

Don't Let Them Perish

Would you live your life differently if you realized that every non-Christian you meet is headed for an eternity without God?

The stabbing words of a foreign exchange student studying in the United States still ring in my ear today: "I thought Christianity was important in this country," she said. "But now I know it isn't. I've been here for a year, and no one has talked to me about Jesus."

Christianity, by its very nature, is evangelistic. Christian missions is based on the assumption that people who are without Jesus Christ are lost. We are on a rescue mission with eternal consequences.

Our emotional involvement in missions will be in direct proportion to the strength of our belief in the doctrine of the lostness of mankind. The reason for much of our lethargy today lies at this point. Though we may give mental assent to this truth, often we do not emotionally come to grips with its consequences.

If people are lost outside of Christ, and if faith in Jesus Christ is the only avenue of redemption, what could possibly be a higher priority than spreading the gospel as far as we can, as fast as we can? Anything the church does that is not directly tied to evangelism is not unlike rearranging the furniture while the house is on fire.

As pastor Ted Haggard of New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado, says, the first priority of churches in any city should be "making it hard to go to hell from that city."

In my opinion, no theological issue could be more crucial for evangelism and missions than how deeply we really believe that people without Christ are eternally lost, and that there is

salvation in no one else but Jesus (see Acts 4:12). This is the watershed theological issue for evangelicals as we enter the 21st century. <P> **Hell Is Real**

Today, even in theologically conservative circles, we are battling universalism—the belief that all people will eventually be saved. Some otherwise Bible-believing Christians question the reality of judgment, especially for those who have never heard the gospel.

It is not that they have formally removed their belief in hell. There is simply an eerie silence as many endeavor to sort out what they hold to be true.

Universalism is an ancient heresy. It began in the Garden of Eden when the serpent told Adam and Eve, “You will not surely die” (Gen. 3:4, NKJV). One of its first proponents was Origen of Alexandria, and it was later condemned by the church.

Different shades of the teaching have periodically appeared, most noticeably in post-Reformation times in reaction to a strict doctrine of election, and in the 19th century when it was sometimes referred to as “the larger hope.”

But Scripture leaves no doubt as to the final destiny of those without Christ. The Bible clearly describes a coming apocalypse: “When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thess. 1:7-9).

The most often quoted verse in the Bible clearly presents humanity’s only two options: perishing or everlasting life. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

The subsequent verses remind us that God's disposition toward humankind is love and forgiveness: "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:17-18).

As Paul thought of his own people being lost, he wrote, "I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart" (Rom. 9:2).

He added that he would be willing to give up his place in Christ and be separated from Him if by such a sacrifice others would be saved. Paul believed all people outside of Christ were lost, and it left him with a broken heart.

It is precisely this scandal of an unbroken heart that impedes evangelism today. The harvest is immense and ready to be gathered by those who have sown in tears. "Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy. He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him" (Ps. 126:5-6).

The crown of rejoicing awaits those who win souls (see 1 Thess. 2:19-20). "Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever" (Dan. 12:3).

Jesus Christ declared that "no one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). He spoke often of a terrible place of torment for those who were not reconciled to God. He told the story of an arrogant, wealthy man who, in hell, screamed and pleaded for just a drop of water.

The man cried, "I am tormented in this flame" (Luke 16:24). Jesus said there would be those who would go "into the everlasting fire" (Matt. 25:41) and "into everlasting punishment" (Matt. 25:46).

The late W.T. Conner, president of Southwestern Baptist Seminary, once heard two students outside his office flippantly joking about hell. He met the young preachers in the hall, put his arms around their shoulders, and escorted them to a large picture window overlooking the city of Fort Worth, Texas.

As they gazed out the window, the younger men noticed that tears were coursing down Conner's cheeks. "Don't joke about hell, boys," he said softly. "People are going there. People are going there."

The destiny of those outside of Christ is no laughing matter. God is not desirous that anyone perish (see 2 Pet. 3:9). We should share the heart of God.

Jesus tasted death for every person (see Heb. 2:9). That means the potential of redemption stretches to the entire human race. Christ was separated from the Father so that we might never need to be separated. Jesus, being infinite, suffered in a finite period of time what we, being finite, would have suffered in an infinite period of time. <P> **What If People Never Hear?**

A young person came to me some time ago with a troubled look on his face. "I believe the Bible," he told me. "But I just can't believe God would condemn someone who has never heard the gospel." This raises a difficult question: What happens to those who have never heard the truth?

In Romans chapter one, Paul makes an excellent case for the lostness of humanity. He reminds us that men and women are not only going to be lost when they die—they are born in sin as descendants of Adam and inherently separated from God.

