



An Apparent Overstatement

One of the basic tenants of Christianity is the belief that everyone is born into this world as a sinner and as such deserves eternal punishment. Upon hearing this for the first time, most would consider this at best an overstatement. Most would agree that the Hitlers of this world deserve such, but what about the good people.

One of the most commonly raised questions about Christianity is the fate of those who have never heard of Jesus Christ. This question is often asked in the context of the innocent native living in some remote part of the world where the message of Jesus Christ has never come. The Bible addresses this issue with the following points.

Good People Are Not Necessarily Righteous People — There Are No Innocent People.

It is important to note that the way the question about the native is often phrased presumes some kind of moral innocence. However, living beyond the influences of civilization does not make a man free from sin. No matter what time or culture a person lives in he still has a rebellious nature towards God. The Bible confirms this universal attitude: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23 NAS). The above question really ought to be phrased, "What happens to the guilty native who has never heard of Jesus Christ?"



DO NON-CHRISTIANS REALLY DESERVE ETERNAL PUNISHMENT?

The problem comes about by confusing the common understanding of “goodness” with that of “righteousness.” A good person today is typically characterized as someone who obeys the law, is kind to others, is loving towards his family and is honest at work. While these characteristics are to be commended, they should not be equated with righteousness. In fact, Jesus considered even good people to be sinners.

In Jesus' day some of the most highly respected people were the Pharisees, the religious leaders of Israel. These men were extremely faithful in their religious duties, sacrificial in their giving to the poor and admired by everyone. However, Jesus reserved some of his harshest words for these men: “But I warn you—unless your goodness is greater than that of the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders, you can't get into the Kingdom of Heaven at all!” (Matthew 5:20 TLB). The problem with the Pharisees was that they were concerned only with outward appearances and not inner attitudes. Their hearts were still full of pride, envy, backbiting, etc.

If this is the case, how can anyone have hope of eternal life? If the Pharisees did not measure up to God's standards, who can? Trusting in our own efforts to merit eternal life will get us nowhere, but we can look to the righteousness of another, namely, Jesus Christ. “For God took the sinless Christ and poured into him our sins. Then, in exchange, he poured God's goodness into us!” (2 Corinthians 5:21 TLB). God has made a way for us to have the righteousness of Christ.



DO NON-CHRISTIANS REALLY DESERVE ETERNAL PUNISHMENT?

Everyone Has An Opportunity

If it is clear that the Bible teaches that even the native who has never heard of Jesus is guilty, the question becomes, “Exactly what is he guilty of?” It would be terribly unfair of God to condemn a man for not accepting a message he never had the opportunity to hear. This would be inconsistent with His character which is always fair. God judges according to the knowledge people have, not what they do not have. The following passage of Scripture sheds some light on this issue.

“But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, evil men who push away the truth from them. For the truth about God is known to them instinctively; God has put this knowledge in their hearts. Since earliest times men have seen the earth and sky and all God made, and have known of his existence and great eternal power. So they will have no excuse (when they stand before God at Judgment Day). Yes, they knew about him all right, but they wouldn't admit it or worship him or even thank him for all his daily care. And after awhile they began to think up silly ideas of what God was like and what he wanted them to do. The result was that their foolish minds became dark and confused” (Romans 1:18-21 TLB).

It is apparent from this passage that the native would be judged for his “ungodliness and unrighteousness”, not for rejecting a message he had never heard. In fact, God has made Himself known to all men, although many will “suppress (literally, hold down) the truth.”

Furthermore, the Bible assures us of two important points. First, God has promised that people will hear



*DO NON-CHRISTIANS REALLY
DESERVE ETERNAL PUNISHMENT?*

and respond from every corner of the earth. Second, those who sincerely desire to know God, yet have never heard of Jesus Christ, will be given greater understanding. The Bible tells of the example of Cornelius, a very religious man, who desired to know God. He constantly prayed that God would reveal Himself to him. Like the native in the deepest jungle, he had never heard of Jesus Christ. God answered his prayers and sent to him the Apostle Peter, who explained how to have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Cornelius responded and put his trust in Jesus. Commenting on the fact that every one has an opportunity, Peter said, "I see very clearly that the Jews are not God's only favorites! In every nation he has those who worship Him and do good deeds and are acceptable to Him."(Acts 10:34-35 TLB).

