

Christian Doubts No. 6
“Those Denied a Real Chance at Eternal Life”
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The Bible bears eloquent witness to the fact that doubt is a fact of Christian life. If faith is the master wheel of salvation, it should not surprise us that doubt – the opposite of faith – is a peculiarly Christian condition in a world of sin and weakness. Huge tracts of Holy Scripture, from beginning to end, address the various doubts and confusions that can beset the people of God. We have, so far, in this series of sermons on Christian Doubts examined the biblical doctrine of hell. It is, perhaps, the hardest thing, the most unwelcome thing that Christians are required to believe: that eternal punishment awaits those who are not saved. I sought in those four sermons both to deliver us from the caricature of hell that so often substitutes for the Bible’s more chaste and serious teaching about the fate of the unsaved and to remind us of how necessary hell is to the view of life all human beings hold, and must hold, at least at the level of their ordinary thought and action.

Tonight we move on to a different subject, though certainly related to the first. For that matter, all our doubts are in some way related to the prospect of punishment in the world to come. Deny that and nothing in life is as much of a problem! Tonight I want us to consider the problem posed by the fact that so many in this life seem to have had no chance to embrace Christ for themselves and be saved. This is an objection to the Christian faith raised by unbelievers all the time: how can you possibly believe that people who never even heard of Jesus Christ must be damned? Some poor fellow who lived in Africa in the 18th century, was captured by slavers, and died in the middle passage – whose life was short and brutal through no fault of his own – is going to hell. What kind of enlightened religion is that? What sort of loving God is that? I’m morally certain that virtually every one of you of a certain age has struggled with such thoughts. No wonder some Christians have had their faith shaken by them.

Some years ago a man began attending this church. He was an older man and his wife had died some time before. I can’t remember precisely how we came into contact with him but we did and he began to attend services regularly. I visited him in his home and talked with him at length about the gospel. He was interested. He expressed an interest. Indeed, at one point we were wondering if he had already passed over from darkness into light. But nothing finally came of it and, at the time, I thought I knew why. He loved his wife very much – he talked about her all the time – but his interest in Christ and the gospel came only after she had died. Indeed it was her death that made him take seriously questions of life and eternity that had never really interested him before. But for him to become a Christian would have meant leaving his wife behind. It would have required him to believe that he would live forever while she did not. It would have meant for him the most profound separation from the woman he still loved very much. If only he and she could have encountered the gospel together, but it was too late for that. I suspect – I don’t know, but I suspect – that if he couldn’t come to Christ together with her, he decided he would stay with her where he was. If only she too had encountered the gospel in her life and they had been saved together! That is one example of a large class of situations in which a person, someone might suppose, didn’t have a proper chance, or a timely chance, to be saved.

But it isn't always a person *never* having an opportunity to believe in Jesus. A few months ago Florence and I watched an old western on TV. It starred Robert Mitchum and Marilyn Monroe and was made in the early 1950s. As we watched the movie we became curious about the stars and did some poking around on the internet. There was a lot of fascinating background. Otto Preminger was the director and he had his hands full making the film. Marilyn Monroe brought along her acting coach who often gave Marilyn contrary advice to that given by Preminger himself. He wanted the coach banned from the set, but because the studio couldn't afford to lose Marilyn Monroe, and she threatened to leave the movie if her acting coach was banned, his request was refused. Then Marilyn hurt her ankle and was in crutches for a time. Shooting had to continue around her injury. Mitchum was an alcoholic and his drinking was likewise a problem. There was a boy among the film's characters who proved to be the most professional of the actors on the film. He kept Preminger sane and since Miss Monroe bonded with him, that relationship, more than anything else, kept her on an even keel. In any case, though we already knew a bit of Marilyn Monroe's story, prompted by the movie we read some more.

