



WHAT HAPPENS TO PEOPLE WHO NEVER HEAR ABOUT JESUS? **Romans**

Well, good evening. I have a lot of things to learn about how to be a pastor. One of the biggest lessons that I have yet to learn is how to balance the urgency of the mission before us, and patience involved in leading the people involved in that mission. I realize that the last couple of months in this radical series were tough months, and I want to apologize, not for any of the truths that I have preached, not in any way for anything in this Word, but for any way in which I have shown a lack of patience or lack of compassion for you as the people of God entrusted to my care. I want to be a good shepherd because that is what Christ is to me. I told Heather, my wife...and I have an incredible wife. You have to listen to me once a week. She has to live with me, like, every day. I told her I want to shepherd her as my wife and our kids well, and I want to shepherd these people well.

I have a sign in my office. It's a quote that somebody gave me soon after I came to Brook Hills, and this is what the quote says. It says, "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to gather wood, saw it, and nail the planks together. Instead, build in them a passionate desire for the sea." That's what I want to do. I don't want to drum up people. I want to shepherd people to love the glory of God and to see 4.5 billion people who are perishing and thousands of children dying daily of starvation; to see those things with a passionate desire to make the glory of God known in those situations. That's important, especially for what we're going to look at tonight.

I'll go ahead and let you know, at the end of our time together tonight, I am going to invite you, to challenge you to say, "In the next year, I want to give two percent of my life..." Two percent of my time works out to about a week of the next year of your life, and I'm going to challenge you to give this time to making the gospel known in the context outside of Birmingham, in the United States or around the world. The last thing I want you to do is to respond to that commitment because you feel "drummed up," or because you feel like you have to, or you feel like, if you don't, you'll feel guilty. I want you to want the nations because you love the glory of God, and you have a passionate desire to see Him glorified in the nations.

So, toward that end, if you have a Bible, and I hope you do, let me invite you to open with me to Romans 15. Romans 15. We talk a lot around here about unreached people. They estimate that over a billion, some say over a billion-and-a-half, people in the world today have little to no knowledge of Jesus, little to no knowledge of the gospel, and at the current time, little to no chance of hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ before they die. It begs the question, then: What happens when people die, and they've never heard about Jesus? What happens eternally when people die, and they never heard about Jesus?

If there are over a billion people like that in the world today, then I believe this is one of the most important questions, if not the most important question, facing the church that does have the gospel today. It's a question that we actually visited when I was just filling in here at Brook Hills a couple of years ago that I want us to revisit. A few months ago, the Lord put

it on my heart that this is something we need to revisit on this particular Sunday, and so, that's what we're going to do. This is a deeply theological question: What happens to people who never hear about Jesus? There are so many different doctrines bound up in the...in any answer to this question. It is an intensely emotional question.

If there are a billion, billion-and-a-half people who've never heard of Jesus, there's a heavy weight there emotionally. We want there to be good news, a good answer to this question for a billion-plus people, and it's a question with eternal ramifications. It's a difficult question, too, because there's not a place we can go to in Scripture where Jesus says, "Some of you have wondered what will happen to people who never hear about me, and here's the answer." Scripture's just not explicit on that one, but God is not silent. He has spoken, I believe very clearly, to that question. I want to show it to you, and the reason I've got you here in Romans 15 is very purposeful. Before we dive in, we're going look at Romans 15:20 in just a second, but I want to give you a little background. I need you to hang with me here through just a couple of minutes of New Testament history that are fundamental for what we're going to dive into tonight.

I want you to look up on the screen with me, and you're going see a map come up here on the screen that is going to help us understand some of the context here. If you look...and I know the lettering is very small, and you're not expected to be able to see that...but I want you to try to follow with me here. On the middle, right portion of this map...far eastern portion around the middle...is a city where red and blue arrows come together. It's called Antioch, and this was home base for the missionary Paul in the first century. Antioch is in Acts 13. The church in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas out on mission. When you look at this map, what you'll see is the blue arrows that are leaving Antioch describe where they went; and then you see they went north up into Pisidia, Antioch, some other places. Then, they come back, and the red arrows are their journey back, and you'll notice they come back to Antioch. That was their home base; and so after going out, and they came right back there. They spent time with the believers in Antioch, encouraging them, giving them reports from what was going on, building up the church there.

