

HAVE THEY NOT HEARD?

by Ray C. Stedman

This section of Romans 10 brings before us the answer to the most frequently asked questions we hear, especially from non-Christians. That question is, "What happens to all the people who never hear about Jesus?" That question is phrased in a variety of forms, but basically it is the expressed concern of many -- especially when they hear Christians talking about the uniqueness of Jesus. When we say, as Paul so strongly says in this passage, that Jesus is Lord and it is only through him that men come to God, immediately it raises the question, "Well, what about those who never hear of Jesus?" We are going to come to the answer to that in Verses 14-21 of Romans 10.

In the first part of Chapter 10, the apostle said that in order for any individual person to be salvaged from the wreck of humanity, he must call upon the name of the Lord. Notice how Paul quotes the prophet Joel in Verse 13:

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, {Joel 2:32a NIV}

Well, how do you do that? How do you call on the name of the Lord?

I'm glad you asked that question. It gives me another opportunity to preach a message on it.

Paul goes on in Verse 14 to outline the steps that lie behind this essential to salvation -- calling on the name of the Lord.

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" {Rom 10:14-15 NIV}

Now, there are five steps involved in calling on the name of the Lord.

Paul begins with that final step, the call itself. He traces it back for us so we can see what is involved in bringing people to the place where they cry out to God in a sense of need and desperation and are saved, born again, changed, regenerated, made alive in Jesus Christ. Paul begins by stressing the fact that each person individually must call on God. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." The important thing, therefore, is to bring people to that place.

As we have already seen, in the first part of this chapter, this is not just a routine matter. It involves the whole being. The heart must be involved, that is, the inner consciousness, the deep conviction of the will. Then the mouth must acknowledge it. There must be a willingness to consciously confess that Jesus is Lord, and this must be done before God and others as well, to evidence a deep-settled conviction that Jesus is Lord. This means, of course, that God does not hand out salvation like some free coupon that comes in the mail; it is yours whether you like it or not. There has to be this individual, personal conviction. It is not enough to come and sit under the hearing of the gospel. Some people think that if they go to church regularly and hear the gospel they will be saved. No, there has to be a time when you personally call on the name of the Lord. I want to stress that, as the Apostle Paul does here.

But behind the call is belief. Paul says, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in?" So there has to be belief. That means the mind has to be engaged -- the intellect is called into play. I think this is important because so many times today we think it is enough to get the emotions stirred up. I have been in many evangelistic services where people were stirred emotionally but they did not understand anything about what God had done. They had nothing to believe in; they were just stirred up to want something.

Years ago there was a great evangelist named Gypsy Smith. He was born a gypsy in England and came to Christ as a boy. Gypsy Smith used to preach up and down this country. I remember Dr. H. A. Ironside saying that Gypsy Smith came to Moody Church on one occasion and held meetings and told about his conversion and about his gypsy life. The people would sit, entranced with these wonderful stories he told. At the end of the meeting he would give an altar call, and people would surge forward in great numbers. Dr. Ironside said he used to wonder what they were coming for. Did they want to be gypsies, or what? They had really been given nothing in which to believe. I so well recall Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, my great teacher at Dallas Seminary, saying to us in class, "Men, remember, you have never preached the gospel until you have given people something to believe, something God has done that their minds can grasp, something they can use as a basis for understanding what God has offered to them -- their salvation."

Behind the belief, Paul says, is a message -- something heard. "How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?" Something has to be preached. Some message must come. Again, this is a very important aspect of Christian faith. These days we are hearing much of the 'isms' and 'asms' and spasms that are coming into being, new cults that are springing up on every side, dominating the religious field. Often they make their appeal to some mystical feeling or philosophy, some idea that men have of what could work. But it is not grounded in any historic entity.

