

What happens to people who have never heard of Jesus? Do they go to Hell?

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Opening Prayer

Good morning, and welcome here to KUMC/PCUMC. My name is Jacob Hanson, I am blessed to be the minister here, and it is a joy to be in worship with you today. If you are new to our church or if this is your first time here in a while, a special welcome to you. We are nearing the end of a very interesting sermon series. During the month of August we took a survey, and on that survey were 29 questions, along with space for a write-in. These questions (all of which we will get to by the way) were on the toughest subjects Christians are asked. We took the top seven most requested questions, and we have been answering them over the last month and a half. We have talked about salvation, God speaking to us, evolution in scripture, Jesus's return, and homosexuality. Our final two most requested questions which we will tackle this week and next are "What happens to people who have never heard about Jesus," and "Why does God allow suffering if He is good?" Our questions up until now have been both contentious in nature and confusing... the subject of much speculation both inside and outside the church. Our question for today, which includes talking about hell, is no different.

"What happens to people who have never heard of Jesus... do they go to hell?" It is a question that we have all asked, and probably one that we have all been asked if we are old enough. Often it is phrased with a tribesman in Africa, or a Native Americans before the days of Columbus, or someone who lived before the time of Jesus in Russia. However, if we are honest, this question gets deeper than that. It also comes into our day and age by asking about someone who lives in

Turkey who has never heard of Jesus. It comes out in relation to an atheist in China. It also comes into play when we ask the question about our neighbors who may have heard of Jesus, but didn't have the benefit of the upbringing that some of us did. It is a tough question, because we understand God as fair and just and merciful. How could God allow anyone to go to hell if it is out of their control or if they are operating from a disadvantage? How can we claim that God loves everyone, that He "desires that none should perish" (2nd Peter 3:9) if He doesn't even give them a chance? How can we claim that "Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and that none come to the cross but through Him" (John 14:6) if many people in history have not even heard Jesus's name? All of these questions get wrapped up into our conversation on "What happens to people who have never heard of Jesus... do they go to hell?" Knowing there are so many different parts to this question, please do not be surprised if everything is not answered this morning. There is no way we can get through every point in twenty minutes, but I do encourage you to ask your specific questions of your small group leaders, your Bible Study leaders, and your Pastor when you can. Know that I am praying for all of you, and that I am here to walk with you in these tough subjects. With that being said, our scripture readings for today help us to understand that the Lord makes it clear that there is only one way to Him... but that He also can absolutely work in our absence.

Our first reading came from John 3:14-21. It contains some very familiar scriptures for us, which includes John 3:16, which might be the most memorized scripture in history. But I don't want us to start with 3:16, but rather we must remember 3:14-15 in looking at today's question. John 3:14-15 again read "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that

whoever believe in Him will have eternal life.” During the days of the Israelites, when they were wandering in the desert after leaving Egypt, they encountered a bunch of poisonous serpents because they continued to question and complain about God. When they would get bit, they would die. So the Lord showed them mercy and had Moses make a tall brass pole with a snake on it, and whoever would look at the snake would be cured if they were bit. (Numbers 21) When Jesus makes this reference to the snake on the pole and how the “Son of Man” must be lifted up, He is prophesying His own death upon the cross very clearly. The connection here is pretty astounding too, as looking upon the serpent would heal the Israelites so too would placing trust in the Son heal any who call on Him of their sins. The Lord Jesus Christ goes to the cross for us, so that we might be healed in a great mighty act of mercy. But there is a concern here... it is very clear that we have to know Jesus for salvation. “He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” Our reading from Romans, one we have looked at quite a bit now, backs this up.

Romans 1:18-20 reads “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.” Beloved Congregants, scripture is pretty clear that we need Christ to have salvation, and it is also pretty clear that all of us are held accountable. We are held accountable by our consciousness (given by God), we are

held accountable by the world we live in, and we are held accountable by our own sin which we know is wrong. Psalm 19 further more speaks on this when it declares right from the beginning “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.” Beloved, there is a reason that throughout human history the vast majority of humans looked for a Creator. It wasn’t because the people of the past were unscientific idiots (although they are often portrayed that way), but rather because it made sense that a Creator exists. In fact this is true today, even in the most scientific and well thought out circles, there are many who recognize that this world points towards a Creator. We could discuss moral arguments, mathematical arguments, historical arguments, etc. That was our topic a few weeks ago, but for the moment we should recognize that, in scripture, it is made very clear that we are all shown the Lord’s glory and must recognize His Son in order to receive salvation. But this is difficult, because it seems then to suggest that those who never hear the name of Jesus or are at a disadvantage in hearing about Him, are cursed to hell with no chance for glory. After all, as Romans 10:14 says “How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?” It is a good question.

The reason that this problem and quandary exists, is that we are much too limiting of God’s power in our world. We know that we are called to preach the gospel. We know that it is only by Jesus that we are saved. (After all if we can be saved in another way, then there is no reason for Christ to go to the cross for us.) We therefore think that it is only by preaching the word that anyone learns about Christ, and therefore is able to receive salvation. The question I would pose to you in this, one that should bring you hope but still keep you motivated, is

“Does God work in our absence?” Hopefully we can all unequivocally agree that the answer is yes.

