

## Can non-Christians go to Heaven?

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Course web site: [www.covingtoninnovations.com/tough](http://www.covingtoninnovations.com/tough) (may move to church web site later)

### Some preliminaries

- a. No matter what provision God has made for people who never hear the Gospel, you are not one of them. (If you're looking for an excuse, look somewhere else!)
- b. Jesus clearly tells us to spread the Gospel. If we adopt beliefs that imply that evangelism is unnecessary, we've made a mistake somewhere.
- c. Hell is not the punishment for failing to accept Christ as Saviour. It is the punishment for your sins.
- d. God does not owe anyone salvation. It is an undeserved gift that he can give, or refrain from giving, as He wishes.
- e. **Do we want to say something that "sounds nice"** about non-Christians, **or do we actually have some facts** about how a person can be reconciled to God? If the latter, then we need to follow those facts, whether or not other people like them.

### How does *anybody* go to Heaven?

a. Because of our sins, we are separated from God and doomed to spend eternity separated from Him. This is the condition of all human beings, not just some of them.

b. To get to Heaven (i.e., to enjoy eternity with God), we need our sins forgiven.

c. It's not enough for God just to want to forgive us; something objective had to be done to cancel our sins.

The details of what was done, and how it works, are a sacred mystery. Nothing quite like it has ever happened anywhere else. Whatever it was, it was accomplished by the death of Jesus on the cross.

The nearest we can get to understanding it is to say that Jesus took the penalty for our sins – died our well-deserved death – so that we can live eternally.

d. We must accept salvation; it is not applied to us against our will. We return to God voluntarily but at His prompting. The interaction of our will and His is also a sacred mystery.

e. We get to Heaven by the merits of Jesus Christ, not by our own good works.

A life of good works may indicate good will, i.e., willingness to accept Christ's salvation. Or it may indicate an attempt to work around Christ.

We are saved by grace (undeserved favor), not by good deeds, nor by religious activity or piety.

## **Which non-Christians go to Heaven, if any?**

Situations to consider:

### **Universalism**

The belief that God loves everybody and saves everybody, whether they cooperate with Him or not.

Objection 1: Then why evangelize?

Objection 2: If God gave people the freedom to reject Him, why would he take it away again? If He planned to take it away, it isn't really freedom.

**People who cannot hear or respond to the Gospel:** There are 5 kinds:

#### **1. Those who knew God but died in Old Testament times.**

They are saved by Christ, same as us. Noah, Abraham, etc., are Christ's firstfruits. The whole Epistle to the Hebrews is about this.

#### **2. Those who die as infants or are severely mentally deficient.**

The Bible says little or nothing, but most Protestants believe that such people are not fully accountable for sin, and hence are not separated from God in the first place.

Catholics believe that they have inherited sin from Adam and have traditionally believed that they will spend eternity in a state called limbo ("the edge"), where they lack the joys of Heaven but are not punished for sin. (Limbo is no longer current Catholic doctrine. Instead, the current teaching is that God deals with them mercifully in some way that has not been revealed to us in detail.)

**3. Those to whom the Gospel is never preached,** or who, due to prior prejudice or misinformation, are unable to understand it when they hear it.

Be careful what you say about this case.

"God wouldn't punish them for rejecting Christ" – no, He never punishes you for rejecting Christ. He punishes you for your own sins, not the sins you have not had the opportunity to commit, and that's quite enough!

"God will save everybody who has no opportunity to choose whether to accept Christ" – well, then, let's arrange for Christianity to die out, so then nobody will hear the Gospel and everybody will be saved!

See also the next 2 cases.

#### **4. Those who live a life of good works while practicing some other religion (or none).**

Remember that good works do not save you. Enough said. But see the next case:

#### **5. Those who seek God's mercy while practicing some other religion (or none).**

This is the interesting case.

## **Two clear Biblical teachings:**

1. Salvation is made possible by the death of Christ on the cross. Apart from Christ and what he did, there is no salvation. (Acts 4:12, John 14:6; Lk 10:22)
2. Non-Christians can, at least in principle, perceive God's righteousness and their need for His mercy. (Romans 1:18-20, 2:14-16; Acts 17:28)

Whatever we conclude will need to be faithful to both of these teachings.

## **My opinion**

(and you are welcome to disagree):

- a. It is possible for a non-Christian to realize his need for God's mercy and seek it.

(Note: Although I think this is possible, I do not think it happens routinely. Missionaries report finding occasional cases of it.)

- b. In my opinion, God will not turn away people who seek His mercy, even if their understanding of Him is vague and they lack historical knowledge of Christ. (Some of God's people in the Old Testament knew little about Him and His works; one example appears to be Melchisedek.)

— Such a person is talking to God (Christ), whether he realizes it or not, because there is nobody else up there to listen! Let us take seriously the fact that only one God actually exists.

— If and when this happens, it is at the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the same as anyone else turning to Christ.

- c. We should never rely on Christ to save people who have not heard the Gospel. We have our marching orders.
- d. The Bible gives no statistics on how many people go to Hell. It does, however, clearly teach that it is possible to do so, and that evangelism is urgently needed.

**Bottom line: Non-Christians don't get to Heaven, but some people may become Christians in unusual ways, without the usual kind of help from the Church.**