

What is the eternal destiny of the unbeliever?

[East Valley International Church](#) continues to lead the way where timeless faith meets cutting-edge innovation. By integrating xAI's Grok—a powerful AI assistant—into our Sunday School classes, we're not only capturing key insights but enhancing our ability to understand and engage with complex biblical truths. In this week's study, Pastor Joey Sampaga addresses one of the most sobering and theologically weighty questions in Scripture: “**What is the eternal destiny of the unbeliever?**” His message carefully unpacks the biblical narrative on eternal judgment, combining scriptural clarity, historical context, and spiritual urgency that speaks directly to today's church.

Thanks to Grok's detailed analysis and note-taking capabilities, we can preserve and reflect on these teachings with added depth and clarity. The AI doesn't replace human teaching—it reinforces it, offering a fresh, organized lens through which to revisit each point. This synergy between Spirit-led teaching and technological assistance is shaping how we learn, grow, and share God's Word, making discipleship more accessible, impactful, and enduring for all.

PROMPT: Write a comprehensive Bible study on the eternal destiny and spiritual condition of those who die without salvation through Jesus Christ.

Grok...

Bible Study: The Eternal Destiny and Spiritual Condition of Those Who Die Without Salvation Through Jesus Christ

This Bible study explores the sensitive and complex question of the eternal destiny and spiritual condition of those who die without explicitly receiving salvation through Jesus Christ, particularly focusing on those who never hear the gospel. It draws on scripture, theological perspectives, and reflection questions to guide personal or group study. The topic touches on God's justice, mercy, human responsibility, and the nature of salvation, with an emphasis on biblical texts and their interpretations within Christian theology.

Introduction

The question of what happens to those who die without salvation through Jesus Christ is one of the most challenging in Christian theology. It raises concerns about God's fairness, the necessity of the gospel, and the fate of those in remote or unevangelized contexts. Scripture provides guidance, but interpretations vary across Christian traditions, leading to views like exclusivism, inclusivism, and conditional immortality. This study will examine key biblical passages, consider theological perspectives, and encourage reflection on God's character and human accountability.

Objective: To understand what the Bible teaches about the eternal destiny of those who die without explicit salvation in Christ, explore theological perspectives, and reflect on how these truths shape our understanding of God and our call to share the gospel.

Materials Needed: Bible, notebook or journal, pen, and an open heart for prayerful study.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, we come before You seeking wisdom and understanding as we study Your Word. Guide us by Your Holy Spirit to grasp Your truth about salvation and the eternal destiny of all people. Help us approach this topic with humility, trusting in Your justice and mercy. May our study deepen our love for You and our commitment to sharing Your gospel. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Section 1: The Universal Need for Salvation

Scripture Reading: Romans 3:23-24, Romans 6:23, John 3:16-18

- Romans 3:23-24: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."
- Romans 6:23: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."
- John 3:16-18: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ... Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

Key Points:

- All humanity is fallen and sinful, deserving spiritual death (separation from God) due to sin.
- Salvation is a gift through faith in Jesus Christ, who atoned for sin through His death and resurrection.
- John 3:18 suggests that unbelief results in condemnation, raising questions about those who never hear of Christ.

Reflection Questions:

1. What does Romans 3:23-24 teach about the universal condition of humanity and the role of Christ's redemption?
2. How does John 3:16-18 balance God's love with the reality of condemnation for unbelief?
3. Why might the Bible emphasize sin's universal impact before discussing salvation?

Section 2: General Revelation and Human Accountability

Scripture Reading: Romans 1:18-20, Romans 2:12-16, Psalm 19:1-4

- Romans 1:18-20: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."
- Romans 2:12-16: "All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. ... This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares."

- Psalm 19:1-4: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. ... Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”

Key Points:

- God reveals Himself through *general revelation* (creation and conscience), making His existence and moral standards evident to all.
- Romans 1:20 states that people are “without excuse” because they suppress the truth revealed in nature.
- Romans 2:12-16 suggests that those without the law (or gospel) are judged by their response to the moral law written on their hearts.

Reflection Questions:

1. How does general revelation (creation, conscience) make God’s existence and moral standards accessible to all people?
2. What does it mean that people are “without excuse” (Romans 1:20)? Does this imply everyone has enough knowledge to be saved?
3. How might God judge those who never hear the gospel, based on Romans 2:12-16?