Now, the glory of Christianity is that it has a message that is grounded in history. It is objective truth, not just something that happens inside of you. It is not some feeling that you are following that you hope will work out; it is the story of historic events. One of these events is the coming of Jesus as a baby in the manger of Bethlehem, the coming of the wise men from the east and the uproar and unrest that it caused in the kingdom of Judea, beginning with Herod the king himself. That is all part of history. Then there was the resurrection and the events that followed in the church. These are all historic events -- objective truth. The great thing of the Christian faith is not that we are presenting some philosophy, but a faith that is grounded in events that cannot be explained away. That is our message.

Behind the message, of course, is the messenger. "How can they hear without someone preaching to them?" There has to be a messenger speaking forth this message. This is why I believe God has always used some object or person to convey truth and that this method will never be superseded. All the marvelous machinery and inventions that we have today -- the media of communication -- are only ways of conveying the preaching of the Word of God. You can preach today on television, on radio, on cassette tapes, and on video tapes. You can have the message flung up to satellites and back to the four corners of the earth. But in every event, someone has to deliver the message. God has chosen preaching as his means of conveying this great truth in every generation. That is why I don't believe that the distribution of the Scriptures alone will ever be sufficient to win men.

Now, I do not demean that ministry, because it is a very important one. The translating of the Word of God and the spreading of the Scriptures all over the earth are important. But they are only supplementary. That, alone, will never reach and change nations as does the gospel when proclaimed by a human messenger. God has sent men out everywhere, therefore, to preach this word and to proclaim the truth.

And behind the messenger, as Paul brings out, is the sender. "How can they preach unless they are sent?" I don't think there need be any doubt as to who does the sending. Jesus himself said, "Pray the Lord of the harvest, that he may send forth laborers," {cf, Mark 9:38, Luke 10:2}. It is God who sends men. The great initiative in the process of redeeming men and women, healing them and restoring them, healing the fragmentation of their lives, is the great heart of God that sends men out. He calls out men and women and sends them into the far reaches of the earth.

I think that Paul has brought all this before us in order that we might understand what a wonderful and beautiful thing this is that God has done. That is why Paul quotes Isaiah here: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" {cf, Isa 52:7}. What a welcome and beautiful thing it is to think of God sending out men and women all over the earth with this message. What a marvelous thing it is when this message takes root in the human heart! We never forget the ones who bring it to us. I am sure that many of you can think of people who came to you with the message of Christ, and they are dear to you because of that. "How beautiful

are the feet" ... feet are not usually the most beautiful part of the body, but even they become beautiful when the message is conveyed and God delivers and frees and heals us and makes us whole.

I have often thought it is like turning on a light switch. You flick the switch on the wall and the lights go on. It seems like such a simple thing. Yet behind it is a very complicated process. There are the transmission towers, the substations, the dam that was built to hold back the water, the poles on which the wires are strung -- a tremendous complexity lies behind the simple act of turning on a light switch. Every time you do it, power surges forth -- and it comes only because that complicated process has been gone through.

Every time an individual comes to the place where in quietness he calls out to the Lord, a tremendous process is behind it. There is the darkness and anguish of the mystery of the cross, the birth at Bethlehem, the wonder and miracle of the resurrection, the sending forth of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost -- all this is the process behind a single individual when he calls on the name of the Lord. God is behind it, he has started it. The apostle wants us to understand this activity of the sovereign character of God.

But what if all this is provided, but still men do not respond? That is the problem Paul is facing here, with regard to Israel, Verses 16-17:

But not all the Israelites responded to the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. {Rom 10:16-17 NIV}

Paul is telling us here that a strange reaction occurs when people hear this message. It is what we might call the puzzle of unbelief. Isn't it strange how some people seem to be so suspicious, so self-dependent, that even when good news comes, they don't want to receive it? This is the reaction that preachers and other who tell the good news run into all the time.

