

GRACE TO YOU

ROMANS 2:12-16

HOW CAN GOD JUDGE THE HEATHEN?



FIRST BYRON CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

"How can God judge the heathen?" How can God judge people who have never heard the Gospel? In recent times, many have answered, "He can't and he won't. It wouldn't be fair" Even Christian leaders have gone down this dangerous path of denying God will judge the heathen who don't know the Gospel.

Why is this a dangerous path? Well, first of all it's dangerous for the heathen. What if those teaching this are wrong and God will indeed judge the heathen? Second, it's dangerous for the church, because the logical conclusion to draw from this would be to stop sending missionaries and doing outreach. If the heathen are saved because they don't know the Gospel, let's just leave them alone because to send the Gospel to them is make them responsible and condemnable.

Although wrong answers have been given to this question, the question remains for many thoughtful Christians. **"How can God judge the heathen?"** How can God judge people who have never heard the Gospel? In Romans 2:1-16, the Apostle Paul gives us the right answer.

BACKGROUND

In chapter 1:18-32, the Apostle Paul exposed the guilt of the heathen Gentiles. In chapter 2:1-11, he exposed the guilt of the religious Jews. He then anticipates two objections to these truths.

- Objection 1: If God has not given his special revelation to the heathen, God should not condemn them. Simply put, God should not judge people who have never known the Gospel. That's not fair.
- Objection 2: If God has given his special revelation to his special people, the Jews, God should give them special treatment rather than condemn them. Simply put, God shouldn't condemn religious people. That's not fair.

These objections impugn God's justice, and therefore the Apostle Paul goes all out to defend God's justice and fairness. He does so by asking three questions. He's saying, "You've got some questions about God, I've got some questions about you."



**He had spiritual knowledge that affected his spiritual excuses.
How does spiritual knowledge affect our spiritual excuses?**



1. WHAT DID YOU KNOW? (12)

For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law (1).

We will be judged according to what we knew not what we didn't know. We will be judged according to the light we had not the light we didn't have.

Some know little

Some sinned "without the law." Those who are "without the law" are people who do not have God's specially revealed law in Scripture. God will not judge people for what they did not know and could not know. He will not call them to the dock and bring out the Law of Moses or the Gospel of Christ as the standard of judgment because they never had either of them. God will not condemn them for not keeping a law they did not have.

And yet, they are still sinners and they still perish. They "sinned without the law" and "will also perish without the law." How can they still be sinners and still be condemned if they didn't have God's special revelation? Because, as we have seen in the previous chapter, they had God's general revelation through conscience and creation. They will be judged by what they knew, not by what they didn't know. That may be very little knowledge, a line or two, or a page or two, but that's the limited standard by which they will be judged.

Some know lots

Some sinned "under the law." They knew God's Law and lived under God's Law. They had the special privilege of God's special revelation. But that does not secure special treatment for them. Having the law does not spare them from condemnation, but rather aggravates their condemnation. When God calls them to the dock, he brings out the Old and New Testaments, the volumes of the Law and the Gospel to judge their lives. Having the law, then, does not stop people sinning or stop people being judged or condemned. Having the law does not mean no judgment but full judgment. It doesn't mean decreased judgment but increased judgment.

CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

God is fair. Little knowledge means little judgment. Big knowledge means big judgment. Who can complain about that? God judges by the standard of our knowledge. He doesn't bring law books full of laws we never had or knew. He brings law books that have our names on them. He starts his judgment not with what he knows but what we know.

What do you know? Forget about the heathen for a minute and ask yourself, "What do I know?" If you could download everything you've ever been taught about God, what would that look like? One day you will know, when God brings out the book with your name on it and all you know about the law and the Gospel.

SOME KNOW LITTLE
SOME KNOW LOTS
ALL KNOW ENOUGH



"What did you know? is the first question at the judgment.
What's the second question?"



2. WHAT DID YOU DO? (13-14)

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law (13-14)

Hearing is not enough

Having the law and hearing the law did not make anyone righteous before God. Having a head full of law was not salvation. Reading the law, understanding the law, teaching the law, judging with the law - none of these things were enough. "For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God."

Doing is enough

"Doers of the law will be justified." Knowing must lead to doing. Having established what we know, God will then ask, "What did you do with that knowledge?" Did you do what you knew? Did you obey my law? Externally? Internally? Partly? Fully? Imperfectly? Perfectly? Some laws or all laws? Cheerfully or reluctantly? How did you live with what you have? If you can do what you know, God will say "Righteous! Perfect!"

Even the heathen Gentiles have this opportunity. Even though they do not have God's written law in their hands. God has written it to some degree in their hearts. In that way, "they are a law to themselves." They don't have an external law like the Jews, but they have an internal law. They know enough to do enough to be saved enough.

This explains why many pagans, many heathens look after their neighbors, don't steal, are kind to their families, etc. Biblical examples of heathens doing the law despite not having the law include Cyrus (Ezra 1:1-4; 5:13-17) < Darius (6:1-12), Artaxerxes (7:11-27), the city clerk (Acts 19:35-41), and the barbarians (Acts 28:2).

CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

God is fair. How can anyone have any complaints about this? The heathen bring their few lines of knowledge and God will judge them according to that. "You only knew this tiny amount. Did you do what you knew?" The religious person will bring the gigabytes of knowledge and God will judge them by this standard. "I gave you more than most. Did you do what you knew?" God is such a fair judge.

What did you do? God has brought your gigabytes of religious data into the courtroom. "Did you know all this?" "Yes," we say with a measure of pride, "I knew all that?" "You knew it, but did you do it?" he probes. The air leaves the room and we swallow hard when we think of all we knew and did not do.

LIVE WHAT YOU KNOW
AND YOU KNOW YOU'LL LIVE



Any more questions I might have a hope of answering?
Just one.



3. WHAT DID YOUR CONSCIENCE SAY? (15-16)

They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus (15-16).

Conscience spoke

The heathen Gentiles show by their lives that God has put his law in their hearts. It's not as full or as clear as his written law, but it's there to some extent and to some degree. It's there enough for their conscience to work with. Their consciences compare what they know with what they do and speaks accusing or approving words to them.

Does this mean that heathen Gentiles can live a good enough life to get into heaven? Theoretically, yes, if they live up to what they know and do what they know. However, we know, that no one does what they know. No one lives up to what they know. No one has a perfectly approving conscience.

God speaks

On the judgment day, God will add his voice to our consciences. It may look like people no longer have a conscience, but God will uncover the secret workings of every conscience on that last great day. Our own conscience that wanted to serve us and save us, will stand up and say, "I told you this was wrong and you still did it. I told you this was right and you did not do it." We will be judged according to our own conscience. Our friend will become our enemy.

CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

God is fair. Dan Crawford, veteran missionary to Africa, came out of the jungles and said, "The heathen are sinning against a flood of light." God sent an ally and friend into our hearts to be his voice to us, but it's a voice that is often ignored. No one will be able to say, "I never knew it was wrong."

What did your conscience say? We can quieten conscience, injure our conscience, sear our conscience, and weaken our conscience, but we can never totally silence it. No matter how long ago it spoke to us, God will reawaken its voice on the last day of judgment to remind us of its earlier judgments against us.

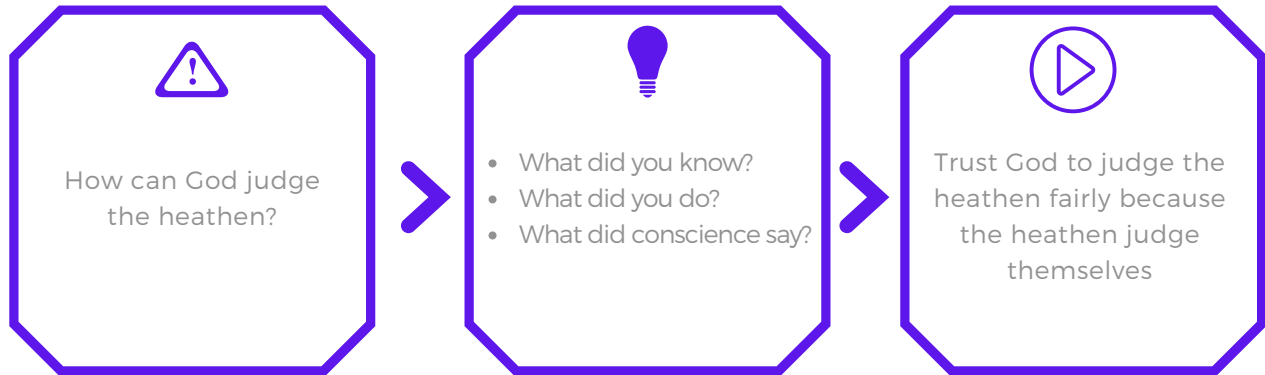
OUR CONSCIENCE IS
OUR CONDEMNATION



Hear God's Story > Change your story > Tell the story > Change others' stories



SUMMARY



A NEW CHAPTER

Gospel. Ask yourself these questions before God asks you the same questions. And when you cannot answer them without failing, remember Jesus answered them perfectly for believers.

Evangelism: If we go wrong on God judging the heathen, we will go wrong on getting the Gospel to the heathen. If we think that the heathen will go to heaven because they don't have the law or Gospel, then mission, evangelism, and outreach will wither and die. Sending the Gospel will only send them to hell, so let's stop sending them the Gospel. But if we get the right answer, God will judge the heathen, and we have the greatest motivation to get the Gospel to them.

Prayer. Fair God, your questions are fair, and your treatment of our bad answers is fair. Give us the right answers so we will believe in Christ and get the message of Christ to the Christless.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How have you struggled with the question of how God will deal with the heathen?
2. What other answers have you come to. What was right or wrong about them?
3. How would you explain or defend God's fairness to those who question it?
4. What examples can you give of unbelievers doing by nature what God's Law requires?
5. How does this passage point you to Jesus and make you love him more?
5. How should this sermon change our evangelism and mission?

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