

Life: Those who haven't heard the gospel

January 20, 2014

- *The Bible Studies for Life* lesson for Feb. 2 focuses on Romans 1:16-25.

The summer after my sophomore year of college, I boarded a plane for Thailand. Brand-new passport in hand, I was serving as a summer missionary teaching English in Bangkok. It was a challenging and rewarding summer.

God's heart for the nations

There's something about worshipping with believers singing in a different language that helps you glimpse God's heart for the nations. And yet there would be moments on the bus or walking down a crowded street when I would find myself looking into people's faces and wondering how many had ever heard the name of Jesus. Who would tell them? What happens to people who have never heard the gospel?

Many people wrestle with the question of what happens to people who never have heard the gospel. On one hand, we know the Bible unflinchingly teaches Jesus is the only way to salvation. No one comes to the Father but through him, and there is no other name given under heaven by which we can be saved (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). On the other hand, it clashes with our sense of justice. In our human understanding, it seems unfair to hold someone accountable for something they didn't know.

God revealed in his creation

Yet Romans 1 makes it clear there are no excuses (v. 20). God reveals

himself in creation (vv. 19-20). In fact, God has made it plain he exists. Creation reveals there is a God, and we should seek him. On its own, creation does not explain the gospel, but it is enough to reveal God's existence and power in a way people are compelled to respond.

We are accountable to God for whatever knowledge of God we have received, whether revealed through creation or through Bible stories learned at our mother's knee. But instead of seeking God, we exchanged truth for a lie and worshipped the created instead of the creator (v. 25). We all are guilty.

After the Hebrew people escaped from their slavery in Egypt, they gathered at the base of Mount Sinai. God met with the people there. They had seen God do miraculous things. He alone had delivered them from the Egyptians. God had parted the Red Sea and given them manna in the wilderness. Now the Lord summoned them to the mountain.

While Moses was on the mountain meeting with the Lord, the people grew restless. They exchanged the glory of God for an idol of gold—gold they had received from the Egyptians as a sign of the great fear God had placed on the nation of Egypt (Exodus 32:1-10).

A god in our own image

We wonder how they could be so foolish, but it is a story repeated in every time and every nation. Instead of worshipping God, we exchange his power for a god made in our own image—a god we can understand and control. Some bow down to manmade idols of wood or stone. Others worship the intangible but seductive gods of money, power and fame. We all have worshipped our own idols, and we all stand condemned.

God did not leave us without hope. The gospel is the power of God for salvation (vv. 16-17). The gospel demonstrates God judges sin perfectly, including the sin of rejecting him. The gospel also proves God loves

perfectly. God sent his own son to take our punishment so we could be made righteous before God.

Christ's death satisfies both God's justice and God's mercy and proves God's good intentions of bringing salvation to all people. Because of Christ, we can proclaim that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13).

What then should we do about those who never have heard the gospel? First, we must recognize our ability to ask the question implies we have both heard and understood the truth. In Scripture, truth is never just an intellectual understanding; truth is something we must respond to and obey. For those of us who have heard the name of Jesus, we must be prepared to respond.

Who is Jesus to me? Will I dismiss him a fiction or an irrelevant historical figure? Will I appreciate his moral teachings, missing that Jesus proved goodness is impossible apart from God? Or will I bow before him and acknowledge him as Savior and Lord? We all must answer the Savior's question: "Who do you say I am?" (Matthew 16:15).

With knowledge comes responsibility

Second, we must acknowledge that with knowledge comes responsibility. Paul's heart cry must become our own: "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Romans 10:14-15).

As long as there are people groups and language groups with no church, no Bible and no Christian witness, the church's great commission remains unfulfilled. Whether we gather on Sunday with a congregation of 10 or

10,000, we all share the same responsibility. There is no church too small to share the gospel. What will be our part in carrying the gospel to those who have never heard?