I have a young friend living in Fresno who told me the story of his conversion. As a young man he became a Christian. He was a man of considerable wealth, and he tried to reach his friends for Christ after he himself became a Christian. He told them, with tremendous enthusiasm, what had happened to him, how the Lord had changed his whole life and saved his marriage. But he found that his words fell largely on deaf ears. They were not interested. His wealthy friends patted him on the back and went on their way. Finally he decided on a rather strange and remarkable demonstration -- both for his sake and the sake of his friends. He sat down and wrote out a check for a million dollars (and he was good for it too!). Then he took his check around to his friends and said, "I have always highly regarded you as a friend. I have always wanted to do something for you. Would you receive this check as a gift from me?" People would look at the check and, when they saw the amount of it, they would hand it back and say, "I can't take that from you." He tried to give that check out to a dozen or more of his friends and no one would take it, although it was a valid offer. Finally he faced the fact that there is something deeply embedded in human nature that doesn't want to hear good news, doesn't want to be helped too much, doesn't want to be the recipient of great riches without having some part in it.

This is what is universally discovered by those who bring the good news of the gospel. Even the prophet Isaiah discovered this when he came to the people of Israel at a time in their history when they were surrounded by enemies. They were about to be overrun by the nations around them, they had turned to the idols of the nations about them, degrading practices had come into the national life, and peace and joy had fled from the land. Isaiah the prophet, in the dark days, 725 years before Christ was born, came and preached to this people good news about one who was coming. And on the basis of this person's life and death, God would work on their behalf. He had to confess, as Paul brings out here, that they would not believe his message. The great and luminous 53rd chapter of Isaiah begins with those words:

**Lord, who has believed our message?
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
And he grew up before them like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.**

**He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
Surely he has borne our grief
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. {cf, Isa 53:1-6 RSV}**

Yet the nation of Israel said "No!" to that tremendous revelation of Isaiah the prophet -- at least, most of the Israelites did. Now Paul isolates the difficulty for us in Verse 17: "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."

This, by the way, is a more accurate translation than the Authorized Version, which says, "and hearing comes by the word of God." It is really "the word of Christ."

Paul says that faith is aroused by hearing. If you hear a message, then you either have to believe it or disbelieve it. Your faith is aroused by the message. But if it is to be saving faith, he says, it must be a word about Christ. Once again, Paul sets Jesus right at the center of the universe. He is the very issue of life. Even back in ancient Israel, when they heard the news about Jesus, it precipitated the puzzle of unbelief. People refused it, and that word "refused" brings the whole project of God's enterprise to reach men to a point of failure.

Last week I shared with you some paragraphs from a letter written by a rabbi to a boy of Jewish background who is now in this congregation. The rabbi was greatly concerned because the boy had become a Christian, and in his letter he explained to him what he saw as the difference between what the Jews believe about the messiah and what Christians believe. Perhaps you would be interested in his words:

The Messiah question is central to Christianity. This is the hub around which their whole theology rotates. To make this your major concern is to play their game. We [Jews] have a belief in a messiah, but this is not too rigidly defined, nor of central concern. According to our belief, the messiah is a man, descended from the house of David, since God had promised not to replace the line of David with another, who will defeat the enemies of the Jews, restore the people to the land of Israel, rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, and reign there and introduce an era of peace. The advent of the messiah has to do with God's plan for actualizing his plans in the world.

That is the usual Jewish position regarding the Messiah. He was a man, not a divine Being; he was to come into history only to deliver the Jews from their oppressors, in fulfillment of the promises to Israel of leadership among the nations. But they ignore the passages such as Isaiah 53 and others that speak of the suffering of the Messiah. The rabbi goes on,

The situation is quite different for the Christian. He believes that nothing that man does can help. Man necessarily exists in a state of sin. Ethical living, obedience to God, goodness, all are of no avail. The only way that a man can get out of a state of damnation is to believe that Jesus is his Savior or Messiah (quite a different meaning for the word). Thus the whole purpose of religion is for man to be in Jesus, i.e., to accept this belief in Jesus as his Savior.

Now, that betrays a considerable degree of understanding of the Christian position and of the gospel. To show how thoroughly he understands it, he goes on,

The Law is not only ineffective, but unnecessary, because once one has accepted Jesus, one of the byproducts is that he is essentially good and needs no direction from the Law. From this point of view, one of the most

basic and almost exclusive concerns of religion is the Messiah. Don't be shifted to that question without realizing the difference in import and meaning that places messiah, as used by a Jew, and Messiah, as used by a Christian, worlds apart.

