

What about those who can't believe?

Sign Title: What about those who can't believe?

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Welcome to Faith Evangelical Free Church. My name is Kurt and I am one of the pastors. This summer we are in a series called, "The Mysteries of Heaven." We are learning what happens to people after they die. For the last few weeks we looked at what the Bible says are the big things we need to know about life after death. We looked at the new creation, the new bodies we will receive, the reality of hell and the incentive of eternal reward for Christians in heaven. Those messages were the foundation we will build the rest of this series upon. If you missed those messages, I encourage you to go on our web site at www.faithefree.com to review them.

Today, we are making a decisive shift. We are moving from understanding the realities of eternity to answering the real-life questions you have about eternity. For the last two weeks I circulated a "Build your own sermon" response card. I wanted to know the real-life questions you have about heaven.

First, I want to thank you for the great thought you put into those questions. As a pastor, you gave me many good questions. In the next few weeks, I look forward to answering many of them. Some of the most common questions you gave me revolve around the question of those who *can't* believe. What happens to them? Look over my shoulder and let me show you some of those questions.

- For those who have never heard the message of Jesus Christ, how does it work if they never even had a chance? Will they go to hell for eternity just because of where they lived? - *What about those who can't believe because they never heard?*

- What about aborted babies or miscarriages? What about the severely mentally handicapped - *What about those who can't believe because they never became old enough to hear the message and believe?*
- Is the age of accountability such that, for example, 11 years, 3 months, 25 days and 56.67892 seconds. Before that they went to heaven. After that they go to hell? - *(That is my favorite question in the bunch.) Is there an age of accountability?*

Today we will answer these questions: What about those who never heard? What about those who can't hear? When is someone old enough to hear?

What about those who never heard?

Before we answer this question, we need to make sure we are all on the same page about real issues in life.

The Universal Problem is Sin.

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, Romans 3:23 (ESV)

The Bible is absolutely clear that the human problem is not the difference between the middle class and the upper class. It is not the political party of the man in the White House. The problem is not what we have or even what we don't have. The real problem for every human being is sin. Every one of us is in rebellion against God. Rather than honoring God, we worship ourselves. This is the problem in every culture, in every period of history and in every place from the Bahamas to Alaska. There was never an aboriginal people on the Discovery Channel where they needed teaching on how to lie or how to steal. Everyone is built that way. The universal problem of sin gives everyone the same feeling; separation from God.

but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. Isaiah 59:2 (ESV)

This is why everyone gropes for God and people everywhere worship some kind of a God but they do not know him. He is distant. Our sinfulness separates us from God. Even as Christians we know this experience. Has anyone willfully sinned against God and afterwards felt like your prayers never went higher than the ceiling? (You don't have to raise your hand on this one.) You felt your sin separating you from God. As Christians that doesn't mean God disowns us when we sin but the joy that is part of our relationship with God is stifled as we can feel the disappointment of our heavenly father. It is time and repentance that allows that experience of God's joy to return. So understand, the universal problem is sin and sin brings separation from God.

The Universal Solution is Jesus.

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 1 Timothy 2:5 (ESV)

The Scriptures are clear. There is no other way to God other than through his son. Jesus died as the once-for-all sacrifice for sin.

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” Acts 4:12 (ESV)

Jesus is the exclusive solution for sin in America, in Mozambique, in Croatia, in Latvia, in Iraq and in Sudan. There is one problem for mankind and one solution for all men. The Bible reminds us that Christ is the source of salvation for all cultures and all people.

And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made

them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”
Revelation 5:9–10 (ESV)

Heaven will not be filled with white anglo-saxons. God loves diversity and the greater the diversity in heaven, the more glory that goes to Jesus. The Scriptures tell us sin is the universal problem and that faith in Christ for our sins is the universal solution. Those are the important foundation stones for us to build on but as we are focusing on those who haven't heard about Jesus. Since they never heard about Jesus, how can they reject Jesus?

Everyone knowingly and willingly sins against God.

The Bible is clear that God *justly* condemns everyone for their sin. Even if they have not heard about Jesus, because *everyone knows God exists from the light of nature and their own consciences*, yet they choose to rebel against him anyway, they are justly condemned. According to god, atheists don't exist.

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. Romans 1:20 (ESV)

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. Romans 2:14–16 (ESV)

What everyone knows about God from nature and from the light of their own consciences *is enough to condemn them eternally*. Everyone knows right and wrong but chooses to sin. This is why unreached people in the jungles of the Amazon are still guilty of sin. They knew of God through nature and they knew of right and wrong through their consciences, but they chose to violate their

consciences and sin. They may not understand the depth of their sinfulness apart from the Bible but they know the reality of their sinfulness so they are justly condemned before God as deserving of eternal separation from God's beauty and holiness.

Apart from Christ, everyone will be justly punished in Hell.

Behind our question about those who haven't heard is really a question about the justice of God. How can God justly condemn anyone to hell simply because they never had a chance to trust in Jesus? Lest you run amuck, remember the justice of God is what demands eternal separation from God in the first place.