In the United Methodist Church, one of our core teachings is the three levels of grace. Prevenient Grace, Justifying Grace, and Sanctifying Grace are three different ways in which the Lord works, as described by John Wesley. Justifying Grace is salvation, think being justified. Anyone, from the criminal on the cross who was barely a believer before passing to Martin Luther is equal in this, so long as they trust in Christ. Jesus takes their sins, they go to heaven and spend eternity with the Lord, easy. Sanctifying Grace is the growing process for Christians that is instigated by the Holy Spirit. The thought being that as you grow in your faith by the Holy Spirit’s good work, you will more closely mirror the Lord. That one is also fairly easy. Prevenient Grace, though, is tough, because the thought is that the Lord puts us in a position to accept or reject. The idea is that the Holy Spirit is at work preparing all of us to know the Lord, even before we reach the point of being able to reject or receive. Our readings from Acts and Jonah help us to understand how the Lord works in these ways... and how He can work in our absence.

In Acts 8:26-36 we read about the Eunuch from Ethiopia and the disciple Philip. Philip is led into the desert down a prominent road, and on his way he encounters this Eunuch who happens to be reading the most important messianic prophecy from the Old Testament. This Eunuch is reading Isaiah 53 “He was led as a sheep to slaughter; and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so He does not open His mouth. In humiliation His judgement was taken away; who will relate His generation? For His life is removed from the earth.” This is a direct quote from Isaiah 53:8, and we would easily recognize the entire

chapter of Isaiah 53 as being direct prophecy about Jesus. When the Eunuch and Philip begin to converse about this, Philip is able to relate the entire gospel of Jesus to the man, who then is immediately baptized. Beloved Congregation, I want you to recognize that while Philip did what he was called to do, He wasn't the one who set up the Eunuch's salvation. Philip wasn't responsible for it... the Holy Spirit was. Before Philip even arrived, the Holy Spirit was already at work in Philip's absence. Before Philip even was led out onto the desert road, the Holy Spirit was already preparing the Eunuch's heart so that the man might believe. While Philip does well, the Holy Spirit really is the one who does all the hard work. A similar tone is clear in the book of Jonah, of which we read several parts today.

The book of Jonah is very strange in many ways. We see that God sends a stubborn prophet who doesn't want to listen to the city of Nineveh... the very people who were Israel's enemies in that day. The strangest thing about the whole story is that the man of God is NOT the one who listens... but rather everyone else. In the beginning of the book Jonah is told "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me." Nineveh is the capital city of the Assyrians, the very people who destroy the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. Just before Israel is destroyed, the Assyrians heavily oppressed the Israelites, of which Jonah (it is guessed) was a part. Jonah, knowing the Lord is merciful, doesn't want to preach the truth to the Ninevites... these are people that he hates, and so he flees. When he flees is when we get the story that many of have heard regarding Jonah, where the Lord sends a great storm, the crew (at Jonah's request) throws him overboard where he is then swallowed by a whale and then vomited up onto dry land... next to Nineveh. (Interesting note, the sailors who did not know the Lord come to know

the Lord in during this part of Jonah's tale. It is also worth noting that Jonah would rather die than to tell these men to take him to Nineveh or drop him off on dry land.) When Jonah, this pretty awful and disobedient prophet, finally gets to Nineveh and preaches the message, the Ninevites turn and repent to follow the Lord. As it says in Jonah 3:10 "When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it." When Jonah sees this, he is greatly unhappy that the Lord would relent from destroying Israel's enemies. Jonah 4:1-2 says "But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, 'Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.'" Jonah is angry that the Lord relents, and the Lord's response should not go unnoticed by us when at the end of the book the Lord says to Jonah "Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?" Beloved, if you remember anything from the book of Jonah it should be this: the Lord has compassion for those who do not know anything about Him... the example being the Ninevites. The book of Jonah as a whole, the story out of Acts regarding Philip and the Eunuch, and our other reading regarding Christ's salvation should leave us with two important points to remember this morning. The first lesson should encourage us to preach the word and the other should give us peace regarding those who have never heard the message.

Practically for us John 3, Romans 1, and Psalm 19 all make it very clear that we should take seriously God's command to preach the word. All of humankind is under condemnation of their own sin... that is all of us. We all know right from wrong, we all are given hints regarding God's truth in the world, and the only way we reach salvation is through Christ's blood. Therefore, as believers, we should be motivated Beloved Congregation to be reaching others for Christ. We should be motivated to preach God's word, knowing that this is part of the reason we exist, and that it is the greatest job the Lord has given us, to be a part in leading others to salvation. However, when we despair that perhaps God is sending to hell those whom have not heard His word from us, we should remember the lessons of Acts and Jonah, that the Lord can work well even in our absence. He cares for those who haven't heard, He sets things up through Prevenient Grace ahead of time so that His people might hear His voice. Knowing that He cares, and knowing that He doesn't need us to do His work, when it comes to that great question about people who have never heard His name, we should feel confident knowing that the Lord makes a way. We should feel comfortable placing the eternal fate of anyone into His merciful and mighty hands. Who knows what the Lord may do in our absence? Perhaps in their last moments the Lord is there, like with the criminal on the cross. Perhaps the Lord has sent out many more missionaries and preacher than what we are aware of. Perhaps instead of worrying about those things which we cannot control, we should be more concerned about what it is that we are given control over (like sharing the Gospel with those around us) and entrusting those things which we don't have control over (like those who have not been preached to) into the hands of Him who is merciful and mighty. Beloved, the Lord is merciful and great, and He loves all of us... He can work in our absence, but we are called to share the Gospel for His glory. Be motivated to

share the truth, and do not despair over those who have not yet heard who are outside your realm... God is in control. May we be obedient and at peace over the Lord's reach worldwide, knowing that He is good. Go in peace this morning, Amen.

Closing Prayer