westminster Confession says,

"Men, not professing the Christian religion," cannot be saved "in any other way whatsoever than by Christ, be they ever so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature, and the law of that religion they do profess..."  
(Westminster Confession X,4).

Salvation is only by grace through faith alone. Repentance for sin and trust in God who offers forgiveness is the only way to God. Morality is not the way to God but repentance is. "Sorrow for sin produces morality; but morality does not produce sorrow for sin" (Shedd n.d.: 11, 709). Though someone may appear to be a moral, upright man, his heart is, in fact, selfish and proud. He must repent and believe the Gospel.

## **LIMITATIONS OF GENERAL REVELATION AND NECESSITY OF SPECIAL REVELATION**

The Bible teaches that God has revealed Himself to all men and women, not just to a chosen few. This general revelation is given in nature and conscience. God has revealed something of Himself in nature (Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1:18-20) and something of His law in their conscience (Rom. 2:14, 15).

But this general revelation is limited. The person and nature of God and his moral requirements have been revealed to some extent. But nothing of God's grace and way of salvation has been made known. General revelation means that they

moral requirements have been revealed to some extent. But nothing of God's grace and way of salvation has been made known. General revelation means that they are "without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). For everyone knows something of right and wrong and everyone knows that they have fallen short of that moral standard. So they stand under God's judgement. But general revelation does not announce the good news of forgiveness of sin. This was revealed from the beginning by God through special revelation to various individuals and peoples (compare Gen. 3:21; 4:2-7; 12:1-3)

God owes salvation to no one (Eph. 2:8, 9). All have sinned without exception (Rom. 3:23). Therefore, everyone deserves punishment for his sin, namely, eternal death (Rom. 6:23). Everyone is responsible for his or her disobedience because of what God has revealed to everyone in nature and conscience. But God's revelation of Himself and His gracious offer of salvation is by grace and grace alone. God is not obligated to save anyone. Unless God graciously reveals Himself to man (special revelation), and unless man repents of his sin and believes in the gospel, he cannot be saved.

Cornelius is often set forth as an example of one Gentile who was saved without the Gospel (Acts 10:34, 35). But the text does not support that conclusion.

Cornelius is described as a godly man, one who feared God with all his heart and one who behaved righteously toward his fellow man (10:2, 35).

But Cornelius was not an ordinary Gentile for more reasons than his godly character. For he was not limited to the light of nature. Scripture reveals him to be a "God-fearer." That is, he had become a worshipper of the Lord God along with the Jews. Cornelius does not appear to have become a "proselyte of righteousness," one who was circumcised and completely identified as a Jew. But he had become "a proselyte of the gate." That is, one who followed the so-called Noachian commandments against idolatry, blasphemy, disobedience to magistrates, murder, fornication or incest, robbery or theft and the eating of blood (compare Gen. 9:4-6).

Therefore, Cornelius was not a typical Gentile. He had a knowledge of the ten commandments, a knowledge of the true nature of sin, the need of grace, the place of sacrifice and the God of grace. As a Jewish proselyte, a convert to Judaism, Cornelius knew all that.

The words of Peter, however, seem to have a broader application. "...God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34, 35).

Does Peter here teach a salvation by works? By "fearing" God and "doing what is right," can the Gentiles be saved? Mercy can only be found when a person repents and entrusts Himself to God with a sincere heart. "Fearing God" and "working righteousness" are the fruit and evidence of the new life in Christ, not the conditions for salvation. Joseph Alexander observes, "This verse has sometimes been abused, to prove that the knowledge of the Gospel is not necessary to the

salvation of the heathen" (Alexander 1956:409).

The context proves otherwise. The whole emphasis in this chapter is God does not show prejudice toward people. Unlike Peter who was prejudiced towards the Gentiles, "God does not show partiality" (10:34; compare 10:1-23). The Gospel is universal in application. While we take this for granted today, this revelation was revolutionary to Peter. This is shown by the great prominence this whole story is given in Acts 10 and 11. Wherever a man of any race, nation or people truly seeks after God, the Lord will receive him.

