

WHAT ABOUT THE HEATHENS?

Acts 4:11–12 *"This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.'¹²There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."* [NRSV]

So did the Apostle Peter — "filled with the Holy Spirit" — explain the fundamental truth of the gospel and the exclusive uniqueness of Jesus to Annas, the high priest, assembled in Jerusalem with the rulers, elders, and scribes, who had arrested him and requested to know by what power he had healed a crippled man the previous evening: Jesus is the only way to salvation.

Hence, today we often hear expressions of skeptical criticism that God is unjustly condemning to eternal punishment all those who do not believe in Jesus, since there are some who have not been reached by missionaries or have not heard the proclamation of the gospel. Thus, it may seem it is God's fault that they do not know Him, not their own failing: God did not send them the good news. It is therefore unjust that they be punished.

I may also know of dear people, who conducted their life well, gave generously and helped those in need; yet I may have never heard them confess the Lord Jesus. Should I think they will be — again unjustly — not saved, but condemned to perdition?

First of all, it is fit to remember God's word through the prophet, who reminds us that:

Isaiah 45:21c *"there is no other God besides Me, a just God and a Savior; There is none besides Me."* [NKJV]

Hence, it is essential to know, first, that God is a Savior and that His judgment is always just, no matter what my own judgment and opinion might be or what my common sense might suggest. We'll return to this point at the end.

Second — and just as important — is for me to understand how the Lord may relate to people in the world in ways that may be unfamiliar to me and to our culture: in this regard, the example of the Apostle Paul speaking to the Greeks in Athens is revealing.

Acts 17:22–23 *Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; ²³for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you."* [NKJV]

The point made by the Apostle was that he understood that the "unknown god," whom some of the Greeks were worshiping, was not just some other

false god, fabricated by human minds, to be added to their heathen pantheon; rather He was the true God, Whom they were worshiping — because their hearts had been drawn to Him and they recognized His existence — although they knew neither His name nor anything else of Him.

In other words, the Lord had called them and revealed His existence to them, but had not revealed His nature nor any other attribute of Himself: it was thus "unknown." The Apostle intended to witness and reveal Him to them, who already had perceived of Him, but had not yet met Him.

Thus, in our days, the Lord may have already revealed Himself to some, who may not know the name of Jesus Christ or who may call Him by other names, for example the "unknown God" or the "nameless God, Who is above all creation."

Another example of God reaching a soul directly, is the criminal, hanging next to Jesus on the cross at Calvary:

Luke 23:39a, 40–44 *One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."* [NRSV]

This criminal had never followed Jesus in his life, let alone followed Him, and deserved just punishment for sinful deeds, as he himself recognized, but his heart — not as the heart of the first criminal, who rejected Jesus altogether — yielded to the Spirit of God: he repented and was welcomed immediately into the Kingdom.

Thus, I have to be careful about casting all, who do not have the name of Jesus, as worshipers of false gods destined to perdition: yes, some may have heard of Him, have rejected Him and deserve just punishment for their sinful deeds; however, some may be worshipping the true Lord and not know His name.

In this case, my responsibility is not to cast away such beliefs, rather to reveal to them fully Who the Lord is (as the Apostle did), to explain how He loves them and sacrificed Himself on the cross for them, to bring witness of His grace and His truth, as well as of His final and just judgment, as the Apostle Paul concluded in his preaching to the Greeks:

Acts 17:30–31 *"While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has*

fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." [NRSV]

The instance of the Greeks worshiping the unknown God is but one example of the general teaching of the Apostle Paul that all know the truth of God, because He has made it known to them: the judgment applies because they reject the truth, not because they are not appraised of it.

Romans 1:18–19, 20b, 21a, 23–24a *But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. ¹⁹They know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them. ^{20b}..... Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. ^{21a}Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks..... ²³And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles. ^{24a}So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. [NLT]*

Third and most important: when I indulge in questioning whether God is just or unjust in His judgment, fair or unfair in His practices, I hurt the Lord, because such is not the behavior of a little child, fit for His Kingdom.

Matthew 18:3 *And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." [NIV]*

Little children — who are in the Kingdom — do not appraise nor assess the behavior of their parents, because they know them: they just love them and trust them.

So Jesus loved the Father and never questioned His judgment nor His actions:

John 14:31a *"but so that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded Me." [NASB]*

So am I also to love the Lord: trust Him and His judgment and obey Him.

As a matter of fact, I'd better realize that God will do according to His judgment, whether I approve or disapprove it, whether I like or dislike it. However, by trying to analyze whether God does rightly or wrongly I *de facto* show myself to appeal to another authority — a higher one — in open violation of God's command:

Exodus 20:2a, 3–5a, *"I am the Lord your God ³You must not have any other god but me. ⁴You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the*

earth or in the sea. ^{5a}You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods." [NLT]

The higher authority — invoked to justify (or to challenge and oppose) God's actions — is none other than my own judgment: my judgment of what is right and wrong, my pretended knowledge of good and evil.

When was this practiced first? Was it not in the Garden of Eden? When the serpent said:

Genesis 3:5 *"because God knows that on the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." [CJB]*

Hence, by questioning whether God is just or unjust in His practices, fair or unfair in His conduct, I do show that my nature is carnal, still in bondage to the original sin.

However, we are new creatures, born anew:

Romans 6:18 *..... having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. [NKJV]*

A great example of being slave of righteousness, the righteousness of God — over and above one's standards and common sense — was exhibited by Abraham, whose knowledge of God and whose dedication and obedience to Him were so great and thorough that he was able to overcome all and, first, obey the command to sacrifice his only young son and then to continue to obey when, only a few days later, God completely countermanded that first command of His.

Romans 4:3 *For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." [ESV]*

In conclusion, as a new creature and a slave of righteousness, my assignment is to preach the good news:

Mark 16:15 *And then he told them, "Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone." [NLT]*

to make disciples:

Matthew 28:18–20a *And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ^{20a}and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." [NRSV]*

and then to let all judgment rest with the Lord, Whose ways, He explained, much surpass ours:

Isaiah 55:9 *"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." [KJV]*