Something else we learned in our study of Hell in previous weeks is very important here. We don't need to worry about God being unfair. God is all about fairness. Even in hell God is just and fair. There are degrees of punishment in hell. Hell is God's just response to man's willfully chosen sinful choices.

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. Revelation 20:12 (ESV)

The murdering power mongers of this world like Hitler and Osama-bin Laden will be punished in hell with a greater intensity than the good, moral citizen who never knew Christ but tried to live as a role model for good in their society. The Bible is clear that the choices we make in this life impact our eternity. Those who dive to deeper depths in earth depravities will be justly reflected in greater degrees of torment for eternity in hell.

If you want to know what is unfair, that is heaven. Nobody will be in heaven apart from getting what they don't deserve. Hell is about people getting what they deserve, heaven is getting what we don't deserve.

Can anyone be saved without literally hearing the Gospel?

I answered this question in a message I delivered in the fall called, "[Christ - The Focus of All Saving Faith](#)." If you want a more extensive answer to this question, I encourage you to hop onto the www.christ2Rculture.com web site to read this message. This morning, I will just recap a portion of it.

I want to start with a story given to us in Acts 10 and 11 about a Gentile centurion in the Roman army named Cornelius. This is how the Bible describes him.

a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. Acts 10:2

Without question, Cornelius was one top notch religious guy. Was Cornelius on his way to heaven or on his way to hell? Even though Cornelius was a great religious guy, he was on his way to Hell. Why do I say that? Read the text of the Bible and it tells you that Cornelius was not in a saving relationship with God.

If we go to Acts 11, Peter summarizes what a supernatural visitation from an angel told Cornelius to do.

And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' Acts 11:13-14 (ESV)

Now, here is the question. Was good, moral Cornelius saved before hearing of God's grace through Jesus? No! I think Luke is emphasizing this. No

matter how morally good people are, *it is not enough to save them*. God's sole chosen means to save people is through the verbal witness of the mouths of his people. God may work supernaturally to get his people together with others who need to hear, but it is always a witness from the mouths of his people that God uses to spark faith in the lives of others. People do not just wake up one day and discover they are a Christian through osmosis.

So is God in the business of saving people apart from sending people to tell others about Jesus? Absolutely not.

You say this isn't fair. I beg to differ. God is totally fair. Remember that everyone will be judged fairly on the basis of what they have done before they enter hell so the punishment of hell is fair for their sin. With Christ, God moves beyond fair to merciful and gracious and instead of giving us what we deserve, *he gives us what we don't deserve* and the way God has chosen to extend his grace is exclusively through the witness of his people.

Paul is also adamant about this in Romans as he hits us with a series of rhetorical questions.

For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" Romans 10:13–15 (ESV)

First, "*How can they call upon him whom they have not believed?*" This rules out the argument that people can call upon Christ without believing in Christ. In other words, people have to believe in Christ so they can call upon him.

Second, “*And how are they to believe in him whom they have never heard?*” This shows us that the only way to believe in Christ is to hear about Christ. This rules out the argument that a person might have saving faith without knowing or trusting in Christ.

Third, “*How are they to hear without a preacher?*” This reminds us that the only way to hear about Christ is if someone tells them about Christ.

This is why missions is such a big deal. Our missions team is not just a group of people who write checks but our missions team is strategizing how we can bring the gospel to places it has never been heard before.

Our friends and neighbors can not be saved unless someone tells them about Jesus. God wants to use our mouths to do it. There is no other way shown to us in Scripture.

What about those who can't hear?

This is a very difficult and sensitive topic. Anyone who has attended the funeral of a child knows the incredible depth of grief that is laid upon the heart of a parent. I have walked with parents down that dark corridor at a child's funeral and it is much more somber than the death of someone in their nineties. What happens to children when they die? How can they be responsible for rejecting a Christ they never heard or they were too young to understand?

All infants are sinful. (inductive)

Maybe some of you are following the exchange taking place in the paper over infant baptism. Two churches are fighting each other on this. What amazed me is that one church

said infants do not need to be baptized because infants are innocent, not sinful. I don't know about you but nature itself has proven that one wrong. Just wait till a child can talk and what is the first word out of their mouth? "No!" In fact, if it wasn't that they were so small, they would be quite dangerous!

It is not just experience that proves infants are sinful but the Bible also tells us this.

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. Psalm 51:5 (ESV)

This is not saying the Psalmist's mother was a prostitute. It is saying that even from the moment of conception, he was sinful. So the Bible says children are born with a sinful nature, even when we look at them in the crib and we change their first diaper, their nature is sinful, not pure.

The Bible doesn't just say children are sinful explicitly but the Bible reminds us of the sinfulness of children implicitly. The only reason people die is a result of sin. If a child dies, it is because they are sinful. Look how Paul makes the argument that death is evidence for sinfulness.

...But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam,... Romans 5:13–14 (NIV)



If salvation is by faith in Christ alone, which, according to the Scripture, is something we must hear about to believe in, and infants do not have the capacity to hear and understand, it looks like no infants will be in heaven because they can not have faith in Christ and be saved.

All children are sinful.

But before we draw that conclusion, let's dig a little deeper. There are some passages of Scripture that lead us to believe *some* infants were saved even before they were born.