We may go even further. H.A. Ironside in his commentary remarks, "That tells us this: Wherever a man is found in all the world who turns in repentance to God and takes the place of a lost sinner and trusts God for deliverance, He will make Himself responsible to give that man light enough to be saved" (Ironside 1943:254) God is not one to show partiality. A truly repentant heart moved by the grace of God, will be given sufficient light in order for him to be saved.

In fact, this is the very thing that happened with Cornelius. Cornelius was seeking but not saved. He had followed the light granted to him through the Law, but had not yet found Christ. For this reason the Holy Spirit sent the Apostle Peter to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. Not until Peter preached Christ did the Holy Spirit fall upon them (10:44). And Paul taught, "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him" (Rom.8:9).

### **POSSIBILITY OF INDIVIDUALS KNOWING GOD IN TRADITIONAL RELIGION**

Stated above is the biblical teaching that the Bible does not offer hope to that class of people who have never heard the Gospel. As Boettner says, "The Scriptures, then, are plain in declaring that under ordinary conditions those who have not Christ and the Gospel are lost" (Buis 1957:142).

But the Old Testament does indicate that some people, outside the nation of Israel, have truly known God. How they have come to know God has not been revealed. Such individual examples are the exception, not the rule. Nevertheless, we are led to believe that God is not limited to the normal or usual channels of bringing revelation of His grace. God has and He can reveal Himself to individuals apart from the usual preaching of the Gospel.

Job was "blameless and upright," one who "feared God and shunned evil" (Job 1:1). How he came to know God is not revealed, though it is clear that he was not from the line of Abraham.

More surprising is Melchizedek. Unless one assumes that he was Christ

revealed in the flesh before the birth of the Saviour as some believe, Melchizedek was "king of Salem" and "priest of God Most High" (Genesis 14:18). That is, he was a Canaanite priest who served the true and living God whom Abraham recognised as "God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth" (14:22). Though the Canaanites engaged in child sacrifice and worshipped many gods, here was one man who was a true believer in the living God. Abraham acknowledged his authority as priest of God Most High by offering to him "a tenth of everything" (14:20).

Whether or not Abimelech, king of Gerar (a city of the Philistines), was a true believer is not clear from the Bible. But the irony is that the Bible shows that the king of the Philistines was more upright in this instance than Abram (Genesis 20:1-18). On the one hand, Abram deceived Abimelech with a half truth out of fear. Abram thought, "There is surely no fear of God in this place" (20:11). On the other hand Abimelech surprised Abram, for he did fear God. Gerar replied to God in a dream, "I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands" (20:5).

Balaam is a strange figure in the Old Testament (Numbers 22-24). Was he a false prophet or a disobedient prophet of the Lord? Without seeking to answer that question, we do observe the following. Balaam received revelation from the LORD (YAHWEH). In an act of obedience he replied to the elders of Moab and Median, "I will bring you back the answer the LORD (YAHWEH) gives me" (22:8). Elsewhere he said, "I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the LORD..." (22:18). Furthermore, Balaam calls the LORD (YAHWEH), "the LORD my God" (22:18). Here was a man, coming from Mesopotamia, the land near the River (Euphrates), who had some knowledge of the true God.

These few examples and others do not provide any basis for a general hope that those without a knowledge of the Word of God will be saved. But they do suggest that God can reveal Himself to individuals if He so chooses. This significant statement is made by the Reformed theologian, Bavinck.

In so far as heathenism as a system of belief and practices is concerned, I agree with those scholars who proclaim its vanity; but with regard to the religious life of the individual Gentile, I am inclined to believe that we must not underestimate the power of God's mercy and charity" (Bavinck 1948:108).

Shedd observes,

It is not the doctrine of the Church, that the entire mass of pagans, without exception, have gone down to endless impotence and death. That some unevangelised men are saved, in the present life, by an extraordinary exercise of redeeming grace in Christ, has been the hope and belief of Christendom (Shedd n.d.:11, 706).