Section 3: The Exclusivity of Christ and the Necessity of the Gospel

Scripture Reading: John 14:6, Acts 4:12, Romans 10:13-15

- John 14:6: “Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”
- Acts 4:12: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”
- Romans 10:13-15: “For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”

Key Points:

- Jesus is the sole mediator of salvation, emphasizing the exclusivity of Christ as the path to God.
- Romans 10:14-15 highlights the importance of preaching the gospel, suggesting that hearing and believing are normative for salvation.
- These passages challenge inclusivist views and underscore the urgency of evangelism.

Reflection Questions:

1. What does John 14:6 and Acts 4:12 teach about the exclusivity of salvation through Christ?
2. How does Romans 10:13-15 emphasize the role of preaching in salvation? Does this exclude those who never hear the gospel?
3. How do you reconcile the exclusivity of Christ with the reality that some never hear the gospel?

Section 4: The Nature of Eternal Punishment

Scripture Reading: Matthew 25:31-46, Revelation 20:11-15, 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9

- Matthew 25:41, 46: “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’ ... Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”
- Revelation 20:11-15: “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. ... Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.”
- 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9: “He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord.”

Key Points:

- The Bible describes eternal punishment as separation from God, often depicted as “eternal fire” or “everlasting destruction.”
- The “lake of fire” in Revelation symbolizes final judgment for those not found in the book of life.
- Some interpret “eternal punishment” as conscious torment, while others (e.g., annihilationists) see it as cessation of existence.

Reflection Questions:

1. What images does the Bible use to describe eternal punishment? How do these shape your understanding of its nature?
2. How does 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 describe the fate of those who “do not know God” or “do not obey the gospel”?
3. How do you respond emotionally and theologically to the concept of eternal punishment?

Section 5: Theological Perspectives on the Unevangelized

Scripture Reading: Genesis 18:25, 1 Timothy 2:4, Acts 17:26-27

- Genesis 18:25: “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”
- 1 Timothy 2:4: “Who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”
- Acts 17:26-27: “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.”

Theological Perspectives:

1. Exclusivism: Salvation requires explicit faith in Christ. Those who never hear the gospel are lost due to sin (Romans 3:23). This view emphasizes the urgency of missions but struggles with God’s fairness.

2. Inclusivism: Salvation is through Christ alone, but those who never hear the gospel may be saved by responding to general revelation or God’s grace (Romans 2:14-16). Catholic theology (e.g., Vatican II) and some Protestants (e.g., C.S. Lewis) support this view.

3. Conditional Immortality/Annihilationism: Eternal punishment is not eternal torment but cessation of existence (Matthew 10:28). This softens the fate of the unevangelized but is a minority view.

4. Universalism: All will ultimately be saved, but this is widely rejected as contrary to scripture (Matthew 25:46).

Key Points:

- Genesis 18:25 affirms God's just judgment, giving hope that He will judge fairly those who never hear.
- 1 Timothy 2:4 shows God's desire for all to be saved, suggesting He provides opportunities for salvation.
- Inclusivism argues that God may apply Christ's redemption to those who respond to His grace implicitly.

Reflection Questions:

1. How does Genesis 18:25 reassure us about God's judgment of the unevangelized?
2. What does 1 Timothy 2:4 suggest about God's heart for those who never hear the gospel?
3. Which theological perspective resonates most with you, and why? How does it align with scripture?

Section 6: The Call to Evangelism

Scripture Reading: Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15-16

- Matthew 28:18-20: "Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.'"
- Mark 16:15-16: "He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.'"

Key Points:

- The Great Commission underscores the importance of sharing the gospel with all people.
- Evangelism ensures that more people hear and respond to the explicit message of Christ.
- Even inclusivist views support missions, as explicit faith is the clearest path to salvation.

Reflection Questions:

1. How does the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) motivate Christians to share the gospel?
2. How does the call to evangelism relate to the question of the unevangelized?
3. What practical steps can you take to share the gospel with others in your community or beyond?

Application and Discussion

1. Personal Reflection: How does studying the eternal destiny of the unevangelized affect your view of God's character (e.g., His justice, mercy, love)? Write down one way this study challenges or encourages your faith.

2. Group Discussion: Discuss the tension between God's desire for all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4) and the reality of eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46). How do you reconcile these truths?

3. Practical Action: Consider how this study impacts your approach to evangelism. Identify one person or group you can pray for or share the gospel with this week.