Hers was a sad life. She never knew who her father was, her mother had mental problems, and she was unaware she had a sister until she was an adult. How different things might have been. As an infant she was placed in foster care with an evangelical Christian couple, but her mother took her back shortly thereafter, just before having a complete breakdown herself, at which point Marilyn became a ward of the state of California. She was placed in an orphanage for several years, then was cared for by various relatives and friends through her school days. She married a 21 year old fellow when she was 16 and dropped out of school. You know perhaps most of the rest of the story: struggles with depression and addiction, marriages to two famous men (the baseball star, Joe DiMaggio, and the playwright, Arthur Miller, both of which ended in divorce), her being used by a series of famous and powerful married men, including Frank Sinatra and the Kennedy brothers, John and Robert.

Here was a woman whose life began in great difficulty, who spent it in the company of people, most of whom had other interests in her than her welfare and happiness, and in a community famous for its utter indifference to the spiritual interests of the soul. One biographer wrote about her:

“There was an aching hole in her that needed to be filled. Religion might have served her well. But she was God-resistant. When she and Jane Russell were working together, Russell, who was a Christian fundamentalist (of a sort), suggested to her: ‘Why don't you come with me after work to a Bible [study]?’ The answer was: ‘I'm having a [study] myself, with Freud.’” [Paul Johnson, *Heroes*, 237]

God-resistant? Or was it that her soul had been ruined early on and then battered into spiritual insensibility ever since? When a person's life is what it is in some significant part because of the sins committed against her, or because of misfortunes not of her own making, are we yet to believe that she must be damned because she never found Jesus Christ? Surely you feel for this woman, first a little child bereft of the love and care any little girl needs, then a woman exploited by virtually everyone in her life. She behaved badly in many ways, of that there is no doubt. But who cannot wish for this girl and woman another life than that which was given to her. Must she

now be damned? Let's put it bluntly? Must she now exchange her addictions and her depression and her broken relationships for hell?

This is an existential question of the deepest and gravest kind for Christians, who are, after all, banking everything on the perfect justice and the infinite and almighty love of God, who does not wish anyone to perish but all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. And there will be few thoughtful Christians who have not felt the weight of this question pressing down upon their hearts. And, without a doubt, this fact of life – how far from the gospel and the narrow way so many human beings lived all their lives – has shaken the confidence of many Christians in the truth of God's Word and the goodness of God's ways. What are we to say about this? Well, there are many things to say, as you can imagine.

First, we can remind ourselves that the Bible itself rings the changes on this very fact: that everyone's circumstances are not the same and that God's judgment takes that fact into account. We have considered in our investigation of the biblical doctrine of eternal punishment that we fail to appreciate the perfect justice of the Lord if we do not remember that some will be beaten with many stripes and some with just a few. It is not the case that everyone's fate in the world to come will be the same. I take great comfort from that fact.

Remember what the Lord Jesus himself said, "To whom much is given, much is required." That is the same thing as saying that those whose circumstances in life were difficult, those who were greatly sinned against, those who were not evangelized in a faithful and winsome way, will not be held to the same standard as those who had spiritual advantages but wasted them.

And remember Paul in Romans 1 saying that those who sinned without the law would also perish without the law and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. That is, men and women will be judged according to the measure of light and understanding that they could be expected to have had, according to the measure of their exposure to the truth, according to what extent they were made familiar with the Word of God.

All of this should remind us that God knows better than we do what the actual circumstances of any person's life were. He knows what they knew and could be expected to know. He knows what sins were committed against them, he knows their mental and spiritual IQ if you will, and he knows when and where they lived and what affect that had on what they could have been expected to know and do. God also knows precisely what they did with what they were given. He knows all of that and he judges accordingly.

All of that should be tremendously helpful to anyone who is troubled by the fact *that some people are not saved who, it would appear, had no opportunity to be saved*. God knows that and takes all of that into consideration. It is what we expect of him and it is what we are told he will do. So perfect is his justice and his judgment.

