

## ***And Those Who Haven't Heard?***

*What happens to people who have  
never had the chance to hear about  
Jesus?*

***'Whoever has the Son has life...'***  
(1 John 5:12)

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To Olivia McGiverin

Jesus – **‘God with us’**<sup>1</sup> – preached himself. That’s right, his message was his own person: **‘I am the way...’** (John 14:6)

He is God. He has come. We are told, **‘There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.’** (Acts 4:12)

Jesus himself said: **‘Whoever believes in me has eternal life, but whoever rejects me will not see life for God’s wrath remains on him.’** (John 3:36)

So what about people that lived (and died) before Jesus came? What about people this very day who have never heard about Jesus, and will die before they ever hear? Let’s consider some things that we see in Scripture...

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 7:14 & Matthew 1:23

## **1. God Made Everyone**

***‘God made the world and everything in it. He gives life and breath and everything else. He made all nations, and marked out their times in history and lands.’***  
(Acts 17:24-26)

God made every person – man, woman and child – in his image. (Genesis 1:27) He put ‘eternity’ in their hearts. (Ecclesiastes 3:11) Every single person across the globe and across history – from caves to continents, B.C and A.D.

## **2. God Has No Favorites**

***‘God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.’*** (1 Timothy 2:4)

***‘God does not want anyone to be lost, but everyone to come to repentance.’*** (2 Peter 3:9)

***'It is not God's will that anyone is lost.'*** (Matthew 18:14)

### **3. Everyone Should Believe In God**

God expects people to know that he exists because of the miracle of creation.

***'Since the creation of the world the existence of God has been clearly seen – proven by creation itself – so people are without excuse.'*** (Romans 1:19-20)

### **4. Everyone Should Be Looking For God**

***'God made all people so that they would seek him, reach out to him and find him – and he is not far from anyone of us.'*** (Acts 17:27)

People should know from creation, from life, that God exists. And people

should be 'seeking' him, trying to find out who this God is. God made people to do this. (*'God made people so that they would...'*) This is a God-given force in people.

If people are not doing this, not seeking God, then something is 'off'. This is not God's will. As we have seen from this verse, it *is* God's will that people 'seek' him.

If people are not seeking God, sin and deception are at work. One of the key reasons people do not believe in God, and do not seek God, is because they do not *want* God. And the main reason we do not want God is because we want to do things that we know we should not do. We want to sin. We want to love and live for money and self.

***'Although they knew God, they did not acknowledge him or thank him. So their thinking became dull and their foolish hearts became dark. God let them go with their***

***choices, their sin. They chose to exchange the truth about God for lies.*** (Romans 1:19-25)<sup>1</sup>

## **5. Everyone Should Be Obeying God**

***‘When people who do not have God’s Word and Rules, do by nature the things required by God’s Word and Rules, they show that God’s Law is written on their hearts.’*** (Romans 2:14-15)

People have a God-given conscience about right and wrong. I have a friend who is atheist – i.e. he believes that God does not exist. I asked him one evening why, if he believes there is no God and therefore no spiritual authority on ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, he is faithful to his wife (which he is). He laughed and said, *‘Honestly, I can’t answer that.’*

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Nehemiah 8:8 Version’ (N88V)

This is the same for anyone who denies God, and yet believes we should not lie, should not cheat, should not commit adultery, should not murder, should not steal... All of these 'sins' come naturally to human nature. So why don't we just give into them? Why don't atheists just do what they want to do – it's perfectly natural? Well, the truth is that there is a compelling force within them, a 'fear', that says they should do this, and they should not do that. In other words, there is a spiritual 'law' written on their hearts whether they like it or not.

God puts it this way: ***'All who sin even though they do not have the Bible and the Ten Commandments, are still guilty of that sin.'*** (Romans 2:12)

Let's summarize so far: God made all people in history and put in each one a sense of right and wrong. God expects all people to believe in God, to be seeking for God, and to be



obeying their conscience.

Now let's keep going...

## **6. God Revealed Himself to One Man**

At a specific time in history, a few thousand years in, God chose one man (Abraham) and revealed himself. God 'unveiled' himself to this man and spoke with him.

At this time, and up to this time, we have all people in all nations knowing in their inner being, in their conscience, that God exists and must be sought, must be obeyed. But these people do not know who this God is specifically. No name for him. No words from him.

