

Will Everyone Have a Chance? Does God Have Favourites?

By Rex Morgan

Most Christians say that the only way to salvation and everlasting life is to believe in Jesus Christ.

But what about people living in parts of the world where they never so much as even hear the name 'Jesus Christ' in their lifetime? What about babies who die before they get a chance to learn about anything, let alone Jesus? Or people with severe learning disabilities preventing them from understanding the meaning of the word 'Jesus'? How about people born into non-Christian religions, or to parents who are atheists? They are not likely to learn about Jesus, at least in any positive way.

Clearly there are multiple millions of people who have gone through their lives without even hearing the words 'Jesus' or 'Christ', let alone being offered the choice of believing in him or not. If Jesus is the only route to everlasting life, it would seem logical that a majority of people who have ever lived must miss out.

Is God fair?

Does God have favourites?

It sure seems that way, since geography and culture play a big part in whether you hear about Jesus or not. How can God expect people



'The Last Judgement' by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, Rome depicts the final judgement described in the Bible. Is this the time that people who have never believed in Jesus will be consigned to some sort of hell?

who have never even heard of Jesus Christ to believe in him?

Looking at the Bible

Actually, the Biblical answer to this question is widely misunderstood, even by many Christians. It is indeed true that the Bible says, speaking of Jesus: 'Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved'.¹

Many Christians have concluded this means that if people don't profess belief in Jesus before their death, they will be consigned to some kind of hell. When you think of all those who haven't even heard of Jesus' name, this appears to be blatantly unfair. How does it stack up with a kind, merciful and loving God who urges us to be ever ready to forgive people and to love our enemies?

Probably the most widely quoted verse in the entire Bible claims: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life'.² The next verse goes on to say: 'For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him'.

This is saying that Jesus came to earth to save the world, not just a small group of people who follow him because they are somehow lucky enough to know about him.

Many other Bible passages emphasise a loving God's earnest desire to save all of mankind. For instance God says he 'wants all people to be saved'³ and that Jesus Christ 'gave himself as a ransom for all people'.⁴ Another verse says: 'He is patient with you, not wanting anyone



How many of these people have had a chance to believe in Jesus? (from top left, clockwise) Worshipers at Tirta Empul Temple in Bali; Japanese commuters at Shinagawa train station, Tokyo; Buddhist monks praying in Myanmar; a crowd at Picadilly Circus, London.

to perish, but everyone to come to repentance'.⁵

How come this isn't happening? Millions of people live and die without so much as hearing the name of Jesus. Comparatively few people come to repentance, certainly far short of God's desire for 'everyone' to do this. Is God doing a lousy job?

Not the Right Time

The answer is that God is all-powerful and well able to bring the whole world to repentance, and he really wants to, but he is not doing this right now. The Bible shows that he has a timetable, a plan, and now is not the time that he is seeking to have the whole world aware of his presence.

A number of Bible passages point this out. For example: 'God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all'.⁶

This statement attests that the world is presently free to live in opposition to God—evidenced by injustice, violence, and crime—but this is a temporary state. A time is coming in the future when God will show mercy to everyone.

It is well known that the Bible predicts a time when everybody who has ever lived will be resurrected⁷ and judged.⁸ What will that judgement be like?

There are lots of indications in the Bible that it won't be nearly as fearsome and devastating as many people think. Mercy and forgiveness

are central qualities of God's nature.⁹ So we can rest assured he is not going to consign people to some kind of hell for innocently failing to believe in a Jesus they have never even heard about!

The Apostle Paul referred to this when he said: 'God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them'.¹⁰ Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, not just a 'righteous' minority.

Paul affirmed very clearly that: 'God does not show favouritism'.¹¹ The context of this declaration was that the early church, composed at that time exclusively of Jews, was shocked by the fact that God

was calling non-Jews to join them. The non-Jews, known as 'Gentiles', were despised by a majority of the Jews who felt they were the only people in a special relationship with God. Surely God couldn't be saving those 'heathen reprobates'!