Second, we must take care not to sugarcoat the life of any human being, Marilyn Monroe or anyone else. We must be careful not to pull out from under ourselves the moral foundation of human life and with it the dignity and meaning of human life. We all know that to some significant degree, our lives are shaped by our childhood, by the various influences that bore

down upon us, by the love and the competence of our parents, or, alas, by their want of love and competence.

I live in a neighborhood where many children live whose lives, apart from the intervention of God, are in some significant respects over before they have well and truly begun. The sins committed against them as children will dog them for the rest of their lives: bad habits of social behavior in their parents, intellectual laziness in the home, parents who are often miserable role models, growing up genuinely ignorant of happy and healthy manners of life; all of this produces the same thing in the children as they grow up: anger, instability, discouragement, moral and spiritual stupidity, and a host of other sinister psychological pathologies. We are right, absolutely right, to pity them and to sympathize with their plight, and to understand why they live troubled lives in their adulthood.

But, at the same time, we also know and must accept that much of what they do later in their lives is actually evil. They are still responsible for their behavior, they are still to blame when they harm others as they themselves were harmed. They have a will and they are misusing it, they can do good if only they will, and they themselves know perfectly well that their behavior is indefensible since they are forever condemning the same behavior in others. And their attitude to life, as we encounter it in their teenage years and then in their adulthood, is without doubt unacceptable. That there is a reason for it does not excuse it. If we were to excuse it, we would be powerless to condemn anyone for anything and every human being knows by a God-given instinct that we cannot go there; we must not go there.

Tragic as human life so often is, it remains a morally responsible life. To deny this is to deny a person's very humanity, his or her dignity as a moral being. And, of course, let's be honest. Everyone in the world is a stupid, selfish, senseless sinner. In the life of some there is less help in countering the sinful tendency of the human soul, but every human being acts all the time against the real interests of himself and others. We are, after all, talking only about differences of degree between the moral failures of human beings. Not every woman allows herself to be used to the degree that Marilyn Monroe did, but every woman, as every man, foolishly seeks fulfillment and happiness in the wrong places and with little thought to the damage being done. The Bible does not mince words about the rebelliousness of the human heart and of its penchant for seeking to make a life without reference to God or his will. I think we all know that, as sad as Marilyn's early life must make any sensitive person, we would have been – as many of her friends and at least one of her husbands were – utterly exasperated by her foolishness, her selfishness, and her unwillingness to learn the simplest lessons of life. She certainly had help getting there, but then to some degree we can all say that. At the end of the day what difference does it make? We are still both responsible for the lives we live and fully able to do so much better than we do. Fact is, not every orphan becomes a drug addict, not every child of unloving or unfaithful parents becomes unfaithful and unloving herself, not every pin-up model jumps from one man's bed to the next. We all know that, and it is a fact to conjure with when we find ourselves in the company of someone who continually does utterly stupid things with his or her life.

Third, remember, these doubts are fueled by our sense of injustice, unfairness. Shouldn't God, being who he is and what he is like, shouldn't God do this or do that rather than what he did? Why doesn't he? But, now, think about that. Where did that sense of injustice come from? Why

do we look to God as if he ought to be acting differently? Is there such a thing as injustice or unfairness *without God*? We have pointed out many times that try as they might human beings have never been able to justify such ideas as “just” and “fair” without God. It’s one of the reasons why systems of philosophy are constantly turning over, being discarded, being tried again 200 years later because everybody figures out pretty quickly that this one doesn’t work either, this one is incapable of justifying the fundamental moral intuition of human beings. Only God can provide an ultimate moral standard against which human actions may be judged as right or wrong, just or unjust. But if we got our capacity for moral judgment from God, can we possibly then use it to complain *against God*? It is the Christian faith which alone proclaims a God of perfect goodness, justice, and fairness. Islam doesn’t. God in Islam is the unknowable. No one can say what God would do or should do, as if we knew his character, as if he had revealed it to us! Certainly none of the Eastern faiths give us a God of mercy and of justice such as Christians proclaim him to be. Atheism cannot justify *any* concept of something being inherently fair or unfair, just or unjust. Here again, when we complain of *God* being unjust or unfair, we are sawing off the limb we’re standing on. There is no injustice or justice without God. We would have no sense of such things without him and without his image being stamped upon our beings. He alone guarantees that justice exists. And of mankind’s gods, only the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob actually entered this world as one of us, lived and died, suffering injustice all the while, to save us from our sins. It takes some hutzpah to accuse *this* God of a want of justice or mercy!