But at a specific moment in history, God chose to speak to a man, and his family line, to make himself known. This connection to Abraham, this revelation, was going to be for all

people.

***'The Lord said to Abraham... all the nations on the earth shall be blessed through you.'***

(Genesis 12:3)

From this time, through words and signs and different prophets from this family line, we began to see more of God and learn more about him. This family – called 'Israel', which was the name the angel gave Jacob<sup>1</sup> – documented the words of this God, his power displayed, his teachings, his judgments. And so little by little we came to know this one true God in more detail.

This is how God revealed specifics about himself to mankind. We say 'specifics', because his existence and moral values are seen and felt by *all* people of *all* time. We must not forget this. God loves all people and

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 32:28

has moved in their hearts and minds to draw them to himself. All people! However, his actual name, his teachings, his words, his plan, God chose to 'reveal' to one specific people group, and through them he would roll this out over history. I have chosen this phrase deliberately – *'roll out over history'* – because we see God work his gospel message in a very mysterious way that defies space and time. It goes up, down, backwards and forwards. Let's look at this a little closer...

## **7. Jesus Preached to the Dead**

If you are reading this essay, you are clear on the story, the history, of Jesus – God in the flesh – stepping down into the world and calling people to himself. We are not questioning the issue of those who see and hear Jesus and his call. We are considering those who have not and will not have this opportunity.

A very mysterious verse about Jesus, written by Peter, says:

***‘After being made alive, Jesus went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits - to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.’*** (1 Peter 3:19-20)

This verse seems to indicate that after Jesus died and rose again, he visited and revealed himself to people from the past, people dead and gone. Not just good people, but all people – ***‘those who were disobedient.’***

What does this mean? Well, it gives us a sense that God is going to make sure that everyone has a full revelation of himself – which includes a revelation of Jesus Christ. Even if the fullness of this revelation has to happen after someone has died and awaits their final destiny.

But note: seeing is not believing. When Jesus was on the earth, people saw him with their own eyes and chose to reject him. So seeing him in the afterlife is not a sure bet, anymore than seeing him in this life. Jesus made proclamation to us here on earth, and he made proclamation to some in the afterlife. He did not compel us to believe here on earth, and he will not compel belief (or repentance) in the afterlife. I don't know how it works, but what Scripture does indicate here is that if a person – good or bad – has not had the opportunity to respond to Jesus here on earth, they will after they die.

Another thing to note, however, is that we are told that more will perish than be saved. (Matthew 7:13-14) So whether people receive a 'proclamation' of Jesus Christ before or after they die, the heart and soul will still wrestle to surrender, to repent, to believe.

This does raise questions, maybe, about praying for the dead? There is another mysterious verse indicating that the early church had baptisms for the dead:

***‘Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?’***  
(1 Corinthians 15:29)

There really is no teaching or even specific modeling of praying for the dead or being baptized for the dead, but there are some Scriptures, such as the above, that seem to indicate that even after dying there may be a space where a person can meet God before final judgment.

And there are lots of other ‘time warps’, as it were, in Scripture, that should give us a certain humility – maybe a hope? – about the finality of dying. For example, we have the spirit of the prophet Samuel raised from the dead to speak with Saul by

a Medium (that's a discussion in itself!). Samuel tells Saul that he and his sons will be with him the next day, i.e. in the land or space of the dead. Where is that, exactly? Where was Samuel coming up from? Meanwhile, we have Elijah and Moses appear with Jesus and speak with him on the mountain top, both of whom also were dead and buried thousands of year before. Then Jesus tells the man on the cross that **'this day'** he will die and be with Jesus in Paradise.<sup>1</sup> However, Peter refers to God's timing as something different to ours, saying that with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like a day. (2 Peter 3:8)

We see in these examples – and there are many more from Genesis to Revelation – that there is mystery around time and space with God and mankind. There is interaction

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 17:1-3; Luke 23:42-43

between the living and the dead at times, as seen with Elijah, Moses and Jesus, and there is proclamation of the gospel by Christ himself to people who never heard or had the opportunity.

This raises a question in my mind: If Jesus proclaims his own message to those who have never heard the gospel, why should we as Christians even bother to share it with the living?

Let's look at what God has revealed on this...