Salvation does not depend on the clear understanding of all the doctrines of grace. People in the Old Testament had a less clear understanding of God's grace

than those in the church age. "Under the Old dispensation, nay, during the time of our Saviour's abode on earth, it was possible for a man to be a true believer, and in a state of grace, who was ignorant of the sufferings, the death, and the resurrection of Christ..." (quoted from Witsius, an elder Calvinist, in Shedd n.d.: 11, 706).

Salvation is not based on morality of life but on repentance of sin and trust in the Lord who offers His salvation and forgiveness. Zanchius, a conservative Calvinist in the sixteenth century, believed that some individuals in countries where the Gospel had not been preached, "may belong to the secret election of grace," and have a broken and contrite heart in repentance for their sin (Shedd n.d.: 708).

The emphasis in this section is this. General Revelation does not offer any hope of salvation. Only by special revelation by God Himself can anyone understand his own sinful condition, repent of his sin, and turn to the Lord for forgiveness. Normally, this comes through the preaching of the Gospel. But there may be some individuals whom God draws to Himself, even as He did with Job, Melchizedek and others. But this is the exception, not the rule.

## **BASIS FOR THE FINAL JUDGEMENT OF NON-CHRISTIANS**

How can people be judged by the Gospel which they never heard? Is it fair for someone to be condemned for not accepting Christ when, in fact, they have never heard of Christ? How can anyone be responsible for what he or she does not know? The Bible is clear on this.

"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). The standard by which all people will be judged is the standard which they know. Those who never heard the words of special revelation will be judged by the natural revelation which they have in their own conscience (Rom. 2:15, 16).

This passage does not teach salvation by keeping the law. For the Bible teaches that no one can be saved by keeping the law, for no one keeps the law perfectly, not even the law of the conscience (Gal. 3:10, 11; James 2:10).

Rather, it teaches that everyone will be judged by the light of revelation they have actually received, not by what they should have known if the Gospel had been preached to them.

## **FINAL JUDGEMENT VARIES ACCORDING TO THE LIGHT GIVEN**

Buis makes an interesting observation.

The unwillingness of many to believe that the heathen are really lost is

based largely on the crude conception of hell ... If we have a conception (as many of the opponents and some of the advocates of the doctrine have) that all men who are lost will roast for eternity in a sort of common frying pan, we might well question how it is possible that those who have never had an opportunity will yet end up in such a condition" (Buis 1957:142).

The fact is that there are degrees of punishment in hell, according to the Scriptures. All sin is sin. And the wages of sin is death. But the knowledge of God's will is not equally known. Every man has some knowledge of right and wrong through general revelation but not every man has the full light of the Gospel through special revelation.

In Luke 12:43-48 we find the key. Those who knew the master's will but did not do it, "shall receive many blows." But he who "does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows" (Lk. 12:48). All those outside of Christ will remain outside of salvation, for all have sinned. But the degree of punishment will vary.

The towns of Galilee where Jesus performed all his miracles and the pagan cities of Sodom and Gomorra and Tyre and Sidon are an illustration of this. Because Jesus had performed many miracles among the people of Galilee, they were more responsible than pagans who had little light. They would be more severely punished for their rejection of Christ than Sodom which had little light. "... it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgement than for you" (Matt. 11:20-24).

Hebrews speaks of a more severe punishment for the man who rejects the final revelation of God through Jesus Christ, than the punishment given to those who rejected the law of Moses without the knowledge of the Gospel (Heb. 10:29). By extension we might say that those without any special revelation will have less punishment than those with special revelation.

As Jesus said, "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 required" (Lk. 12:48). However, we must remember. Though men without the gospel will receive less punishment, they will endure eternal separation from God.

## THE FINAL TEST

The final test, whether someone is truly seeking after God, is what he or she does with the Gospel when it is presented to him.