Then, Paul left out on his second missionary journey. Let me show you a second map. This one's going to be a little bigger, because he went to different places. Again, far right side, around the middle, is Antioch; and what he did is he went north into some of the regions that he'd already been before; and then Acts tells us...book of Acts tells us that he got what's called a "Macedonian call" there in the book of Acts, where he received a call to go up and make the gospel known among unreached areas near Macedonia. So, he went, headed off north. He went up into areas that are in the northwest corner of the map up there, Thessalonica. It's where Corinth is. He comes down around the middle of the map to Ephesus. Then, he makes his way down to the bottom right corner of this map, which is Jerusalem; the very southeastern part of this map is Jerusalem, and then he headed back up to where? Antioch. He went back up to the home base. That was home base for him. Spent some time with the believers there, encouraged them, challenged them, and then was sent out by the church at Antioch on his third missionary journey.

Watch this with me. Now, hang with me. This is really important. He leaves out on his third missionary journey, and you see he's going to some of the places that he had been before; and up in the northwestern portion of that map, you'll see the city of Corinth. You'll see it better on the next map I'm going to show you, but that's where he writes the book of Romans. Now, hang your hat on that for just a second. What he does is he travels down...all the way back down to Jerusalem, but you'll notice he does not go back where? He doesn't go back to Antioch, and he didn't plan to go back to Antioch. There was a reason why he

wasn't going back to Antioch. Let me show you this last map up here on the screen, and I'll show you why.

The very middle of this map is Rome. Then, on the very far right side, you'll see Jerusalem and Antioch and Sidon, all right there together. In between Rome, in the middle, and Antioch on the far side is the city of Corinth, and there's a little red dot for Corinth. That's where Paul is when he writes this book. He's sitting in the pagan city of Corinth. He'd left Antioch on his third missionary journey, and what he's wanting is to take the gospel further west. Specifically, he wants to take the gospel to Spain, which is on the far western portion of this map...far left of this map, because they had no knowledge of the gospel in Spain, and he wanted to take the gospel to them.

So, Paul's sitting in Corinth, and he picks up his pen, and he writes a letter. There's one major city between him and Spain, and that city is what? Rome. So, he writes a letter to the church at Rome, and he says to the church at Rome, "We need to take the gospel to Spain way over there. They don't have any knowledge of the gospel. We need to take the gospel to them, and this is why I'm writing you this letter." Let me show it to you, Romans 15:20.

Paul says, "I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written, 'Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard of him will understand.' This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you." Listen to verse 23. "But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while." Did you catch that?

Paul writes this letter to the church of Rome. He says, "I'm coming to see you, but you're really not the goal. I need to get to Spain, and I need you to help me get there. I need your assistance in getting there." The book of Romans is kind of like a missionary support letter. When people go on mission trips today, oftentimes, they will write a letter to friends or family, and they will say, "This is where God's called me to go, and I want to ask you to be praying for me." Then, oftentimes, people will ask in a letter like that, "If the Lord leads you to give financially, I could use some help in getting to this particular place."

I think the book of Romans is one big, fat missionary support letter here. I've never seen one written quite like this in our contemporary context, and, probably, if you wrote one like this, it would get discarded in the mail really quick because people just wouldn't have time to read it, but that's what he's doing. This is more than just a masterful treatise on the gospel, which it is. It totally is, but it's got a deeper reason behind it. Paul wants to take this gospel to people who've never heard it before, and that's why he writes this letter.

As a result...now... "Thanks for the New Testament history, Dave. What's the point?" Here's the point: We don't have a place in Scripture where we can go and see Jesus say, or anybody else say some... "If you've wondered what happens to people who never hear about me, here's the answer." Instead, we have an entire book written to persuade the church to take the gospel to people who never heard the name of Jesus, and as a result, I believe the book of Romans has huge implications for how we understand any answer to this question.

Seven Affirmations ...

So, what I want to invite you to do is turn back with me to Romans 1. We're going to start in just a second in verse 18, and I want to show you tonight...we're going fly through some of these and camp out on a couple of them...I want to show you seven affirmations from the book of Romans, seven truths that rise to the top in this book that are part of Paul's argument for why we've got to take this gospel to the unreached peoples. Now, I need you to follow with me very closely tonight, because there are a couple of points when...where if you hear me at one sentence, and then you kind of doze off and catch back up about three or four sentences later, you will think I have just said something heretical, and you'll walk out tonight saying, "I cannot believe he said that. Did you hear that heresy?" I'd rather you not walk out saying that.

So, unless...I mean if you hear it all, and you still think it's heresy, well, that's...well, anyway, that's your conclusion. I don't agree but, anyway, just don't snooze in those three or four sentences in between. So, I'll try to draw your attention to those points where it's particularly important to be awake, but I really want you to follow me and hear these truths that are going to rise to the top that I believe are going to help us understand the answer to this question, "What happens to people who never hear about Jesus?" Okay, you have them there in your notes. You ready?

All people know God the Father.

