

What About Those Who Have Never Heard?

Romans 2:12-29

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For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. - Romans 2:12, ESV

One of the most famous questions Christians ask and are asked about the Gospel is, "What about those who have never heard the truth about Jesus? What about those who have never read the Bible or don't have access to the Bible or Christianity?" Interestingly, the people who ask these questions always have heard the Gospel and can read the Bible for themselves, but instead of doing that, they want to speculate about hypothetical people on the other side of the world. It's easier to speculate about hypothetical people than to deal honestly with the claims of the Gospel for my own life.

But the Bible does address this question, in a way that is honest and fair and challenging to all of us. No one will be judged on the basis of what they did not know. In other words, a person who has never heard of Jesus and who has no access to a Bible will not be judged by God for rejecting Jesus. However, God will judge everyone. Here's what Romans 2 says about these kinds of people, who are "Gentiles who do not have the law" -

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. they show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. - Romans 2:14-16, ESV

Everyone in the world has a conscience, and everyone's conscience bears witness. Everyone has an innate knowledge of God's moral standard, to one degree or another. "The word of the law is written on their hearts." So, everyone has thoughts of having done right when they have obeyed their conscience and thoughts of having done wrong when they disobey their conscience.

In the first part of Romans 2, Paul put forth the hypothetical possibility of being justified by religious morality according to the law. He said, in essence, that someone might be able to be justified by the law, if they actually kept everything written in the law. In the next chapter, he will make it clear that no one ever does this. In fact, no one even has a sincere desire to want to do this for the glory of God.

Now, Paul is saying that a Gentile who is without the law (a pagan who has no Bible) might hypothetically be able to be justified if he consistently obeyed his conscience so that his thoughts never accused him or condemned him. The question is: Has anyone ever done this? Is there anyone whose conscience is perfectly clean, whose own moral compass never condemns them? Obviously not.

God is neither unjust nor unfair. He is going to judge everyone when Jesus returns. Everyone will be judged according to the light they have. So, are you ready to stand before God on that day? Will your conscience clear you of all wrongdoing? Even if you have seared your conscience and twisted your morality, you know the answer to that question. Later, Paul will give us the solution: the gift of righteousness in Jesus Christ.