The Bible says the unbelieving person is "condemned already" and that "the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:18, 36). Paul gives an airtight argument that every person stands accountable to God because of the light of conscience and the

testimony of God in creation.

This testimony of nature is sometimes called “general revelation.” Creation’s general revelation of God powerfully preaches a person’s accountability to his or her Creator. However, only the specific revelation of God in Jesus Christ shows how we can be justified before this holy Creator.

According to Paul, even the remotest of peoples are “without excuse” because of the light of conscience and nature. Yet only the light of the world, Jesus Christ, can bring them salvation.

It is important to understand that rejection of the gospel is not the only criterion for lostness. Humanity is already lost because of sin. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). We are sinners because of the wrongs we have done. But we are also sinners because of who we are—children of Adam.

God has gone to the very limits of boundless love to prevent humankind from perishing: God incarnate became sin incarnate on the cross. It is too much to fathom fully. Yet it is wonderfully true.

As we moved toward judgment, God intervened personally through Christ. “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

The question of the lostness of those who have not heard the gospel is a vital issue. It must be resolved in one’s heart before missionary passion can flow in fullness.

While the question is usually raised in sincerity, the one who doubts the lostness of those who haven’t heard should carry that argument to its logical conclusion: If those who haven’t heard are not accountable, then we should immediately rush to every missionary home and prevent every national worker from

reaching any further.

After all, what if those previously unaccountable were to hear the gospel and reject it? They would then be accountable. The missionary would have done them a terrible disservice.

Such a line of reasoning would have to conclude that the kindest thing we could do for unreached humanity would be to stop preaching the gospel. Such reasoning dwarfs missionary advance.

But the truth is that those who have not heard the gospel are just as lost as those who have heard and rejected it. Therefore, the most benevolent, humanitarian activity in the world is preaching the gospel.

When the gospel message is received, the benefits begin immediately. Time and again, social transformation has resulted from the infiltration of the gospel into a society. But the benefits are also eternal. Those who hear and obey the gospel now possess eternal life. Dick Hillis, founder of Overseas Crusades, brings the issue to a verdict:

"If those who have not heard will somehow be saved, would it not then be best if they did not hear? Did Christ misguide His followers when He sent Paul throughout all Asia Minor and Europe? Or when He sent William Carey to India, Hudson Taylor to China and tens of thousands of missionaries around the world?

"If the unevangelized are not lost, is not the mission program of the church a ludicrous blunder? Are millions of dollars spent on a useless program? If the unreached are not lost, does not the Scripture become a bundle of contradictions, the Savior become a false teacher, the Christian message become 'much ado about nothing?'"

All evidence points in the other direction. Most of the adherents of the world's great religions are sincere. Yet

sincerity is not what saves us. Only faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ brings salvation.

Holy Scripture does not suggest any alternative plan. We have a distinct message—the only message that can set humanity’s captives free. The Christian message does not parrot other religions. Our faith is gloriously unique. <P > **The Rescue Operation**

In light of Jesus’ sacrifice, we must go to the lost—endued with the Spirit’s power to actualize that for which Christ died. It was this motivation that spurred Nikolaus von Zinzendorf and the Moravian missionaries “to win for the Lamb the reward of His sacrifice.” The apostle Paul cried, “Necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16).

John Knox pleaded on his knees, “Give me Scotland, or I die.” Hudson Taylor, as a young man in England, cried to God, “I feel that I cannot go on living unless I do something for China.” Robert Arthington could not go overseas but, through sacrifice, helped send others. He lived in a single room, cooked his own meals and gave more than \$500,000 to missions. At the end of his life he wrote, “Gladly would I again make the floor my bed, a box my chair, another box my table, rather than that men should perish for want of the knowledge of the Savior.”

Each of these men had a heart pumping with what Oswald J. Smith called “a passion for souls.” Do you have that passion? Do you long for more? The believer who is intimate with the Holy Spirit is advantaged here. Why? “Because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 5:5).

Late one night a concerned lighthouse keeper watched as a violent storm erupted at sea. Suddenly the seasoned keeper saw the faint SOS of a ship in distress. Instinctively he turned

to his young apprentice and commanded, "Let's go!"

Horrified, the apprentice retorted, "But, sire, if we go out there, we may never come back."

The old keeper of the lighthouse paused and put his hand on the young man's shoulder. "Son," he responded, "we have to go out. We don't have to come back."

No one doubts that there is great peril in penetrating the final frontiers. But that is not the issue. What matters is that people are perishing.

We have to go to them. Are you willing to be on the rescue team?

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