Truth number one, affirmation number one: all people know God the Father. All people know God the Father. This is Romans 1:18-21. Listen to how he starts. He spends the first 17...Paul spends the first 17 verses introducing the picture of where he's going, and then, he says in verse 18: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes..." Listen closely to Verse 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."

Then, he says in verse 21: "For although they knew God..." Here's the picture: Every person in all creation has knowledge of God the Father. God has made revelation of Himself continually and clearly known to all people. There's not a person on this planet, not a person in this room, not a person a hundred miles from here, not a person ten thousand miles from here, every single person in this room, every single man in the African jungle, every single woman in an Asian village, the Eskimo in the forgotten tundra, everybody has knowledge of God the Father; everybody in all history knows God. Paul says, "For although they knew God..." God has made revelation of Himself clear to everybody. Of the 6.7 billion people on this planet today, everybody has knowledge of God, everybody. That is affirmation number one.

All people reject true knowledge of God.

Affirmation number two is this: All people reject true knowledge of God. All people know God the Father. Affirmation two: All people reject true knowledge of God, and this is what Paul begins to talk about in Romans 1:21. He elaborates on it through a couple of chapters, but he says, "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things." You skip down to

verse 25 and listen to this picture. "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen."

So, here's the picture. All people know God the Father, and all people reject the true knowledge of God. All people, every person in this room, has rejected true knowledge of God. Every person on this planet...we all have an inherently sinful nature that is prone to worship creation rather than the Creator. Now, this is a fundamental truth in Scripture, but I think it's often overlooked when it comes to this question of what happens to people who never hear about Jesus.

I remember sitting with a group of college students at one point. We were talking about this question of what happens to people who never hear about Jesus and some of these truths, and I remember one of them said she was really having a hard time with processing through this. She said, "Well, what about..." This was the illustration used. She said, "What about an Indian tribe who was here long before we were, and they didn't have knowledge of the gospel, but they had an innate desire to worship something. They didn't have knowledge of what that something was, and so they did the best they could with what they had. Maybe they worshiped the sun god, but that's the best they could with what they have. Isn't God pleased with that?"

It's a good question, but I want you to think about the answer with me. What Paul is saying very clearly in Romans 1 is you don't worship the sun and call it "God," and that become pleasing to the God who is worthy of all worship. That's not true worship. That's idolatry, and in the same way that we, in our culture today, worship money as a god or worship any other idol, any other god, we all have a tendency, we're all prone, every single one of us...this is not an indictment of that Indian tribe. It's not an indictment of any tribe in Africa or people in Asia. It's an indictment of every single one of us. We are all prone to worship creation rather than the Creator, who alone is worthy of all praise. All of us, in our hearts, have been given over to idolatry, to the worship of that which is less than God. We worship ourselves, worship of things, worship of idols, whatever it is, we have rejected true knowledge of God.

There are no innocent people in the world.

So all people know God the Father, and all people reject true knowledge of God. That leads to the third affirmation: As a result, there are no innocent people in the world. There are no innocent people in the world. Now, what Paul does is, from Romans 1:18 through 2:16, he addresses, specifically, the Gentiles. Now, the Gentiles were non-Jews, people who were not a part of the chosen people of God in the Old Testament, and he addresses how the Gentiles were sinful. You could almost hear a lot of Jewish Christians in Rome who were probably "Amening" at every verse in Romans 1:18 all the way to 2:16. "Yes, yes, that's exactly what they do."

Then, he turns the tables on them in Romans 2:17, and he says, "But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God..." and he begins to let the Jews know where they stand. He talks about how they have blasphemed in the name of God and how they are no better. He gets to Romans 3:9, and he brings it to a head, brings it to a point here, a climax, so to speak. In Romans 3:9, he brings it all together, and he says, "What then? Are we Jews better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written..." He starts quoting from the Old Testament. "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." Do you hear the universality in all of those statements? "No one, no one, no one; all have turned away. No one who does good, not even one."

Now, here's one of those points where I want you to follow with me closely. If you were to ask me, "Dave, just pointblank, just give me a yes or no answer. I hear all these affirmations. Just give me a yes or no answer. What happens...Dave, what happens to the innocent guy in Africa, for example, who never hears of Jesus? What happens to him when he dies?" If you were to ask me that question, I would say, pointblank, as simply as I could, "I believe wholeheartedly, based on the Word of God, that that guy would go to heaven when he dies, without question. No question in my mind that he would go to heaven." The only problem is he doesn't exist. I want you to follow with me here. "What happens to the innocent guy in Africa..." Wait a second. Now, this is how this question is most often phrased. "What about the innocent guy in Africa or Asian village who's never heard the gospel?"

