



What about the heathen?

General question: Is God fair? Does God treat the heathen fairly?

Also asked as:

How does God judge people from remote primitive tribes? What happens to people who never have, or had, a chance to hear about Jesus?

Similar questions answered separately:

What happens to good people who do not believe in Jesus?

Isn't it unfair to say that Jesus is the only way to God ... and what about other religions?

What happens to Jewish people who do not believe that Jesus is their Messiah?

What happens to mentally handicapped children ... or to those who die young?

A caution: The word *heathen* refers to someone in a remote and primitive culture that has never come under the influence of a major world-religion (particularly Christianity). They are among the unreached, un-evangelized, remote peoples of the world. The English word *heathen* has no equivalent in some languages ... and its use may prompt thoughts of Western colonialism and/or arrogance. The use of the word *heathen* in this eSeeker answer intends no such insult.

The short answer:

Some people seem to have, or have had, no chance to hear about Jesus. The basic question is ... *Can heathen people get to Heaven some other way besides responding directly to the message of Jesus?* The basic Biblical answer is ... *No, there is no salvation without Jesus.* Referring to Jesus, Acts 4:12 states, "*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.*" A deeper look into this shows that it is fair. The Bible states that the heathen are judged fairly by God's law written in their hearts ... and are not judged by what they have not heard, Romans 2:11-16. The heathen fail to live up to that inner God-given standard. Moreover, their behavior is not good ... often including immorality, cruelty, idolatry, sorcery, witchcraft, demonism, and human sacrifice. Many inexcusably never seek the true God. Even without knowing His name, they know that He exists, Romans 1:19-20. They know enough to seek Him. Moreover, God reveals Himself to all true seekers including the heathen, Jeremiah 29:13. He usually does that through human means, Romans 10:14-15 ... but He may do so miraculously. God will get the message of Jesus to anyone who truly seeks to know Him. Concern for the heathen is good. However, we should be most concerned about ourselves ... after all, we have heard about Jesus. "*How will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?*" Hebrews 2:3.

The longer answer:

Who are the heathen? The word *heathen* often refers to people who do not worship the God of the Bible ... and are not part of another major world religion. Their religions are localized and most often somewhat primitive. The word also implies that they are, or have been, out of the reach of normal Christianity ... humanly appearing to have little chance to hear about Jesus. I will use the word *heathen* to refer to such people. If you speak English as a second or third language, your first language might not have an equivalent word.

What about the heathen? Does God treat them fairly? What happens to the people who do not seem to have a chance to hear about Jesus? Are they eternally lost because Christianity (i.e. the message of salvation through Jesus Christ) has not reached them? Or do the heathen worship God in their own primitive way? Or does God condemn them without giving them a chance? How can people in isolated tribes and in remote places be saved? Does their ignorance excuse them? What chance do they really have?

Do the heathen worship God? Do their beliefs and religious practices honor God? The Bible's answer is emphatically *No!* God said, "*You shall have no other gods before Me,*" Exodus 20:3. In addition, He said, "*For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me,*" Isaiah 46:9. Jesus said, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me,*" John 14:6. Jesus also said, "*He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him,*" John 5:23. The Bible offers no exceptions to this. God offers no exemptions for the heathen ... or for anyone else. The good works of the heathen do not save them. Good works cannot save anyone. "*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast,*" Ephesians 2:8-9. It is impossible to satisfy and appease God by doing good works ... even in the form of religious activity. However, many of the religious practices of the heathen cannot be classified as good. Idolatry is common in heathen religions ... but forbidden by God in Exodus 20:4. The heathen often worship images of birds, animals, and reptiles ... condemned in Romans 1:21-25. Moreover, many other practices of the heathen including sorcery, witchcraft, consulting the dead, demon worship, and human sacrifice are explicitly forbidden in the Bible, Leviticus 18:21, Leviticus 19:31, Deuteronomy 18:10-12, Psalm 106:32-40, I Corinthians 10:20-21. Not all heathen religions include all of these practices ... but all include some practices that are forbidden in the Bible. Individually and collectively, their behavior and beliefs are neither benign nor pleasing to God. The heathen neither worship God via their idolatry and animism nor honor the true God through their primitive religious practices.

Does God love the heathen? Yes! "*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life,*" John 3:16. He loves them ... and desires their salvation. The Lord is "*not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance,*" 2 Peter 3:9. However, each person must individually call upon the one true God. David wrote, "*For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You,*" Psalm 86:5. Paul wrote that God "*desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth,*" I Timothy 2:4. However, God does not overlook people's sins just because they live in remote places. People are not automatically saved because God loves them. The heathen must come to the knowledge of the truth ... specifically to the

knowledge of Jesus. Jesus said, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me,"* John 14:6. The heathen must come to Jesus to be saved. In reality, they are given an opportunity to be saved because God loves them. God has given them enough information to prompt a response from them. He has given them a candle of light in their darkness to show the way to the one true Light ... to Jesus.

What do the heathen know about God? What light do they have from God? They have not heard of Jesus. They do not know His name. However, God has revealed Himself to them. *"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,"* Romans 1:19-20. These are important verses in understanding the Bible's answer about the heathen. God has given knowledge of Himself to all people. They see His attributes, power, and divinity in His creation. Therefore, as it states in the above verse, *"they are without excuse."* God has given His witness to all people. His goodness is a continuous witness of His existence and character. *"In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness,"* Acts 14:16-17. The heathen have enough information to know that God exists ... even though they do not know His name. They know enough about God to respond to Him. However, their limited response to that is not enough. They do not know enough to become saved until God delivers the message of Jesus to them ... and are not saved until they respond positively to that message.