But God showed very clearly at that time that he didn't have favourites, as he began to draw numerous Gentiles to believe in Jesus. God is much more merciful and even-handed than humans are. Just as he surprised the church by helping the Gentiles back then, so he has the capacity to surprise us by welcoming people who haven't heard of Jesus in this lifetime.¹²

Paul pointed out that Gentiles, even though they had never known God's laws, were still capable of obeying

them.¹³ He added that the biblical patriarch Abraham, who lived millennia before Jesus, was nevertheless saved.¹⁴ Abraham responded to the level of revelation about God that he had received. If it is necessary to know the name of Jesus Christ in order to be saved, then Moses, Joshua, Ruth, David, Isaiah, and other Old Testament heroes who lived before the birth of Jesus wouldn't have a chance!

But Jesus died for the sins of every human ever to live. Since his death by crucifixion availed for believers who died in ignorance of the cross in the centuries before Christ, surely it can likewise avail for people who don't know about the cross after the earthly life of Christ. That is an argument made by noted Christian writer Michael Green, who comments: 'The whole Bible makes it plain that men will be judged by God with utter fairness and they will be judged by their response to such light as they have had'.¹⁵ What is important to God is the attitude of the heart rather than the amount of religious knowledge people have.

Not Our Place to Judge

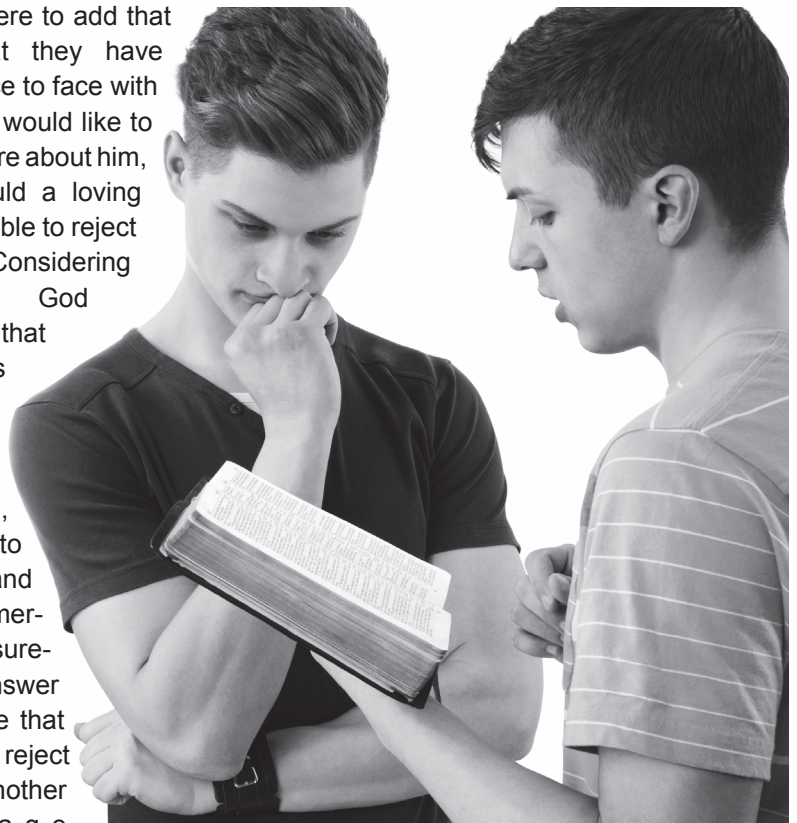
After Paul said, as quoted above, that at a future date: 'God will have mercy on all',¹⁶ he went on to say that God's wisdom is amazingly deep and rich, and his judgements are unsearchable.¹⁷ So we don't know the details, but we do know that he is a generous God of mercy and love, as exemplified by Jesus, and he will be absolutely kind and fair to everybody. He is the very epitome of true justice, because he knows the thoughts and intents of our hearts.

Paul went on to say that everybody will stand before God's judgement seat, and 'each of us will give an account of ourselves to God'.¹⁸ At this time of judgement millions of people will truthfully be able to account to God that they never knew he existed.

If they were to add that now that they have come face to face with him they would like to know more about him, how would a loving God be able to reject them? Considering that God reveals that he is 'gracious, compassionate, slow to anger and full of mercy',¹⁹ surely the answer has to be that he won't reject them! Another passage notes: '...all his ways are just, a faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he'.²⁰ The Bible abounds with similar descriptions of the perfect, righteous, holy character of a kind and generous God who loves us more deeply than we can comprehend.