Well, if he's innocent, of course he'll go to heaven. Why does he need a gospel if he's innocent? Why does he need news about how he can be saved from his sin if he has no sin? Innocent people don't need a gospel. They're righteous before God. Therefore, there's no question that he would go to heaven. Are you with me? Are you following me here? You see how we bias the question, most often from the very beginning, toward us? We even...even when we talk about mission, we have this picture that there are innocent people all over the world waiting to hear the gospel. I want to remind you, based on the authority of God's Word, that there is no innocent guy in Africa waiting to hear the gospel. There's no innocent woman in Asia waiting to hear the gospel. There are guilty people all over Africa, guilty people all over Asia, and guilty people all over this room that need the gospel.

No innocent people. The reason they need a gospel is because they're guilty, and not just them, but all of us. We need the gospel because we are guilty. If you ask what happens to the innocent guy in Africa who never hears the gospel, he goes to heaven for sure because he wouldn't need to be forgiven of his sins. The problem is he's not there. He's not there. There's no guy like that. There's no woman like that. There's no person like that.

All people are condemned for rejecting God.

All people, guilty...no one righteous, not even one; and all that leads to truth number four. Affirmation number four. All people know God the Father; all people reject true knowledge of God; there are no innocent people in the world; and, as a result, affirmation number four: all people are condemned for rejecting God. All people stand condemned for rejecting God. This is what Paul says in Romans 3:19-20. "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law..." Listen to this. "...so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."

Let me paraphrase what Paul just said. He just said, "Every mouth is silenced. In fact, every effort you try to overcome your condemnation only drives you deeper and deeper into condemnation because you can't do it. Every effort to do good to overcome your bad only drives you deeper and deeper into bad, because you cannot...you cannot overcome the sinfulness that is in you. All people are condemned, stand condemned for rejecting God."

Now, this is huge. Now, I want you to follow with me here. Think about this question. I won't ask you to raise your hand or respond out loud, but just think about it with me. If I were to ask you this individually, what would you say? Do you think...do you think it would be just, fair, for God to condemn someone to hell for not believing in Jesus when they never even had the opportunity to hear about Jesus? Let me repeat the question. Think about it. Do you think it would be just, would it be fair, for God to condemn someone to hell for not believing in Jesus when they never even had the opportunity to hear about Jesus? I think that the answer to that question is clearly no. It would not be fair; it would not be just for

God to condemn someone to hell for not believing in Jesus that had never even had the opportunity to hear about.

Now, it's at this point that many in the Christian community today have said, "Okay, based on this, then, that if they haven't heard about Jesus, then they will be okay." The only problem is all people stand condemned for rejecting whom? For rejecting God. Now, obviously, there are different levels of knowledge. Paul talks about this in the way Jews and Gentiles are, and the same thing is true today. There are, obviously, people today who have never heard the name of Jesus, and there are people all across this room who have heard the name of Jesus. So, there are different levels of knowledge, and, certainly, if we've heard the gospel, then there is a greater level of knowledge that we have and, in a sense, a greater accountability because we chose whether or not to trust in...to choose Jesus, or to reject Jesus. However, even if somebody never has the opportunity to hear about Jesus, they still stand condemned, because they've rejected God.

What has happened is people have come to the conclusion...they've drawn the conclusion...professing Christians who have said, "Well, if they haven't heard about Jesus, then that gives them a pass of sorts. They're excused, and, as a result, they will go to heaven precisely because they haven't heard about Jesus. They never had the chance to." Now, I want you to follow this with me. I want you to follow this logic. If people get a pass of sorts, if people will go to heaven precisely because they never heard about Jesus, then what is the worst thing we could do for them? Go and tell them about whom? About Jesus, because as soon as we tell them about Jesus, we've just increased their chances of condemnation. Before we got there, they were going to heaven. "Thanks a lot. Thanks, Brook Hills, for having your two percent day. David, you need to apologize to us over here. Why are you..." By telling them about Jesus, we would increase their...they were going to heaven before we told them about Jesus. I mean, think about this on a very practical level, not just somewhere around the world.

Imagine being on a college campus, UAB here in Birmingham. You're on the UAB campus, and there are...there's a whole host of international students on the UAB campus. I think international students on college campuses in the United States are one of the most incredible mission fields that we have. One of the most ripe mission fields we have, because there are people...I guarantee it...people on the UAB campus today, international students, who are studying here, who have never heard the gospel. I want you to imagine being on the UAB campus, and you're walking down, and you see an international student, and you begin a conversation with him or her. You say...let's say to her...you say, "Have you heard about Jesus?" She looks back at you, and she says, "No, I haven't."