But all of that still doesn’t address the question, or our doubt about the justice of God’s ways, as profoundly and helpfully as they can be addressed.

We can certainly say of the unreached African in the mid-18th century that he was a sinful man. Anyone who knew him would confirm that to be the case. But our question is: why was that man not given a chance to believe in Jesus? Why did God not get a missionary to him while he was still alive, before the slavers got him? Why did he live his life bereft of the good news?

Well, to begin with, it is important to notice that, while the Bible is very sensitive to the question of the justice of God’s ways, and while it is careful to teach us that his judgments are always scrupulously executed in keeping with the facts of any human life, that men and women will be judged according to their knowledge, their opportunities, and so on, the Bible never faces the question of the unreached *as a problem*, as a reason to question the wisdom, justice, or goodness of God.

That many do not hear of Christ and salvation is a fact and the Bible acknowledges it as a fact. In Romans 2 we read that there are those who live without the law and will be judged without the law. But nowhere is this fact explored as a problem. So we need to be careful that we are not inventing a problem when there isn’t one; that the so-called problem is not rather a case of our misperception, as we have already argued is the case with the struggles Christians have had over eternal punishment.

The classical Arminian, or free-will solution to this “problem” of the large number of human beings who never heard of Jesus Christ is a solution that suggests to me that this is in fact precisely what has happened. Our doubts here are the result of a serious misunderstanding, a

failure to come to terms with the actual teaching of the Bible. Arminians have, as a class, suggested that those who have not heard of Christ and salvation are accountable only for the light that they have. That is true, of course. Paul says as much in Romans 2. But Arminians then go on to say that such people *can be saved* through the use of whatever light they have. If they tried to live a faithful life according to the religious knowledge that they had, whatever that knowledge might have been, that would have been enough for God. That is, they don't have to hear of the gospel and they don't have to believe in Jesus Christ to be saved. Presumably, by analogy there must be a great multitude of people who have been saved in this way, without the knowledge of Jesus, or his cross, or his resurrection. The Bible, however, never says that or suggests that and Paul says explicitly that those who sin without the law *will perish* without the law. The Arminian, however, almost *has to* say that it is possible for unbelievers to be saved without the knowledge of Jesus Christ because ultimately he or she suspends salvation not on the grace of God alone but on the free will and decision of man. How could God hold a man accountable for a decision he had to make who knew nothing of the actual decision God required of him. He had to believe in Jesus but had never heard of Jesus. Therefore, the Arminian reasons, God must be content with less than faith in Christ in the case of those who never heard of Christ.

I have in my library a very fine book entitled *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*. It is written by two Roman Catholics, which is to say, by two Arminians, for in their acceptance of the idea that salvation is, finally, the free decision, the unfettered decision of a man or woman, Roman Catholics are Arminians. And this is the approach taken in this book in giving answer to this objection and this cause of Christian concern. The authors use the example of a "good" pagan like Socrates to form the typical objection. The more you learn about Socrates, perhaps the more you will feel that he isn't the best one to use for this example, but nevertheless they use Socrates.

"It wasn't his fault that [Socrates] didn't live in the right time or place to meet Jesus or a Christian missionary. How unfair and unloving of God to consign most of the world to hell!"