## **8. It Matters!**

Let's step away from the theoretical question (*If this... why that?*), and actually look at God's story and life.

God stepped down into this cruel world and walked and talked with the hurting. He left his glory and comfort in heaven, to be cold, and hungry,



and with us. He did this because life here matters. He did this, because eternity starts here on earth, not after we die. Jesus – God with us – showed us (did not just tell us) that life here, and people’s response to God here and now, was so important he would die for it. He died to get his message to us here in the land of the living.

Then he ‘commissioned’ us. He called us and sent us on mission. He told us that his own Spirit would testify to people about him, and that we needed to partner with his Spirit and also testify to people. (John 15:26-27) Jesus told us that a new kingdom was now being built, and it would be the only kingdom that will stand when all else falls. (Hebrews 12:28) And he told *us* to build it. To commit our lives to this, that it was the only purpose worth living for. Paul puts it this way:

***‘I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the***

***race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.’*** (Acts 20:24)

He told us and showed us that sin destroys people, leaves us ***‘helpless and harassed’***, and this breaks God’s heart. He spoke of leaving the ninety-nine safe sheep to go out and rescue the one that was lost. Jesus said his own mission was intentional, ‘seeking’ to share his truth:

***‘Jesus said, ‘I have come to seek and save the lost.’*** (Luke 19:10)

We could go on and on about the ways and words of Jesus, and how he lived to reach out, speak out, and make himself King in the hearts of people. We could consider how men and women of God laid down their lives to bring the name of Jesus to others and counted it an honor to be whipped and beaten just to stand with Jesus, and ***‘bear the disgrace he bore.’*** (Acts 5:41; Hebrews

13:13) This is God's way and his working. He came to earth on mission, and left his followers to carry and commit to that same mission – making Jesus King in the hearts of people.

So why do we testify to Jesus here and now, in the *'land of the living'*? Because this is the real, the ultimate, in a sense the 'only' mission of God in life right now. And Jesus showed us that it matters. It matters so much that Jesus died to make clear this 'proclamation' here on earth. He died for his own name, his gospel. That was his crime in crucifixion. His name. His gospel. So if we want to honor him, and if we want to actually flow in the purposes of God here on earth, than we step into the mission of making him known. That is what God is doing, that is where he is working, so that is where we want to be.

Outside of this? Outside of making Jesus known and building his

Kingdom? Well, there is work, life, war, hiding, running, regretting, spending, saving, dying. There is normal life and death outside of the purposes of God. It exists. And even as a Christian we can, if we choose, live just that 'normal' life and not share Jesus with others. But if we do this, we are outside of what God is doing. We are missing out on the purposes of Jesus. And not only do we miss out here and now on the Spirit of God, but we miss out on future reward:

***'Each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a***

***reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved — even though only as one escaping through the flames.'***  
(1 Corinthians 3:10-15)

OK, so we're seeing God's revelation. We see and know and want to be part of God's purposes, his testimony, his kingdom. We believe, as we are taught, that there is meaning, urgency, truth in bringing the gospel message to all nations as we live here on earth. We don't have to worry about what comes after life, or about those who we can't reach, because God is loving, God is just, and Jesus will not leave them without revelation. But in the meantime, we walk with Christ. We see with his eyes, his light, and we step into his ways and purposes. His love is better than life, and this love of God moves to share Jesus with the world.

So now what? I'm ready. What's my part?

## **9. What's My Part?**

We as Christians all have one mission: **'Go and make disciples of all nations...'** (Matthew 28:19)

However, we do not all have the same roles and responsibilities in this mission. Look at what Paul writes:

***'There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord... To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good... Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ... God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be?'***

(1 Corinthians 12)

Yes, we are all called to stand with Jesus, and not be ashamed of

Jesus. We need courage for this. And I'm sure opportunities have come your way where you have felt a nudge in your spirit to invite someone to church, or send someone a card with Scripture in it, or pray for someone to come to know Jesus. These are some examples of where you are 'advancing' the kingdom of God. I'm also sure you have had times where you have felt called by God to 'acknowledge him before others', and it has not been easy. For example, if you are in a group of people speaking things they should not, or gossiping, maybe you have had to take a stand – or step away – because you are a Christian and feel this dishonors God. In this you are acknowledging Jesus before men. (Luke 12:8-9)