Now, if you believe that this girl is guaranteed heaven precisely because she has never heard of Jesus, then what are you going to say to her? You're going to say, "Okay, if somebody tries to tell you about Him, then you put your fingers in your ears, and you start yelling, 'Ahhhhh,' and start running away because you're going to heaven right now. However, if you listen, you could go to hell." Obviously, this makes no sense in Scripture, doesn't hold water, under-cuts the very missionary...mission enterprise of the church. All people are condemned for rejecting God. Therefore, they need to hear about Jesus.

God has made a way of salvation for the lost.

This leads us to our fifth affirmation. All people know God the Father. People reject true knowledge of God; there are no innocent people in the world. All people stand condemned for rejecting God. These are just, by the way, some of the most depressing verses in Scripture, Romans 1:18 to 3:20. Some of the most depressing verses in Scripture, and, thankfully, to this point, I can almost picture Paul, as he finishes Romans 3:20, whether

he's writing this or he's dictating it, he pauses. I can picture it, just tears in his eyes. He picks up the pen to write Romans 3:21-26. This is the truth, and then we'll read it. God has made a way of salvation for the lost. That's truth number five, and I want to read it to you in Romans 3:21.

After he's just said every mouth is silenced, he says,

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

That, right there, brothers and sisters, is one of the most incredible paragraphs in all of the Bible.

Christians, hide this paragraph in your heart. Know Romans 3:21-26. Know this in your mind and in your heart. This is the gospel at the core. God..."For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus..." That is like 50 hours of sermons right there. It is loaded with content and eternally important content. God has made a way of salvation for the lost. He has just built a case that says, including not just the people around the world, but you and I in this room know God and reject God and are guilty before God and stand condemned in our guilt, and God has made a way of salvation for us.

This is a story I have told before at Brook Hills, but it sums up this picture. I was standing in Indonesia with a Muslim leader and a Hindu leader in that particular community that I was in right outside a Hindu temple. I'm talking with these two leaders, and they are talking about how, fundamentally, our religions are the same. We may use different terminology and practice things differently, but we are fundamentally the same. We are, maybe, superficially different but fundamentally the same. I listen as they talked and talked and talked. After a while, after listening, I said, "Let me make sure I've got this right. It's almost like you guys picture God at the top of a mountain, and we're all down here at the bottom of a mountain. You may take this path up, and you may take this path up, but in the end, we're going to find ourselves at the same place." They both got smiles on their faces, and they said, "Yes, you finally understand."

I said, "Well, let me ask you a question." I said, "What would you think if I told you the God at the top of the mountain came down the mountain and met you where you were to bring you to Himself?" They smiled. They said, "Well, that would be nice." I said, "Let me tell you about Jesus Christ." That is the picture, ladies and gentlemen, and there is no other picture like it in any world religion or in any spiritual philosophy in this world...the news that God has not waited for us to find a way to Him, because we can't do it. There is an infinite chasm that separates us from this God, and, by His grace, He came down to meet us where we are and to pull us to Himself. All glory be to God. He has made a way of salvation for the lost. Not a way...that's not a good way to phrase that. Shouldn't have put it that way. God has made the way of salvation for the lost. The way of salvation for the lost, and it is through a redemption that came by Christ Jesus. He died to...He took the condemnation due

us upon Himself and took the righteousness that we could never have and put it on us. That's the gospel; that's grace. It's gospel. It is...there's no greater news than that.

People cannot come to God apart from faith in Christ.

So, what we've got is four truths to this point. We've got some of the most depressing truths there are, and then truth number five just lifts us up. God has made a way of salvation for the lost, and it begs the question, "Okay, well, how does this way of salvation in Christ...okay, He did this...how does that become a reality in my life? How do I have this salvation?" It leads to truth number six...people cannot come to God based on the first five truths. Truth number six is this: People cannot come to God apart from faith in Christ. People cannot come to God apart from faith in Christ. This is what Paul...he's already mentioned it here in verse 22, "The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe..." However, you get down to verse 27, listen to what he says. "Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."

Again, Paul's talking to a lot of Jewish Christians here in Rome who have done a lot of things to try to get to God, and Paul tells them over and over and over again, "It was this way in the Old Testament. It's this way in the New Testament. The only way to come to God is by faith." He uses Abraham as the example in Romans 4. Gets down to verse 16. He says, "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring..." Then, he says in Romans 5:1, he says, "We are justified; we're made right before God...justified through faith." That's why we have peace with God, because we have faith.