The overall point Paul was making in this passage is that we ought to refrain from judging others, and leave that up to God.²¹ How can we tell if someone will be saved? It's not up to us. God is the judge. So let's leave it to him and not jump to the conclusion that billions of people will perish forever because they have never heard of Jesus. Let God be the judge of that, and be ready for some surprises!

One noted missionary who decided to leave the judging to God was Dr Lesslie Newbigin, a theologian and author who spent close to 40 years as a missionary in India, from 1936 to 1974. Dr Newbigin was confronted by the fact that only a tiny part of India's teeming population was Christian. What was going to happen to all the others? If he and



God's mercy is not dependent of the competence of humans in bringing 'lost souls' to Jesus.

his fellow missionaries didn't reach them, would they all die eternally because of that? Dr Newbigin concluded that the questions 'Who is going to be saved?', and 'How?' are for God alone to answer.

The belief that all people either come to Jesus in this life or they are consigned to hell forever causes some Christians to be very forceful in their evangelistic efforts. They pursue the goal of bringing 'lost souls' to Jesus with extreme zeal, as if people's salvation depended on them reaching their targets before they die. But God won't consign people to condemnation just because a missionary didn't reach them with the gospel before their death. God's grace isn't geared to the competence of humans in evangelism. He isn't dependent on human works.

Does this mean there is no need for evangelism now? Far from it! Jesus commanded his disciples to go out and preach the gospel to all the world.²² The book of Acts records how the early Christians went out evangelising because Jesus told

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deeply loves every human being who has ever lived. It is inherent in his holy, just, compassionate, and merciful character that he will make fair and just provision for everyone to have an opportunity to accept salvation.

The Christian gospel is indeed good news for all of humanity!

Notes

- ¹ Acts 4:12
- ² John 3:16-17
- ³ 1 Timothy 2:4
- ⁴ 1 Timothy 2:6
- ⁵ 2 Peter 3:9
- ⁶ Romans 11:32
- ⁷ John 5:28
- ⁸ Revelation 20:13
- ⁹ Psalms 145:8-9
- ¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:19
- ¹¹ Romans 2:11 ; Acts 10:34-35
- ¹² Romans 10:20; Isaiah 65:1
- ¹³ Romans 2:14-15
- ¹⁴ Romans 4:9
- ¹⁵ Michael Green, *You Must Be Joking!*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1991, p. 54.
- ¹⁶ Romans 11:32
- ¹⁷ Romans 11:33
- ¹⁸ Romans 14:10-12
- ¹⁹ Psalm 86:15
- ²⁰ Deuteronomy 32:4
- ²¹ Romans 14:13
- ²² Matthew 28:19-20
- ²³ Luke 23:40-41
- ²⁴ Luke 23:43
- ²⁵ This is a belief known as 'universalism' or 'universal salvation'.
- ²⁶ Romans 2:11
- ²⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, chapter 9.

them to, not because they thought anyone they didn't reach would go to hell.

The 'thief on the cross' is a prime example of God's grace extended to someone who hadn't known Jesus. The two criminals crucified with Jesus had most likely been scoundrels for many years. One of them admitted they deserved the death penalty they were receiving.²³ But when he expressed belief in Jesus in his dying moments, he received a personal promise of mercy.²⁴

The parable of the prodigal son can also be called the parable of the waiting father, or even the prodigal (lavishly generous) father. It depicts God as a father so filled with compassion that he willingly forgives a wild and wayward son who had recklessly disowned his family. This is the overwhelming love of the God who was willing to die so that humans could be saved. Would a God of that much love really let people die in hell without giving them a chance?

Salvation for All?

It is important to note that this is not to say that all people will be saved

regardless of whether they are good or bad.²⁵ Just as all people will have an opportunity to accept salvation through Jesus, the other side of the coin means that all people will have an opportunity to refuse that salvation.

God gifted humans with free moral agency, the ability to exercise free will and free choice. That's why the world is the way it is. The fact that God 'does not show favouritism'²⁶ means everyone will have the choice of following him or not. If there are people who have the opportunity to follow Jesus but still don't want to do so, it will be merciful for God to exclude them from eternal life with him, as they will simply be miserable if they have to be where he is. Renowned author C.S. Lewis put it this way:

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done'. All that are in hell choose it. Without that self-choice, there could be no hell.²⁷

In summary, the Bible shows that God does not play favourites. He



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