



Is Ignorance an Excuse?

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To many, one of the most troubling questions concerning salvation and the gospel is “What will happen to those who have never heard the gospel nor had an opportunity to obey it?” Often the question is posed in a setting of someone in the far reaches of Africa—some tribesman who will never be able to hear the gospel proclamation because of politics or being so far back into the jungle. He and his family have no modern conveniences—no radio, no television, seemingly no way to hear the gospel. They are isolated from the rest of the world.

When this question is boiled down, it becomes a matter of whether or not ignorance is an excuse. Keep in mind that ignorance is not necessarily the lack of ability to know but the lack of information to know. Actually there are three classes of people who are ignorant. Some people are ignorant of various ideas and concepts because they have never been taught. Others are ignorant because they have never taken the time to learn or are unwilling to take the time to learn. Neither of these first two categories of people are ignorant because of inabilities. The third class of people are those who are ignorant because of inabilities. These fit into the same realm as innocent children—safe in the arms of Jesus. Those who we are concerned with in this article are those who fit into one of the first two categories, but the bottom line is “Is ignorance an excuse?”

Those Who Know Not God

Because the Bible provides for “us all things that pertain unto life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3), we can expect to find a Bible answer to this question. In 2 Thessalonians 1:8 Paul wrote that the Lord Jesus shall come “In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Surely, all of us must realize that all who are ignorant of the gospel message do not know God. Therefore, those who are ignorant of the gospel message are those who Christ will take vengeance against.

When Paul entered into the city of Athens, he passed by an altar with the inscription, "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD" (Acts 17:23). In his address to the Athenians on Mars' Hill, he said that "the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent" (Acts 17:30). Because Paul said "all men," this admonition excludes no one and because he said "every where," it matters not where they might live even in the deepest part of Africa.

As Paul begins the book of Romans, he deals with the sins of Jews and Gentiles. Concerning the Gentiles he wrote, "For the invisible things of him [God] from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse" (Romans 1:20). In this passage Paul shows that God manifested Himself in the things that were created. This same line of reasoning can and should be applied to all men. No man is without excuse because we can look inwardly and know that God exists. And we can look at the universe and know that God exists. Since we can know that God exists, we have a responsibility to Him to do His will.

One Way of Salvation

The Bible clearly teaches that there is only one way of salvation and that is through Jesus. In John 14:6, Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." Undeniably, Jesus is the only way to the Father. Since He is the only way, there can be no other way. He is not just the provider of the way, but is Himself the way. Nor is He just the proclaimer of the way for, again, He is the way—the one and only way. If ignorance is an excuse, then there would be two ways of salvation—ignorance and Jesus. Therefore, because Jesus is the only way, ignorance cannot be a way.

Further, Luke records in Acts 4:12, "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." Again the emphasis is placed on Jesus as being the one and only way of salvation. Heaven's door is open because of His atonement, because of His blood, and because of His sacrifice. Thus, "whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 10:13). If we because of any reason do not call upon the name of the Lord, there is no salvation for only in Him can redemption be found. It cannot be found in ignorance for in Him only is there salvation.

In Christ, we are blessed with "all spiritual blessings in heavenly places" (Ephesians 1:3). Certainly, salvation is a spiritual blessing and it, too, is found in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 2:10). In some cases, ignorance may be bliss, but it is without doubt no spiritual blessing nor is ignorance of spiritual things found in

Christ. In Christ, we have redemption, justification, sanctification, and salvation while in ignorance, there is only damnation and condemnation.

Sin Condemns, Not the Gospel

What causes a person to be lost is sin. Paul wrote, “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Death is separation. Physical death is the separation of body and spirit (James 2:26), while spiritual death is separation from God. Notice what Isaiah wrote to Israel of old: “But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear” (Isaiah 59:2). It is sin that separates man from God—not God's sins but man's sins. What causes a person to be separated from God is **NOT** his or her knowledge of the gospel. It is sin.

If a person could be saved because of ignorance, then the gospel is not a gospel of salvation, it is a gospel of condemnation. If an African tribesman who is isolated from the rest of the world and who never had the opportunity to hear the gospel can be saved because of his ignorance, then when the gospel is preached to him, it would bring condemnation rather than salvation if he did not respond to it favorably. It would not be “the glorious gospel” (1 Timothy 1:11), it would be the horrible gospel. It would not be “the gospel of peace” (Romans 10:15), it would be the gospel of conflict. It would not be “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24), it would be the gospel of the brutality of God. There would be no “hope of the gospel” (Colossians 1:23), only despair.

This justification through ignorance would make the gospel of no power rather than “the power of God unto salvation” (Romans 1:16). It would make the “Great Commission” of Jesus useless, unproductive, and vain. Yea, even the sacrifice of Jesus would have no value if man could be saved through ignorance. It would be better for the world not to know than to know and to be condemned. If man could be saved in ignorance, we are doing no favors to anyone by teaching the gospel. We ought not name the name of Christ among the nations for it would be better to leave every person untaught.

Responsibility

To some, these things are hard. However, the hardness is not seen in that they are unloving. Jesus Christ paid the price for every person and that price was His own precious blood. For “though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). Because God “will have all men to be saved,” Christ Jesus “gave himself a ransom for all” (1 Timothy 2:4,6). “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever

believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). These are the most loving words to ever pierce the hearing of man. These things are hard because of the weight of responsibility placed upon every person.

To those who are ignorant of spiritual matters, it is your responsibility to know God and to obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 1:8). God would not have you to be ignorant but “to come unto the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4) and to purify your souls by obeying the truth (1 Peter 1:22). To obey the truth, you must believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 8:24) and turn from your sins by repenting (Luke 13:3). You then must be “buried with Him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). When you are buried with Him by baptism, the Lord adds you to His church (Acts 2:47). If you are faithful in this new life even unto death, Jesus promises that He will give unto you “a crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).

To those who are the children of God, we are to publish and to herald His word to the four corners of the earth. If we really care about that isolated, ignorant and unenlightened tribesman, we would do everything in our power to send the gospel light to the far reaches of the world. We would not hold back the gospel, but proclaim it at every dawning of the morning and every dusk of the evening. And like the apostle Paul, we would feel indebted to every man and we would be compelled to preach the gospel (Romans 1:14-15). Because ignorance is no excuse, woe is unto us, if we preach not the gospel! (1 Corinthians 9:16).

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