

Who Will be Saved, According to the Word of God?

By Dr. Norman Geisler

ROMANS 1:19-20—Are those who have never heard the gospel lost?

Misinterpretation: Jesus said, “I am the way the truth life, No one comes to the Father, except through Me” (John 14:6 NIV). Also, Acts 4:12 says of Christ, “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved” (NASB). Will someone who has never heard the gospel of Christ be eternally lost? Paul seems to answer this in the affirmative. But is it fair to condemn people who have never heard about Christ? Some New Agers point to this problem in support of the idea that all the world religions are paths to God.

Correcting the Misinterpretation: Paul’s answer is clear. He said the heathen are “without excuse” (Rom. 1:20) because “what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made” (1:19-20 NIV). So, the heathen are justly condemned.

Romans 2:12 states, “For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law” (NKJV). This passage teaches that the Jew is judged by the law (the Hebrew Scriptures), but the Gentile is condemned by “the law written in their hearts” (v.15). “For when Gentiles who do not have the law by nature do the things contained in the law, these, although not having the Law, are a law to themselves, *who show the work of the law written in their hearts*, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them” (Rom. 2:14, 15 NKJV, emphasis added).

The question of God’s fairness in judging the heathen assumes innocence on the part of the unsaved who haven’t heard the gospel. But the Bible tells us that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). In addition, Romans 1:18-20 says that God clearly reveals himself through natural revelation “so that they are without excuse.” Human beings are not innocent regarding God’s natural revelation.

If a person who has not heard the gospel and lives to the best of his or her ability, that person is simply doing works in an attempt to achieve salvation. But salvation is by grace, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8 NKJV). No one can do anything to gain access into heaven. If there was such a way, then the work of Christ on the Cross was a futile act.

The Bible says in essence, “seek and you will find.” That is, those who seek the light

they have through nature, which is not sufficient for salvation, will get the light they need for salvation. Hebrews 11:6 says, “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” Acts 10:35 adds, “But in every nation whoever fears God and works righteousness is accepted by Him” (NKJV). God has many ways to get the truth about salvation through Christ to those who seek him. He can send a missionary (Acts 10), a radio broadcast, or a Bible (Ps. 119:130). Theoretically God could send a vision (Dan. 2, 7) or an angel (Rev. 14) though he no longer gives new revelation. But those who turn their back on the light they have (through nature) and find themselves lost in darkness have no one to blame but themselves. For “men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19 NKJV).

Romans 5:18-19—Does Paul teach universalism when he affirms that “many [all] will be made righteous”?

Misinterpretation: In Romans 5:18-19 Paul wrote:

Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. [NIV]

Many liberal and some neo-orthodox scholars, such as Karl Barth, insist that this passage teaches that everyone will eventually be saved. Is this a proper understanding of the text?

Correcting the Misinterpretation: From these verses universalists infer that Christ’s death “for all” guarantees salvation “for all.” This conclusion, however, is contrary to the context here and in Romans as a whole as well as to the rest of Scripture.

Even in this context Paul speaks of being “justified *by faith*” (5:1), not automatically by what Christ did for us. He also refers to salvation as a “gift” (5:16) that has to be received; in 5:17 he declares that salvation comes only to those who receive the gift of righteousness.

The rest of the Book of Romans makes it unmistakably clear that not everyone will be saved. Romans 1-2 speaks of the heathen who are “without excuse” (Rom. 1:20) and upon whom the wrath of God falls (1:18). It declares that “as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law” (Rom. 2:12 NKJV).

In the very heart of his argument Paul concludes that apart from justification by faith, the world is accountable before God (Rom. 3:19). Later, speaking of the destiny of both saved and lost, Paul affirms that “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23 NIV). Likewise, Paul recognized that, despite his prayers, not all of his kinsmen would be saved (Rom. 11:1-10) but that many would be “accursed” (Rom. 9:3). Indeed, the whole point of Romans is to show that only those who believe will be justified (Rom. 1:17; cf. 3:21-26).

Romans 9 could not be clearer that *only the elect*, not everyone, will be saved (cf. 9:14-26). The rest God patiently endured, waiting for them to repent (2 Peter 3:9), so they would not be “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” (Rom. 9:22 NKJV).

Numerous passages elsewhere in Scripture speak of the eternal destiny of lost people, including the vivid passage at the end of Revelation when John said:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books... and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. [Rev. 20:11-15 NIV]

There simply is no evidence for universalism in Romans 5, and it is contrary to the clear teaching of other Scriptures. Since the Bible does not contradict itself, the verses that can be interpreted in more than one way must be understood in the light of those that cannot.

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