God has designed this whole picture so that it's not one ounce of our works that is the means by which we are saved. It's not one step up that mountain. It is completely a gift of God...faith, trusting in Him, and you cannot come to God apart from faith in Christ. Now, again, when we think about the emotional nature of this question before us: What happens to people who never hear about Jesus? We were down in the depths after four truths, and truth number five kind of brought us back up, but truth number six is...when we think about a billion people who have still never heard of Christ, it's at this point that many people, again, professing Christians today, who have drawn the conclusion at this point: "Okay, yes, all of these first five truths are true, but when it comes down to it, there's over a billion people. Say someone today on this Sunday, which there inevitably is more than one, who today will breathe his or her last breath, never having heard the name of Jesus. You're saying those people go to hell?"

It's at this point, obviously, you feel the emotional pull of this question. We need to. If we don't feel the emotional pull of that question, we're missing the point; but it's at this point that some have drawn the conclusion, "Okay, I know what Scripture teaches, but God is a God of love and a God of mercy." Some have said, "Surely, there is a way, then, that they still go to heaven. Surely, there's something in their life, something they have done...surely, there is something there that God will still bring them to Himself in heaven." I feel the emotion behind that pull, but think about it with me. As soon as we say that, as soon as we say, "Well, surely, there's some other way that God brings them to Himself," as soon as we say that, then what we've said to Jesus on the cross is, "Thank you for what you did, but we could've gotten to God another way. Thank you for your sacrifice, but, in the end, God is merciful, and I still would've gotten there."

This is where I want us to see that, in our desire to answer these questions, we have to be very careful, because we can step, off all of a sudden, into a precipice that ends up undercutting the very necessity of the cross, saying to Jesus that His death, His sacrifice

was not necessary. I, for one, do not want to go there, and I do not believe Scripture lets us go there. Scripture says very, very, very clearly, "People cannot come to God apart from faith in Christ."

Christ commands the church to make the gospel known to all people.

Well, where does that leave a billion, billion-and-a-half people then? Here's where it leaves them. Affirmation number seven: Christ commands the church to make the gospel known to all people. Christ commands the church to make the gospel known to all people. Go with me to Romans 10. You've got to see this. Romans 10. Look with me at verse 12. Paul continues building this whole picture of the gospel. He gets to Romans 10...the first part of Romans 10, and he basically says...what we've just seen in Romans 3:27-31 is that faith in God is possible through faith in Christ. The only way to come to God is through faith in Christ. Then, he gets to Romans 10:12, and I want you to hear what he said. It's one of the most masterful, rhetorical pictures we have in Paul's letters. Listen to this.

"For there is no distinction..." – Romans 10:12 – "...between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" That's a promise. It's a guarantee. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Now, listen to verse 14. "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!'"

Now, this is not just a picture of rhetorical skill. This is a picture of God's redemptive plan for taking this gospel and making it known to all peoples, and I want to show it to you—the plan of God, and what we're going to do is we're going to go from the back of this passage we just read, from Romans 10:15 back up to Romans 10:13, and we're going to work our way backwards through it using the verbs in this passage. I want to show you in Romans 10:13-15 the plan of God for taking this gospel to people who've never heard it. So, follow with me here. It all starts...and you've got this in your notes...the plan of God. It starts with this. Christ sends followers. "And how are they to preach unless they are sent?" This is what starts the ball rolling, so to speak.

Christ sends His followers. His followers do what? "And how are they to preach unless they are sent? Followers preach. Christ sends followers, and followers preach. Now, we have to be careful here because this is that point where, in our church culture, we have the tendency to relegate preaching to one person who stands up here, or the person who stands up in a group of 20 or 30, and they do the preaching or teaching. However, the kind of preaching that's being talked about here is telling the good news, proclaiming the good news. It is the responsibility, privilege, obligation, and opportunity of every follower of Christ. If you have the Holy Spirit of God in you, then you are preacher of the gospel, a proclaimer of the gospel. You tell people good news, and so, this is every one of us in this room who's a follower of Christ. Christ sends followers, and He says, "My followers will preach." How can they preach unless they're sent? So, Christ sends followers, and followers preach.

Let's go to the next verb. How can they...what? "And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" So, followers preach, and people hear. When followers preach, people hear. Unless we are preaching to a wall or preaching in a room by ourselves, then people are going to hear us. So, Christ sends followers, followers preach, and people hear. When they hear, what do they do? "And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?" So, hearers believe.

Now, think about this. This is really good right here. Here's belief. We know...Scripture doesn't teach...we know from practical experience that not everybody who hears the gospel believes in Christ. Not everybody who hears the gospel preached trusts in Christ for salvation, but here's what we can be confident of based on Scripture. They estimate there are about 5,000 people groups represented in that billion-and-a-half people in the world today who have little or no knowledge of the gospel. 5,000 people groups, and we know Revelation 7:9-10 says there is coming a day when every tribe, every people, every language, every nation will be gathered around the throne of Christ, singing His praises; a part of the church in heaven singing praises to God.