God can save infants before birth. (Inductive)

Speaking about John the Baptist it says:

he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. Luke 1:15 (ESV)

In the gospel of Luke, "being filled with the Spirit" is something Luke only ascribes in his gospel to those who have spiritual life. Luke leads us to believe John the Baptist was saved even before he was born.

Hundreds of years before John the Baptist, David wrote

Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother's breasts. On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God. Psalm 22:9–10 (ESV)

Evidently, David had a saving faith in God even from his mother's womb. These verses make it very unlikely that all infants who die are lost. If John the Baptist and David appear to be saved in infancy, could not God save others in infancy? From what we have seen we cannot claim God saves *every* infant who dies but that God can and some evidence leads us to believe he does draw some infants to him while they are yet in the womb. This is not because of the

goodness of the child but it can only be by the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

God can save infants before birth.

There is still one more piece of evidence we need to bring to the table as we unravel this puzzle.

Inability to reject God through nature and conscience appears to make a difference.

Everyone is sinful from conception and how we live matters in the final judgment. Infants who die, while born in sin, have not had a chance to live in sin and reject God through creation and conscience. Remember what we learned earlier in Romans 1:20

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. Romans 1:20 (ESV)

In other words: if an individual does not have access to the revelation of God's glory through nature and the capacity to understand right and wrong, Paul *implies* that in their judgment before God, *they have a type of excuse*. Paul's point is that even though we are under the penalty of everlasting judgment because of the fall of Adam and our sinful nature, nevertheless *the Scriptures hint that God only executes this judgment on those who have the capacity to see his glory and understand his will*.

The Scriptures do not shout this loudly, they imply softly that those who did not have a chance to reject God through nature and conscience are saved as a special act of God's mercy through Christ. I think God in God's wisdom does not state this explicitly because man in his sinfulness would use this as justification

for abortion. This is why there are no specific chapters and verses that say this. Yet for those who look more deeply and try to press into feeling God's character, we see scraps of evidence in Scripture that lead us to believe God extends special grace through Christ to those who never become old enough to reject him through nature and conscience.

God hints at special goodness towards those who could not reject him in nature.

The example of David's two sons.

One example where we can see this is King David's reaction to the death of two of his children. When Absalom died after living as a murderer of his own brother and rebelling against father and planning to murder him, look how David reacted.

And the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" 2 Samuel 18:33 (ESV)

David had incredible grief for the son that was the black sheep night-mare of the family. But look at how David reacted to the death of his infant child.

He said, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the Lord will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." 2 Samuel 12:22-23 (ESV)

David was confident he would be with God for eternity *and his infant son would be with him*. Let me emphasize this again. The Bible *hints* that those who die without the ability to reject God through nature or conscience will be in heaven. That isn't because they are innocent but that God in his mercy chooses

to save them through Christ. This is not explicitly stated but there are bits of evidence that lead us this way.

Remember even our ability to understand the gospel as adults is a special act of God's mercy to us through Christ. Apart from God making us spiritually alive, we can hear God's Word preached all day and it will be foolishness to us. When God, in a special act of mercy toward us through Christ sparks spiritual life, God's word is no longer foolishness but it is the fuel God uses to keep the spiritual fire in our hearts burning hot.

In my research I ran across a quote by Charles Spurgeon that I think really puts this together well.

It is not that God chooses someone to salvation because they are going to die in infancy. Rather, He has ordained that only those who have been chosen for salvation will be allowed to die in infancy. God's justice in condemnation will be most clearly seen by allowing those who will not be saved to demonstrate their inherent sinfulness through willful, knowing transgression.

In other words, those who are not chosen by God for salvation are allowed to live, and demonstrate their rejection of God.

This helps us answer our final questions about the age of accountability.

When is someone old enough to hear?

The age of accountability is different for everyone. Accountability comes when we know what is right and we willfully choose what is wrong.

So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. James 4:17 (ESV)

Can we pin-point an exact moment for this? Of course not! I think this is a mystery that is best left in God's court to answer. We must remember that in all

God's judgments, he is fair, and sometimes he is merciful and gracious. He never punishes anyone more than they deserve.

Conclusion

What should we walk away with today?

Those who die apart from Christ perish no matter where they live. They perish justly. Eternal condemnation is what everyone deserves. Yes, there will be varying degrees of punishment in hell but it is still eternal condemnation.

The proclamation of the gospel is the only means God uses to bring people into saving faith. Can God use dreams and visions to save people? God can use dreams, visions and even angelic visitations as part of the salvation process. He did that with Cornelius. Remember, it wasn't the dream or vision that saved Cornelius. God sent an angelic visitation to guide Cornelius to Peter so he could hear the gospel and be saved. I don't see Scriptural precedence for God using other Christians without someone sharing the gospel message with them.

The Scriptures *hints* that those who die in infancy are saved. The argument for this is more implicit than explicit. It appears that God, in his incredible goodness, chooses to save those who die in infancy. Those whom God has not chosen to save, he allowed to mature and demonstrate their sinfulness. I am not going to die on this one because the Scriptures, are not definitive on this. We just have to trust in God's goodness and his character.



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