Closing Thoughts

The eternal destiny of those who die without salvation through Jesus Christ is a profound mystery that scripture addresses with both clarity and ambiguity. The Bible affirms humanity's universal sinfulness, Christ's exclusive role in salvation, and God's just judgment. While exclusivism emphasizes the necessity of explicit faith, inclusivism offers hope that God's grace may reach those who respond to general revelation. Regardless of theological perspective, the call to share the gospel remains urgent, as it is the clearest path to eternal life. Trusting in God's perfect justice (Genesis 18:25) allows us to rest in His wisdom while fulfilling our mission to make disciples of all nations.

Closing Prayer

Lord God, we thank You for Your Word, which reveals Your truth and Your heart for all people. Help us trust in Your perfect justice and mercy as we wrestle with difficult questions about salvation. Ignite in us a passion to share the gospel, that more may come to know Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life. Guide us by Your Spirit to live out Your love and truth. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Additional Resources:

- Books:
- *A Wideness in God's Mercy* by Clark Pinnock (inclusivist perspective).
- *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis (explores salvation and judgment).
- *Erasing Hell* by Francis Chan (exclusivist perspective on eternal punishment).
- Church Documents: Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* (Catholic inclusivism).
- Scripture for Further Study: Hebrews 9:27-28, Luke 12:47-48, 1 John 2:2.

PROMPT: What is the Christian explanation for eternal punishment for those who allegedly have never heard the message of the gospel?

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Inclusivism in Christianity is the theological view that while salvation is uniquely through Jesus Christ (John 14:6, Acts 4:12), those who have not explicitly heard the gospel may still be saved if they respond positively to God's grace as revealed through general revelation, conscience, or other means. This perspective seeks to balance the exclusivity of Christ as the only way to salvation with the belief in God's justice and mercy for those who lack access to the gospel. Below is a deeper exploration of inclusivism, including its biblical basis, theological development, key proponents, and criticisms.

Biblical Basis for Inclusivism

Inclusivism draws on several scriptural passages to argue that God's salvific grace may extend

beyond explicit knowledge of the gospel:

- Romans 2:14-16: This passage suggests that Gentiles who do not have the Mosaic Law can still follow the law “written on their hearts” and be judged according to their conscience. Inclusivists interpret this to mean that those without explicit knowledge of Christ may respond to God’s moral revelation and be saved through Christ’s atoning work, applied implicitly.
- Acts 17:26-27: Paul’s sermon at the Areopagus describes God arranging human history so that people might “seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him.” Inclusivists see this as evidence that God provides opportunities for all to respond to Him, even without direct gospel knowledge.
- 1 Timothy 2:4: This verse states that God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Inclusivists argue that God’s desire for universal salvation implies He provides sufficient grace for those who never hear the gospel.
- John 1:9: The idea that Christ, the Word, is the “true light that gives light to everyone” suggests a universal illumination that could enable salvation for those who respond positively, even without explicit knowledge of Jesus.
- Old Testament Examples: Figures like Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-20) and Job, who were not part of Israel yet are portrayed as righteous, are often cited as evidence that God can work salvifically outside formal covenant communities.

Theological Development

Inclusivism has roots in early Christian thought but gained prominence in modern theology, particularly in response to questions about the fate of the unevangelized.

Key developments include:

- **Early Church:** Some early Church Fathers, like Justin Martyr (2nd century), suggested that pre-Christian philosophers like Socrates could be saved because they followed the “Logos” (Christ as divine reason) imperfectly revealed in their reasoning. This idea, called the *Logos spermatikos* (seed of the Word), laid groundwork for inclusivism.
- **Catholic Theology:** The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) formalized inclusivism in Catholic doctrine. Documents like *Lumen Gentium* (1964) state that those who “through no fault of their own” do not know the gospel but seek God sincerely and strive to live according to their conscience “may achieve eternal salvation” through Christ’s redemptive work. This view holds that non-Christians (e.g., Muslims, Hindus) can be saved if they follow the light they have received.
- **Protestant Inclusivism:** In Protestant circles, theologians like C.S. Lewis and John Wesley have expressed inclusivist ideas. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity* and *The Last Battle*, suggested that those who follow truth and goodness in other religions might be saved through Christ without knowing Him by name. Wesley, a founder of Methodism, emphasized God’s “prevenient grace” (grace given to all people before conversion), which could enable salvation for the unevangelized.

Key Features of Inclusivism

- **Christ as the Sole Mediator:** Inclusivists maintain that salvation is only through Christ’s atoning work on the cross, but explicit knowledge of Christ is not always necessary. God can apply Christ’s redemption to those who respond to His grace in other forms.