How does God judge the heathen? Will He judge and condemn them for violating His Laws ... laws that they have never heard or seen? By what standard will they be judged? Be assured that God will judge them fairly. Everyone has an inner standard of right and wrong. Actually, someone's asking about the heathen demonstrates that the asker has that inner standard of fairness ... one must have a standard of fairness to question it. God has put a standard of right and wrong inside the heathen. *"For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus,"* Romans 2:14-16. Therefore, God can judge them fairly. They may sear their consciences by repeatedly violating that standard ... and cease to experience guilty feelings. They may live amongst people who have seared their individual and collective consciences by societal approval of evil behavior. However, everyone begins with a basic, God-given knowledge of right and wrong. The heathen will be judged and condemned for their violation of that inner standard. God does not judge them by a standard that they do not know. The good news for the heathen is that God is fair. The bad news is that perfect obedience to their inner standard is impossible. You may want to examine the eSeeker answer to the question about children who die before reaching a developmental age of knowing right from wrong. Such children are neither capable of, nor accountable for, personal sin ... and therefore, are assured of a place in Heaven.

How can the heathen be saved? The heathen know enough about right and wrong to know that they have sinned. They know the standard by which God will judge them ... it is written in their hearts. They

will not be condemned for rejecting a Savior of whom they have never heard. God has revealed Himself to them. If the heathen do not respond to the limited light that they do have, they will be "without excuse". Responding to God's limited revelation does *not* save them. However, it opens the door for God to send the saving message of Jesus to them. Creating or following a primitive religion is not an appropriate response to the light that God has given ... that is an act of rebellion against the true God. It is blasphemous to the Creator when the heathen worship the creation (land, sky, planets, animals, etc.). Additionally, primitive heathen religions, like all religions outside of Christianity, offer no solution to man's sin-caused separation from God. Jesus offers the only solution. His way is the only one that solves our sin problem. The heathen have no hope outside of Jesus. If the heathen respond to the limited light that they do have, then it becomes God's responsibility to get the message of Jesus to them. God has said, "*You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart,*" Jeremiah 29:13. He said, "*And those who diligently seek me will find me,*" Proverbs 8:17. Jesus said, "*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened,*" Matthew 7:7-8. If the heathen respond to the light that they have, God will get the message of Jesus to them. Then they must choose to accept or reject the saving message of Jesus.

How can God get the message of Jesus to the heathen? The God of the Bible is all-powerful. Nothing is too difficult for Him, Jeremiah 32:17. God is certainly capable of getting the message of Jesus to anyone... even to someone in the remotest part of the earth. Human limitations do not limit God in any way. There have been accounts of supernatural appearances of Jesus. Jesus, after His resurrection appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, Acts 9:3-6. Moreover, a missionary could be supernaturally transported to a new location ... as in Philip's trip to Azotus, Acts 8:39-40. However, mystical appearances and supernatural trips would probably be very infrequent. Human messengers have usually been the normal means for delivering the message of Jesus, Romans 10:12-17. All people need to hear the message of Jesus. Moreover, human messengers are the ones commanded to take that message to all people ... including to the heathen in "*the remotest part of the earth,*" Acts 1:8. The need is urgent. There is no second chance beyond the grave. "*Inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment,*" Hebrews 9:27. That verse excludes any second chance at the gate of Heaven. It also excludes reincarnation ... there is no human recycling. True Christians must take His message to the heathen in their lifetime. Today's world tries to squeeze us into its mold of misdirected tolerance and political correctness ... suggesting that we should not try to impose our beliefs on other people (such as the heathen). However, withholding the message of Jesus would be severely uncompassionate. I know of a woman who came to faith in Jesus after she had been married for many years. She immediately went home to tell her husband about Jesus. She loved her husband ... and wanted him to know Jesus. However, her husband's response hurt her very deeply. He did not reject her ... and did not reject her message. He responded, "Oh, I did that before we were married." Her words to him said so much, "I thought you loved me. Why didn't you tell me about Jesus?" She was brokenhearted. God loves the world ... and He loves the heathen. However, they cannot be saved without hearing the saving message of Jesus. God has commanded His children to tell them about Jesus. Will they do it? Or will they one day hear the heathen say, "I thought you were supposed to love us. Why didn't you tell us about Jesus?"

God makes no mistakes. No one is carelessly overlooked by God. No one accidentally falls through the cracks of eternity. Jesus said, "*Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the*

ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows," Matthew 10:29-31. God is fair to everyone. He judges all people fairly ... the heathen and us. Everyone has a chance to hear the saving message of Jesus. If the heathen respond to the light that they have been given, God will get the message of Jesus to them. It is the same for each of us. God has partially revealed Himself to us. We know right from wrong ... and we do wrong. God has promised that if we sincerely seek Him, He will get the saving message of Jesus to us. However, hearing the message of Jesus is not enough. Having heard the message, each person must make a choice ... to believe in Jesus or to reject Him. Everyone has a chance to find God on His terms ... anywhere and anytime ... and it must be on His terms rather than our terms. *"Whoever will call on the name of the lord will be saved.' How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in him whom they have not heard?"* Romans 10:13-14. Christians should not selfishly hoard the message. People need to hear it. The good news is that God has provided a solution ... one solution that works. *"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,"* Acts 4:12. There is nothing wrong with there being only one solution. Would it be logical to reject a cure for a terminal illness if there was only one cure? If you are sure that you are a Christian on His terms, tell people about Jesus. However, if you have not yet believed in Jesus, it is eternally important that you do not reject His saving message. There is no other solution. *"How will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?"* Hebrews 2:3. If you are not sure about your personal relationship with Jesus, you can learn how to be sure at www.911GOD.org.

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