Now, the work of 'evangelism', or actively spreading the news of the gospel, is one of the gifts of the Spirit that is given to some people and not others. We see this in the Bible, for

example, when God said to a group of Christians, ***'Set apart for me Paul and Barnabas for the work to which I have called them.'*** (Acts 13:2) They were *'sent off'*, and they traveled to different place preaching about God in public. This type of focused activity in spreading the news of Jesus is called *'evangelism'*. (The word *'Evangelist'* means *'Bringer of good news.'*)

Think of it in terms of an army. In theory, every member of an army is a soldier, and if needed to fight they would. However, in practical terms, day to day, most of the Army is not in the trenches fighting. Many – in fact most – of the soldiers are back in the camp preparing food for the troops, sewing clothes for the troops, nursing medical needs, etc. Yes, they all have one mission, one purpose, and everyone is willing and ready to actually fight, but if everyone was primarily committed and stationed in the trenches, well, where would the backup support be,



where would the supply of food come from, etc.

We all need to be ready – and courageous – to share the words and name of Jesus with people. However, we do not do this in our own strength, and we do not do this under pressure or in fear or guilt. The Spirit does not lead us in that way. Primarily we pray for people, we grow in our faith, and we ‘partner’ with the Holy Spirit in testifying when a door opens:

***‘Jesus said, ‘The Holy Spirit will testify to me, and you, too, must testify, for you have been with me.’ (John 15:26-27)***

So in peace we prepare. In peace we share, as the Spirit leads. Maybe we are praying for a colleague or friend, and then the Lord opens a door to invite them to a youth group event or a church event. Go for it! Or maybe they share something personal with us and it gives us an

opportunity to say we will pray for them – or maybe even pray *with* them there and then! And we can follow up, for example, asking them about the situation, and sharing a Scripture that the Lord brings to our mind for them:

***‘The Holy Spirit will teach you all things and call to your mind things I have taught you.’***

(John 14:26)

But maybe, despite being willing and ready to share the name and message of Jesus, you identify other giftings God has given you to serve the body of Christ, to build his church. Maybe your ‘primary’ gift is in serving – so you love to volunteer at church and also serve others in Jesus’ name, in your neighborhood or work circles. Maybe you have a gift of faith, and so you pray and believe for people, with people, and support the people of God in their prayer and faith needs. Maybe you have a leaning towards studying and

teaching the Word of God. Maybe you have a gift of healing, and the Lord is leading you to pray for healing for and with people.

So although you are a ready and willing witness – to speak out the gospel of Christ - God might station primarily at a different post, with a different activity for his mission. Yes, the Lord calls some to be primarily evangelists, but most Christians God calls and 'gifts' with other roles.

So don't let the enemy, Satan, guilt you into thinking and feeling that you should be sharing more, or talking more, or standing up here and there preaching to people about Jesus. We don't see that kind of thing in the Bible. That often comes from a place of fear and guilt. It's kind of our worst nightmare, so we think that is what God is calling us to do! Remember, Satan lies to you, he tries to rob your joy and peace, and he accuses you. (John 8:44; John 10:10; Revelation 12:10) If Satan can't get you off the

notion of witnessing about Jesus, he will try to sour it for you, make it a 'fear thing', and accuse you of being scared. This is not the leading and prompting of the Spirit. Jesus always brought peace, and always said, '**Do not fear!**'

So be at peace today! If evangelism is a stressful type of thought for you, it is probably not the gift God has given you. So don't worry about it! Just be faithful in your own life in Jesus, and quietly grow, and ask God to give you words and wisdom to share him in your own circles, as the Spirit leads. Not as you lead, but as the Spirit leads. Just be praying for people around you, and keep an eye open for opportunities the Lord will give you to invite them here or there, or to pray with them, or bless them with a book or Bible as a gift. Just listen to the Lord.

In the meantime, ask God to show you what gifts he *has* given you. Usually if it is a gift from God, there

is a sense of natural ability to do it,  
and natural satisfaction in doing it.  
Why? Because you are 'gifted' in it.

What are your God-given gifts to  
advance the name and Kingdom of  
Jesus? Enjoy those!

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***‘Your love, O Lord, is better than  
life!’***

(Psalm 63:3)