But the answer given to that objection in this otherwise fine book is that Socrates might well have been saved because he might have known Jesus; not, of course, as the incarnate Son of God; not as the one who died on the cross; not as the one who rose from the dead; but as the living God whose light and goodness Socrates might have recognized and worshipped. The authors then go on to write:

"But explicit knowledge of the incarnate Jesus is not necessary for salvation. Abraham, Moses, and Elijah, for instance, had no such knowledge, yet they were saved." [326]

It is, I hope you all realize a bad argument. Those men did know Jesus. They knew him as Yahweh, which the New Testament repeatedly reminds us Jesus was; they knew him as the God who had revealed himself to them and called them into fellowship with himself. They didn't know him by his incarnate name Jesus, but they knew *him!* They had a very explicit knowledge of the living God, of his nature and his will. They knew him as a God of grace and mercy, utterly different from the gods of Socrates' Greek pantheon. Their knowledge of God was the furthest thing from some vague recognition of some divine light or goodness. Jesus himself said, as you remember, "Abraham rejoiced to see my day and was glad." Paul said that Moses spoke of Jesus

and of the gospel. And Elijah, as an OT prophet, put his hope in what the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was going to do to save his people according to the promises he had made in his Word. In Galatians and Hebrews we read that the *gospel* was preached both to Abraham and to Israel. There is nothing remotely like this in the case of Socrates. Paul said rather, that without preaching the gospel, without Christian witness, there can be no salvation. Seeking the Truth as a moral absolute is not the same thing as believing in the one living and true God who gave himself to save us from our sins. [327] Paul also said that, left to themselves, no men seek the truth; not really, not sincerely.

The fact is, there is nothing remotely like this idea of salvation without the knowledge of Jesus Christ anywhere in the Bible. That a person must believe *in Jesus* in order to be saved is the foundation of the entire missionary enterprise begun at Pentecost. It is also the explicit teaching of many passages of the Bible. The Bible's philosophy of history and of human salvation is not Arminian in this respect. All have sinned and been deprived of God's glory; all men live as sinners and rebels against God; they neither submit themselves to God, nor will they or can they. God has chosen a people for salvation and in the history of Jesus Christ, in human history, and in the history of each individual God bestows that salvation. Everywhere in the Bible these are the salient facts: the universal sinfulness and guilt of mankind, the bondage of every human being to a sinful mind and spirit of rebellion against God, and God's sovereign and omnipotent love reaching down to overcome that willful unbelief in the hearts of those who are being saved, drawing them to the knowledge of himself and to the embrace of what he has done for sinners.

No one is owed a chance at salvation; no one is owed a right to hear. You weren't, nor was I, nor is anyone else. The fallen angels are neither redeemed by Christ nor called to salvation and they too are moral beings. People may refer to the "good" heathen, or the "righteous" unbeliever when debating these questions, but, as a matter of fact, such a person does not exist. Such a person has never existed. Every human being is a guilty sinner and a great many of them, as Freud observed, are "trash." That is, anyone who knew the person reasonably well would know that he or she was no paragon of virtue. He or she was as petty as most people are, as small-minded, as selfish, as indifferent to others, and so on. Original sin is the only doctrine in the Bible for which there is overwhelming empirical evidence! Everyone is selfish, everyone breaks the same laws he expects others to keep, everyone fails to love his neighbor as himself almost all of the time. Let's not get ourselves into a stew by forgetting the obvious. No one deserves to be saved.

But what is more important, *no one is lost, no one fails to be saved, no one ever has failed to be saved for want of hearing the gospel*. No one *has ever* been lost because he never heard. It is absolutely true that those who are saved must hear – Paul says that in no uncertain terms in Romans 10. "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord – that is, in context, everyone who calls on the name of Jesus – will be saved. How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are to believe whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" Paul seems to think that the solution to the problem of the unsaved pagan is missionary labor. He never says nor suggests, nor does any other biblical writer, that someone can call on the Lord and be saved without knowing about him, without believing in him, without hearing him, and without someone to tell him about Jesus. It is interesting to me that the authors of this *Handbook* never mention this or any of the other texts that historically

have been understood in Christian theology to teach that only self-conscious Christians can be saved, at least among adults.