***God Does Not Deal Only with
Individuals***

Perhaps more than in any other nation, Americans tend to view themselves as individuals. That is, they identify themselves individually and make decisions primarily in terms of how it affects them personally, not as a part of a larger group. But in most other cultures, this is not the case.

For example, if you ask an American what he does for a living, he will typically tell you his job title, such as Vice-President of Marketing. If you were to ask a Japanese the same question, he would respond by telling you the name of the company he works for, whether he was an unskilled laborer or a Vice-President. Indeed, people of other cultures more often



*DO NON-CHRISTIANS REALLY
DESERVE ETERNAL PUNISHMENT?*

see themselves as part of a larger group. In a similar way God sees us not just as individuals, but as part of a world-wide family. The Bible tells us that all of mankind is related through hundreds of generations to the first man, Adam. Though he was created to have close fellowship with God, Adam chose to disobey God and go his own way. The New Testament tells us that consequently "When Adam sinned, sin entered the entire human race. His sin spread death throughout all the world, so everything began to grow old and die, for all sinned" (Romans 5:12 TLB). The conclusion is that we are sinners because we are part of a race that is sinful. No matter when or where we live, we are members of a sinful race.

***God Would Not Be Righteous if
Sinful Men Were Not Punished***

The Bible clearly says that God's holy character requires He punish sinners. The question of what happens to those who have never heard the Gospel is an important one, but the answer can only be comprehended having understood what the Bible teaches about God and man.

For God to allow sinful man to go unpunished would be for God to tell a lie, to violate His perfect standard and to default His perfect character.

Thus our earlier concern about the native who has never heard is a very important and legitimate one. However, vital to understanding the Bible's reasons for its conclusions, it is essential to understand the Scripture's teaching about God and man.



*DO NON-CHRISTIANS REALLY
DESERVE ETERNAL PUNISHMENT?*

God Is Both Loving and Just

The Bible teaches us that God is both loving and just. The Bible says in 1 John, "We know how much God loves us because we have felt his love and because we believe him when he tells us that he loves us dearly. God is love, and anyone who lives in love is living with God and God is living in him." (1 John 4:16 TLB) But to stop there would be to tell only half of the story. The Bible also tells us that God is totally just, holy and righteous. In the Old Testament (Zephaniah 3:5 TLB), we read, "But the Lord is there within the city, and he does no wrong. Day by day his justice is more evident, but no one heeds—the wicked know no shame."

Very early in the Bible, before man sinned, we read that God warned man if he sinned, he would have to be eternally punished. As the Bible states in the New Testament Book of Romans, "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23 NAS). Sin is defined as "missing the mark." Thus, any attitude or action, whether it be active or passive, that misses God's target of perfection is sin.

Man Is in a Predicament

As we trace human history, we learn that man was created to have loving fellowship with God. However, the Bible teaches that man chose to sin by failing to obey and trust God. As the Bible says in Romans chapter three, "Yes, all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious ideal" (vs. 23 TLB).



*DO NON-CHRISTIANS REALLY
DESERVE ETERNAL PUNISHMENT?*

There's an interesting verse in the Old Testament that says, "God is not a man, that he should lie; He doesn't change his mind like humans do. Has he ever promised, without doing what he said?" (Numbers 23:19 TLB). Based on the fact that God does what He says He will do, we have to conclude that because man has sinned, God's perfect justice requires that he be punished.

We have previously discussed the two most important questions in life: How does one come to know God and how does one get into heaven? Consider the following situation. Suppose you were to die and find yourself outside the gates of heaven in the presence of God and He were to ask you why He should let you in. What answer would you give? According to the Bible the correct answer can be easily summarized in three specific statements.

The First of Three Required Statements

The first thing you would have to be able to tell God is that you believe that you are a sinner deserving eternal punishment. If you believe what the Bible teaches about God and man, it is probable that you could sincerely make this statement. If you don't agree with this statement, it would be good to pinpoint what it is about the Bible's teaching of God or man that you find hard to believe.