If a man responds to the Gospel soon after it has been first presented, we may assume that God has been preparing his heart. But if a person rejects the good news, we may assume that his religious devotion was something less than inspired by the true God.

There are some reports of people who were prepared for a momentary, instantaneous acceptance of the Gospel, but not many. Bavinck tells of a former priest in Annam who believed that his own religion was not sufficient to satisfy the hunger of his heart. In a room in his house he put up a piece of cloth with these words written, "Mr. Heaven." Every morning at 5:00 A.M. he knelt and prayed, "If you exist, O Lord, then reveal Thyself to me." He did this for five years. When he heard of a new religion, Christianity, in a distant city, he eagerly went to inquire and became a Christian (Bavinck 1948:97). As H.A. Ironside said, when someone truly responds in repentance and faith to what God has revealed to Him in nature and conscience and through the power of the Holy Spirit, then God is pleased to bring more light and understanding through the preaching of the Word.

But in all honesty such examples are few. When the Christian missionaries entered Ukambani in Kenya, they became discouraged because the people did not respond more quickly to the Gospel. The Church Missionary Society left the Akamba for this reason and handed the work over to the Africa Inland Mission in 1902. The A.I.M. continued to experience little response to the Gospel.

The following letter expresses their discouragement.

For three years the Gospel has been preached here and there among the people but it has been exceedingly difficult to make any lasting impression. Messages given through itinerating work, were half understood, less believed, and almost forgotten before the missionary could get back to the field again (Hearing and Doing, X, 4, 1905:3, 4).

Two years later the following was reported.

The selfishness, indolence and indifference of the Akamba tribe have discouraged many workers. We recently heard of a German Mission who, after many years of fruitless work, sent out additional missionaries to take the place of the older workers, who, they thought, must be to blame for the lack of results. The new workers were, therefore, carefully chosen and charged, but after they had been long on the field with the same result, they were more than ever perplexed (Hearing and Doing, XXII, 3, 1907:7).

As late as 1922 a District Officer wrote that the attitude of the Akamba toward the missions "is not necessarily antagonistic, but it is certainly not one of enthusiasm, and it may well be doubted if the local missions will ever bring the Akamba in large numbers into the fold" (Munro 1975:104).

The same can be said of the Nandi and others in Kenya. The Church Missionary Society settled among the Nandi in 1909. The missionaries learned the language and gathered Nandi boys in a class for learning.

After several years these CMS missionaries made the following conclusion. "The Nandi were a wild undisciplined tribe and very little progress was made during

the two and a half years of preparatory work. but given time I believe they would have responded to our efforts for their good..." Their opinion was that "ten years of hard work would be necessary before any impression would be made upon the Nandi" (Church Missionary Society n.d.).

Roman Catholics and Presbyterians likewise reported slow progression those early days among the Gikuyu and Meru.

No doubt those early missionaries would be astounded to read the observation of David Barrett 75 years later. He speaks of "instantaneous acceptance of the Gospel" in Kenya. "Wherever the Word of God - the preaching of the Good News - went amongst the animistic tribal populations of Kenya, the response was instantaneous, immediate and enormous" (Barrett 1973:167). Statistics can often mislead. Barrett maintains that the Christian community doubled, sometimes every three years. If you begin with two converts in three years, that means 24 are converted after twelve years. That cannot be called "instantaneous, immediate and enormous."

We simply do not find any evidence that the Kenyans had found true faith in God through African Traditional Religion. The response of Cornelius to the preaching of Peter was totally different from the response of the Kenyans. There is no evidence that the Kenyans had known God in faith and obedience before the coming of the Gospel.

## CONCLUSION

The future destiny of those without the Gospel is in the hands of God who is just and merciful. But God has given us no hope of their salvation unless the Gospel is preached to them.

Therefore, we are greatly responsible to carry the gospel to those who have never heard the gospel. First, Christ commanded us to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Secondly, men apart from Christ are lost, for "how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?" (Romans 10:14). Let us rest in the knowledge that God will do what is right. Let us respond in obedience to take the good news to all peoples.

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