But take my main point: the unsaved are not unsaved *because they never heard!* Hearing is never the issue. Many hear the gospel, many have it explained to them very intelligently and commended to them very winsomely who do not believe. Their guilt is only increased as a result. They had the truth in their hands and they cared so little for it that they let it slip through their fingers. What is more, vast multitudes of people today have heard of Jesus but haven't believed in him. Bibles are everywhere, so is Christian radio and TV. Churches beckon on street corners around the world. But hundreds of millions remain unmoved and continue their lives without a thought about Jesus or salvation through him. Are we to believe that somehow or another they are actually searching for God if God himself is right there to be known? If the pagan is really inclined to search and able to find God for himself, in nature or conscience, or whatever, surely we would encounter large numbers of those pagans entering the church who found the living God, the Christian God themselves before they ever heard of Jesus Christ. On the contrary, what we are taught in the Bible and what we observe in the life of mankind is that *everyone who would hear, hears*. Indeed, according to the Bible, without the direct, personal intervention of God, *no one would ever be saved no matter how often he heard the Good News*. With it vast multitudes are saved. If that 18th century African had been chosen by God for salvation, the Almighty, with a sweep of his arm, would have moved whole civilizations out of the way to get one missionary to that man, to explain the gospel to him so that he might believe and be saved. That is sovereign grace at work and so it has been throughout human history. "Don't go into Asia. Don't go north to the Black Sea coast. Go instead to Philippi. Stay in Corinth longer than you planned to because I have much people in this city." And on and on. It is never the case in the Bible that because God didn't communicate the gospel to people in certain times and places there would be people who would have been saved but were not.

I do not deny that God can act in salvation in a way unknown to us, that he can grant faith and life to whomever he pleases. We certainly believe that in the case of covenant children, in the case of the mentally handicapped, and so on. There are mysteries here. The question is not whether God could, the question is whether we have any reason to think that God does grant salvation to people who never heard of Jesus Christ and have no connection to his people. There is nothing in the Bible to suggest he does and a great deal in the Bible to teach us that we are troubled about this in some large part because we have neither taken human sin and guilt seriously nor the absolute necessity of the grace of God and the personal intervention of God to save a sinner. Where a person lived and when a person lived has nothing to do with whether that person is saved. If God intends to save, time and distance are of no matter. If we are to be troubled, if doubts are to rise in our minds, it should be because of the sovereignty of God's grace, his discriminating love. That sovereign love, in fact, completely resolves the problem of human beings who never heard.

I'm developing a theme, as you can see. Many doubts that trouble Christians are caused less by the facts of the matter, as those facts are revealed in Holy Scripture, than by our misunderstanding of either the world or the Word of God. It is easy to be troubled by the fact that vast multitudes of human beings lived and died with no possibility of salvation. It is much harder

to be troubled by the fact that those who never heard are, in the very nature of the case, those who would never have been saved. If they were to be saved, they would have heard.

It is still harder to be troubled by the fact that vast multitudes of human beings never heard the gospel, if the fact that they never heard, something God himself obviously could have prevented, lessens their guilt and so their judgment. I take it as obvious that one reason why many have never heard is precisely because their judgment was lessened thereby. If you are a Christian, you must believe that not everyone is saved. To deny that is to give up the Bible altogether. But if we see God at work lessening the guilt and decreasing the punishment for vast multitudes of human beings – by keeping those who would not believe and be saved at a distance from the gospel – that is a something to cheer, not something to take offense at. What Christian has ever said that it offends me and shakes my faith that God should take steps to protect those who would not believe and would not be saved from the greater guilt that would be theirs had they heard the gospel and still refused to believe?

Our perspective is too narrow, our grasp of the human condition is too sentimental and unrealistic, and, above all, we have hardly begun to appreciate how compassionate, how kind, and how merciful God really is and how his mercy is over all the earth!