We know that every tribe, people, language, and nation is going to be represented there. So, think about this with me. You can take this gospel to the deepest, darkest, most remote place in the world, people group in the world, who is as far as can be...as far as you can imagine from the gospel, and you can preach the gospel to them. You don't have a guarantee that everybody's going to believe, but you do have this guarantee: somebody's going to believe. Somebody in that people is going to be represented around that throne. That is earth-shaking confidence. You go, and you preach the gospel to the cannibalistic tribe in Southeast Pacific Islands, and you can know somebody's coming out when you preach the gospel. Somebody's going to trust in Jesus. That gives us...we don't have to go timidly to the nations, "Do you want the gospel?" No, we go and say, "Here's the gospel, and I know somebody's coming. So, who's it going to be?" This is great confidence for preachers of the gospel. Brothers and sisters, all around this room, going around the world, somebody's coming out wherever you go. So, that's good. That's good.

So, all right. I have to keep from preaching different sermons on each of these. Christ sends followers; followers preach; people hear; hearers believe, and then it follows after that. Believers do what? Believers call. "How can they call on the One they've not believed in?" Believers call on the name of the Lord and, Romans 10:13, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be..." - what? - "saved." So, those who call are saved. Christ sends followers. There it is. This is the plan of God. Christ sends followers; followers preach; people hear; hearers believe; believers call, and those who call are saved.

Now, I want you to do this with me. I want you to look at this progression of the plan of God you've got in your notes there. Look at it with me and ask this question. "Where, in this plan, can there be a breakdown? Is there any potential breakdown in this plan?" Think about it. We'll start at the end. Those who call are saved. Is that definitely going to be the case? No question. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. You can seal that in stone; no breakdown even possible there. Those who believe...believers call. Will that happen? Yes, absolutely. You don't believe and not call. You believe, you trust, you call. No breakdown there whatsoever. Hearers believe? No, obviously, we just talked about it. Not everybody who hears believes, but somebody who hears is going to believe. So, there's no breakdown there. It's going to happen; Revelation 7 told us that it's going to happen. Are people going to hear when the gospel is preached? Yes, no question. Unless we're preaching to a wall or preaching to ourselves, then people are going to hear. Go to the very beginning; Christ sends followers. Is Christ sending followers? Absolutely. He has not gone on vacation. He does not sleep. He is not quiet. Christ sends followers. There is only one place in this plan where there is a potential breakdown, and what is it? When followers fail to do what? Preach.

The only way the plan breaks down is if the people who have been saved by this gospel sit back and soak it in for themselves and turn a deaf ear to those who have never heard it. Sit back silent when it comes to unreached peoples. That's the only way you can even have unreached peoples: if followers of Christ are not preaching this gospel. This is huge. Now,

what you'll hear as you travel around the world today is you'll hear stories in unreached areas. Muslim areas, for example, where you'll hear stories about Muslims having Christ revealed to them in dreams or in visions. You'll hear this in different places. Miraculous things, and God is...He's doing miraculous things all over the nations today, but what people have done is they've taken that, and they've said, "Well, apparently, obviously, God is accomplishing this mission without us." That is not true.

It's not true at all. You look in Scripture, and you will not find one verse in the book of Acts, not one verse, where the gospel goes forward apart from a human instrument, apart from His people. You won't find one verse. You do have dreams and visions. You see that Cornelius has a dream, has a vision, and what does God do? "Peter, get up, go. You need to go tell Cornelius about the gospel. You need to get over there and tell him about Christ." This is what He's doing. God is doing amazing things, but here's the picture. This is the plan of God that you have there in your notes there, Romans 10:13-15; and there is no plan B. There's no plan B. Let's be honest with each other. God has the power, doesn't He? God has the power to write the gospel in the sky. He has the power to make this gospel known apart from us, but He has not chosen to do this, even though we think it would be probably be a little wiser for Him to do so. He has not.

Instead, He has chosen in His infinite wisdom and His infinite grace to use you and me as the instruments by which these people hear the gospel. I think this is the answer. This is a reason why Scripture does not give us the explicit answer we might want when it comes to what happens to people who never hear about Jesus, because the point of Scripture is this...you've got this in your notes there. The goal of Scripture is not to answer this question that we are asking; the goal is to alleviate the question altogether. The goal is to eliminate the question. Not for us to sit around in contemporary Christianity, gospel-saturated, America debating the answer to this question. The goal is to give our lives even to the very death to make sure this question is no longer a factor; alleviate the question altogether.