- **Role of General Revelation:** God reveals Himself through creation (Psalm 19:1-4), human conscience, and moral awareness. Those who respond faithfully to this “light” may be saved, as God judges them based on their response to what they know.

- **Ignorance Without Fault:** Inclusivism often emphasizes that those who never hear the gospel through “no fault of their own” (e.g., due to geographic or historical isolation) are not automatically condemned. God’s justice ensures they are judged fairly.

- **Missionary Zeal:** Unlike universalism, inclusivism still supports evangelism, as explicit knowledge of Christ is seen as the clearest and most assured path to salvation.

Key Proponents

- **Catholic Tradition:** Theologians like Karl Rahner developed the concept of the “anonymous Christian,” suggesting that non-Christians who follow God’s grace implicitly participate in Christ’s salvation. Vatican II’s teachings reflect this view.

- **Protestant Theologians:** Clark Pinnock, a modern evangelical theologian, argued for inclusivism in **A Wideness in God’s Mercy** (1992), emphasizing God’s universal love and grace. C.S. Lewis’s writings also reflect inclusivist leanings.

- **Orthodox Perspectives:** Some Eastern Orthodox theologians express inclusivism, focusing on God’s mercy and the mystery of salvation, though they often avoid definitive statements about the unevangelized.

Criticisms and Challenges

Inclusivism is not without controversy, and it faces objections from both exclusivists and universalists:

- **Exclusivist Critique:** Exclusivists, common in evangelical and Reformed circles, argue that inclusivism undermines the necessity of explicit faith in Christ (John 3:18, Acts 4:12). They contend that scripture emphasizes hearing and believing the gospel (Romans 10:14-17), and inclusivism risks diluting the urgency of missionary work.

- **Universalist Critique:** Universalists, who believe all will ultimately be saved, argue that inclusivism does not go far enough, as it still allows for some to face eternal punishment. They question why a loving God would limit salvation to those who respond correctly to vague revelations.

- **Scriptural Ambiguity:** Critics note that while inclusivism cites passages like Romans 2, other verses (e.g., Romans 10:13-14, “How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?”) seem to emphasize the need for explicit preaching. The biblical evidence is debated.

- **Theological Speculation:** Some argue that inclusivism relies on speculative interpretations of God’s judgment, as scripture provides limited clarity on the fate of the unevangelized. This can lead to accusations of reading modern sensibilities into ancient texts.

- **Practical Implications:** Critics question how inclusivism affects evangelistic efforts. If salvation is possible without hearing the gospel, some argue it could reduce the motivation for missions, though inclusivists counter that explicit faith remains the ideal path.

Inclusivism in Practice

Inclusivism often appeals to Christians grappling with the question of God’s fairness in judging those in remote or pre-Christian contexts (e.g., indigenous tribes, ancient cultures, or modern individuals in non-Christian regions). It allows for hope that figures like virtuous pagans, devout

adherents of other faiths, or those who never had a chance to hear the gospel might still be saved. For example:

- A devout Hindu who seeks truth and lives morally might be seen as responding to God's grace, unknowingly participating in Christ's redemption.
- An isolated tribesman who follows his conscience and worships a "great spirit" could be judged by God based on his response to general revelation.

Comparison to Other Views

- **Vs. Exclusivism:** Exclusivism insists on explicit faith in Christ, viewing those who never hear the gospel as lost due to humanity's universal sinfulness (Romans 3:23). Inclusivism is more optimistic about the unevangelized.

- **Vs. Universalism:** Universalism posits that all will be saved, regardless of their response to God. Inclusivism maintains that salvation requires a positive response to God's grace, even if implicit, and does not guarantee universal salvation.

- **Vs. Pluralism:** Pluralism treats all religions as equally valid paths to God. Inclusivism rejects this, affirming Christ as the only way but allowing for implicit participation in His salvation.

Conclusion

Inclusivism offers a middle ground between exclusivism's strict requirement of explicit faith and universalism's assurance of salvation for all. It emphasizes God's justice, mercy, and universal grace while upholding Christ's unique role in salvation. Rooted in scripture and developed through theological reflection, it addresses the fate of the unevangelized by suggesting that God can save those who respond to His grace, even without direct knowledge of the gospel. However, it remains a debated position, with critics questioning its biblical grounding and implications for mission work.