This is the position that Jews still take today regarding Christ. Paul says that is the issue. Well, someone says to me, "The trouble is that the Jews never really heard the gospel. Maybe the problem is that it never reached them!" This brings up the question about what to do about those who never hear. Paul takes this up in Verse 18:

**But I ask, did they not hear? [His answer,] Of course they did:
"Their voice has gone out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world." {Rom 10:18 NIV}**

If you have read the 19th Psalm recently, you know that this is the great Psalm that details nature's witness to God. It begins with the words,

**The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world. {Psa 19:1-4a RSV}**

There has been a universal proclamation of the gospel through nature. Now, this is not a lot of light about God, but it is light. In the first chapter of Romans, Paul mentioned that very thing (Chapter 1, Verses 19-20):

**... what may be known about God is plain to them. For since the creation of the world
God's invisible qualities -- his eternal power and divine nature -- have been clearly seen,
being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. {Rom
1:19-20 NIV}**

The answer to the question "What about those who have never heard about God?" is: "There aren't any people who have never heard about God." Everywhere men and women know something about God. He is revealed in nature. There is a universal proclamation that has gone out. And if it is observed, if it is noticed and followed, more light will be given. This is why Hebrews 11, that great chapter on faith, gives us the simplest declaration of how men come to God (Verse 6):

**... without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to God must
believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. {Heb 11:6 NIV}**

First, there must be belief, or faith. Then you must believe that God is, and, then, that he rewards men who diligently seek him. So all men everywhere are responsible to seek the God who is revealed in nature. Now, they may have no more light than that. But, if they, are obedient to it, that is enough to bring them through gradually dawning light to the knowledge of Christ. God will see to it that they have further light. And Israel had that proclamation. No matter how low they sank in their understanding, no matter how dark it became in the land, they at least had that universal proclamation of truth that would have brought them back to truth and to God.

But that isn't all. There is another stage of the revelation of God. God, in his grace often gives more light even when people refuse the light of nature. No one deserves more light, but God gives it nevertheless. I think the United States of America, above all nations, ought to be grateful for the grace of God that has poured light out upon us when we did not deserve it anymore than anyone else. God has given us much light. But we must remember that more light does not necessarily mean more belief.

To turn up the light brighter does not mean that people are going to believe more than when it was dim. Unbelief can reject bright light as well as dim light, so more light does not necessarily mean more belief. That

is why this nation, with this great and shining light pouring so brilliantly upon it, is still a nation filled with unbelievers. God sends men (Verses 19-20):

**Again I ask, did Israel not understand? First, Moses says,
"I will make you envious by means of those who are not a nation;
I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding."**

**Then Isaiah boldly says,
"I was found by those who did not seek me;
I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me." {Rom 10:19-20 NIV}**

God sent the prophets to Israel. He sent Moses and Samuel, Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah and Jeremiah, and all the other prophets in the Old Testament. Through many years and centuries he sent them to this people -- and he did it in order to arouse them to jealousy through the fact that although they often rejected the prophets, the nations around would believe. This would be true more fully in the day when the Gentile nations would suddenly turn to God in large numbers while the Jews remained obdurate in their unbelief. This, of course, is exactly what has happened in history. Paul singles out the specific principle here that God uses to arouse belief, even when people tend to reject truth -- jealousy.

I was watching my grandson play with his cousins the other day. He was playing with a certain toy, then he got tired of it and threw it away. One of his cousins picked it up and started playing with it, and immediately the little boy ran over and grabbed the toy away. "No, that's mine!" he said. He wanted to play with it only because he was made jealous by someone else having it.

You see, God understands this principle in fallen human nature. He even uses it at times to make people wake up. This is why God pours out blessings upon an individual or a family, with one member of the family receiving spiritual insight. He does it in order to make the others jealous so they will listen to him. This is why God will pour out blessings upon one nation in order to make other nations jealous. "What is the secret of your blessing?" they will ask. Thus they might hear the witness about God.