I know that, as soon as I say that, the charge of idealism sweeps across the room. "Okay, alleviate the question? A billion people have never heard the name of Jesus. Let's be honest. Can we really alleviate the question? Can my life, could this church, really alleviate the question?" Before we answer that, I want to take you back to the maps that we were looking at earlier, and I want you to see this with me. I want you to look at the map that we left off with that shows Rome in the middle...Corinth, Jerusalem on the far right. I want you to notice on this map. Are there little yellow areas on this map? You can barely see them, but right in the middle, right around Rome...that red dot, there's a little bit of yellow; and on the right, over around Jerusalem, there's a little bit of yellow up toward Antioch. That yellow represents the regions that were known to contain Christians at the beginning of Paul's ministry. So, when Paul started out on his passion to make the gospel known among unreached peoples, these were where there were Christians.

Now, in just a second, I want to show you a map that shows the regions that were known to contain Christians at the end of Paul's ministry, and I want you to see if you can tell a difference. Look at this next map with me. You see that yellow now? Now, I'm not saying that Paul was the only one preaching the gospel during that time, but it's clear. That's exactly where Paul was traveling to; that's exactly where he was proclaiming the gospel and planting churches. He had a huge impact, but what you'll notice is there is also a glaring void on this map, and it's all the way over to the west in Spain. There's no yellow there whatsoever. You see, Paul eventually got to Jerusalem and eventually got to Rome, though not the way he planned. He was arrested in Jerusalem, imprisoned in Rome, and, likely, years later, died in a Roman jail cell. Paul never got to Spain.

The Real Question ...

What shall we conclude then? "Paul, a bit idealistic, weren't you? Did you really think you could make the gospel known in Spain? Did you really think you could take the gospel to these unreached peoples? Paul, you failed. You wasted your life. You didn't get there. That's what idealism gets you." Well, before we go that far, in just a second, I want to show you a map that shows the regions that were known to contain Christians within 200 years...just 200 years after Paul's death. Look at this map with me.

Now, again, I am not saying that Paul was the only one who impacted this map, but I am saying this: Brothers and sisters, do not underestimate for one second what God will do in and through one person whose life is abandoned to making this gospel known among all peoples. He will use your life and your death to multiply this gospel to places you never could have fathomed before. So, here's the question I want to ask you. Not the person beside you, in front of you, or behind you. Right where you are sitting, I want to ask you tonight. I want to ask you what kind of impact you're going to have on this next map that you see on the screen; this next map that will show you our world today.

Those blue areas are an area called the 10/40 window. This area is full of unreached peoples; people have little to no knowledge of the gospel. What impact is your life going to have on this map? This is the ultimate question. Not what happens to people who never hear about Jesus. The ultimate question is this: What impact is your life going to have on the unreached world with the gospel? Do you believe this gospel in you has the power to impact nations for the glory of Christ? I believe any answer but "yes" to that is selling God short of the very purpose for which He has saved you, and the very purpose for which you have breath in this room at this moment.

A million people who have yet to hear His name, and you know His name. Picture it with me. Just one people group there. 1.4 million Bedouins in Algeria. 1.4 million Bedouins there. 100 percent Muslim. No missionaries. No Christians. No church. No Christianity. No gospel. No Scripture. No Jesus. Now, I want you to imagine something with me. I want you to imagine going up...you, not the person next to you, in front of you, behind me...you going up to a Bedouin in Algeria, and you having the privilege of looking in their eyes and, for the first time, telling them about Jesus Christ. Telling them about how their life can be saved from eternal condemnation based on what Jesus did for them on a cross. Just imagine that, and knowing that there's a Bedouin there that's going to come to faith in Christ because you're proclaiming the gospel. That is a cause worth living for; it's a cause worth dying for; it is the cause for which we have been saved, and it is the cause for which we are still here on this planet. How's your life going to impact the unreached world with the gospel? It's that question that leads us to the invitation, the challenge that I mentioned earlier this evening.

I want to invite you tonight to say, "In the next year, I want to give two percent of my life...a week of time...in a context outside of Birmingham, domestically, internationally...not saying any one of us knows what that looks like, where that is, or how that will look, but in the next year, I want to give two percent of my time to making the gospel known in other contexts around the world." Now, some will say, "What about Birmingham?" Yes, Birmingham...the whole question implies that the other 98 percent of our lives will be lived here in Birmingham making the gospel known here in Birmingham, but the challenge is: Are you willing to go outside of this context, maybe to unreached areas, maybe to inner cities, communities here in the United States? Are you willing to say, "Two percent of my time

next year I want to give that to make the gospel known in another context around the world.”

The last thing I want you to do is to say that because you feel drummed up, because you think if you don't, you would feel guilty, or you think it would make you a better Christian by any means. This is simply because you have a passionate desire to make this gospel known in contexts around the world.

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