If you understand some of these things, you will be able to read your newspapers differently than you ordinarily do. What is God doing in the human events of our day? We see them as simply a conflict of warring factions of humanity. But God is using these events to arouse people to jealousy. Paul gives two instances of this:

First, he points out that Moses said that God would use a people far less intelligent than the Jews. One of the striking things about Jewish history is the brilliance of the Jews. It would be impossible to list the many Jewish leaders in the fields of science, philosophy, literature, art, and music in our day. They dominate the field. Over 12 per cent of the Nobel Prize winners have been Jewish. And yet, these brilliant people, with their tremendous minds, are often confronted with people, savages in the jungles, untaught, dark and clouded in their thinking, who find God and become Christians and are delivered and given blessings, hope, peace, and even prosperity. God is doing this only to arouse his people and awaken them.

Then Isaiah came along. Not only will God use those who are less intelligent, he says, but God will use people who are less motivated: "I was found by those who did not seek me: I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me." Another characteristic of the Jew has been his zeal for God. Paul has talked about that already. Jews seem to be haunted by God, driven by a fanatical loyalty to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And yet, despite all that, careless Gentiles, who are not even thinking about God very often, through Christ, learn to revel in the grace and love and blessing of the living God. This is to arouse the Jews to jealousy. God uses this principle with Gentiles too. That is why people watch Christians. There is blessing there that the Gentiles can't understand. God is trying to use it to awaken them to listen, that they might be saved, to turn and settle the issue at the feet of Jesus.

There is a final stage of divine pursuit that is described in Verse 21:

But concerning Israel he says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient

and obstinate people." {Rom 10:21 NIV}

What a beautiful picture of the character of God. Here is his patience -- all day long! That day has stretched now for almost four thousand years of human history. Four thousand years ago, Abraham set out. Four thousand years later, God is still holding out his hands to this stubborn people, wanting to draw them to himself. He is not only patient, but loving. He held out his hands. This is the stance of God toward those who resist his will -- with wide open arms, all day long he is waiting to draw them back.

Remember how Jesus put it to the Pharisees of his day? "You will not come unto me that you may have life," {cf, John 5:40 KJV}. And looking over the city of Jerusalem, he wept as he saw the stubbornness of this people. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! How often would I have gathered you under my wings, as a hen gathers her chickens, but you would not," {cf, Matt 23:37, Luke 13:34}. With those sorrowful words, he comments on the stubbornness and the pride of people who will not admit their need. This is being repeated again and again throughout the world today. God longs to draw men to himself. He must somehow arouse faith in the individual. In order to do so, he sent messengers with a tremendous message, and still there is resistance to the will and purpose of God.

So the chapter closes with this picture of God standing with his arms open, longing to draw men to himself, admitting that the problem is a disobedient and obstinate people.

I think the most amazing thing from this account is to realize that in order to perish, i.e., in order to go to hell, you must resist the pleas of a loving God. God never damns anyone to hell without a chance. Don't ever let anybody tell you the Bible teaches that. It does not teach any such thing. It teaches us that no one, no one, will end up separated from God who has not personally resisted the claim and appeal of a loving God who sought to reach him.

The historic fulfillment of God's longing to draw men to himself began at Bethlehem, in the very event that we celebrate this Christmas season. If there are any here who have never settled this with God, I urge you, in the name of the Lord, not to resist his plea any longer, but to open your heart to him that you might be healed by the word of Jesus.

Prayer

Father, we scarcely know which is the greater wonder, that men should resist such a beautiful appeal on your behalf, or that you should so patiently and lovingly wait for them to turn. But we thank you for it. We thank you that you have drawn us to yourself, and that you have given us grace upon grace, that we might be drawn to you, and filled our inner life made whole, and our spirit redeemed, through Jesus Christ our Lord. We give thanks for him and for his coming, and for his presence in our lives and hearts today. In his name we pray, Amen.

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