

An Analysis Of The Key Disputed Universalistic Texts

Why there is so much controversy about salvation and the Gospel message? It is because there are popular Biblical verses which seem to contradict clear statements of doctrine elsewhere. Bible students have long disagreed how best to deal with this apparent problem. Some carefully evaluate the texts and harmonise them with sound Biblical teaching - this is the Calvinistic answer. Others change Biblical teaching and develop a new theological system to comply with the supposed universalistic teaching in these texts - this is the Arminian answer. While some try to hold the contention in a confused balance. This is done by

1. Maintaining strange rules of interpretation (such as suggesting these verses are an acceptable paradox, despite being totally contradictory).¹
2. Suggesting that God has two contradictory wills (he desires the salvation of all but chooses only to save some).²
3. Or by developing a hybrid system of theology that is hypothetical and confused - this is the Amyraldian approach.³

The only sane way to interpret scripture is to start with a clear understanding of the Biblical doctrine of salvation, and then interpret the difficult verses in their context and in the light of sound theology. This is what I intend to do here. To begin with we must briefly establish a sound Biblical theology of the Doctrines of Grace.

Sound Biblical Theology of Salvation

Man is lost in sin

Man isn't simply weakened by sin, he is not merely sick or enslaved - he is dead in trespasses and sins. He has no spiritual ability and no self-determination to reach God. He is incapable of any spiritual good of any sort, since his heart is desperately corrupt and wicked. Even the best 'good works' that he can produce are merely 'splendid sins': his sacrifices are an abomination (Prov 15:8) as are his thoughts (Prov 15:26); even his farming is sin (Prov 21:4). Man has no hope unless God saves him.

EPH 2:1; COL 2:13; PS 51:5, 58:3; JN 3:5-7; JER 17:9.

God chose those who would be saved in eternity by his sovereign good pleasure

History is concerned with the salvation of those chosen by God to be his chosen vessel of manifestation - the body of Christ. Instead of damning man for his sin and obliterating the world, God selected a portion of the human race to be saved, despite their rebellion. This is mercy and love. These were not saved for anything they would later do in the future, since everything they do is sin. God's foreknowledge is his foreknowing to love and his choice is totally down to his good pleasure.

EPH 1:4-5; RM 8:28-33; 2 TIM 1:9; 2 THESS 2:13; ACTS 13:48; PS 65:4; DEUT 10:15.

¹ There is a difference between a sensible paradox, where two Biblical statements have an appearance of contradiction but can be harmonised, and contradiction where the result demeans God's glory or denies his essential attributes.

² Of course this posits confusion in God. See my paper, *Does God Have Two Contradictory Wills?*

³ Amyraldism was first developed to attempt unification between Calvinists and Lutherans and tries to uphold Arminian type universalism (God desires to save everyone) and the particularism of Calvinism (God elects only some to eternal life in practice).

God is said to love the elect but hate the wicked

How could God love those he has not chosen to save? How could his love rest upon people in hell? How can God's love change, as if he loved the wicked on earth but hates them in hell? God's cannot change; he is immutable. If his love changes, or if he has various types of love, he ceases to be God who only ever does things perfectly, fully and completely. The Father only loves those he has given to Jesus; and the Lord only prays for these people, not the rest of the world: *I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom you have given me ... I in them, and you in me ... and have loved them as you have loved me ... I have declared to them your name, and will declare it that the love with which you loved me may be in them.* (Jn 17:9, 23, 26)

EPH 1:4; LEV 20:23, 26:27-30; PS 5:5, 6, 11:5; PROV 22:14; ZECH 11:8; MAL 1:2-3; JN 5:42; RM 5:5, 8, 35, 9:13; 1 JN 2:15; REV 3:19

Christ died for those elected by God and no one else.

The Lord Jesus was tasked with the awful job of providing atonement for the sin of the elect. This meant dying for them to take all their punishment in himself. The task of the Spirit is to apply that atonement to the ones chosen by God in time and secure their salvation to the end. Christ does not die for anyone else or that portion of his blood would be spurned and wasted - such a thing is impossible. His death is as wide as his intercession (JN 17:9, 20), and this is for the sheep that God gave him not for the goats that are cursed (JN 10:14-16); for the 'many' not all (ISA 53:11; HEB 9:28); for his people not the wicked (MATT 1:21); for the church, not the world (ACTS 20:28). Those for whom Christ shed his blood are definitely saved. His work is fully accomplished.

JN 6:35-37; RM 1:6-7, 8:30.

God calls the elect to certain salvation in his time

The beginning of conversion is when God calls a person in time. This is done through the Gospel, whether by preaching, conversation or reading. When an elect person hears the Gospel, he receives an inward empowering call from God that effectually draws him to Christ. The Spirit regenerates this person by changing their heart. Jesus calls this being born again. The reprobate (non-elect people) are not called inwardly by the Gospel, indeed the message of salvation hardens them in their sin.

RM 8:14, 9:22-25; 1 COR 12:3; JN 1:13; 1 JN 5:4; EPH 4:4; 2 TIM 1:9.

Faith and repentance are given to the elect by God

Scripture states that faith is not something man can achieve; believing on Christ to salvation is a grace-gift from God that comes from a regenerated heart. Repentance is a thorough change of mind and direction from sin to following Christ, which is part and parcel of true faith.

JN 6:29; ACTS 5:31, 11:18, 14:27, 18:27; EPH 2:8-9; PHIL 1:29; 2 TIM 2:25-26.

Those who are chosen by God, for whom Christ died, will certainly be glorified

Those who are called are regenerated, given faith, given repentance, given the righteousness of Christ spiritually & legally and are then progressively sanctified actually through the Spirit's activity. God promises to see these through to the end so that they are supported and protected by the Spirit until finally glorified with a new spiritual body at the end. Thus truly saved people can be seen by the fruit of their lives that expresses the grace of Christ. Since Christ's prayers are always answered fully, we can rest that his prayer that we should be kept will be also heard: *Holy Father, keep through your name those whom you have given me, that they may be one as we are.* (Jn 17:11).

ISA 43:1-3; JER 32:40; MATT 18:12-14; JN 3:16, 36, 5:24, 6:35-40; COL 3:4; 1 JN 3:2.

Having established that this is true, Biblical doctrine regarding salvation and conversion, any verse that appears to teach something contrary cannot be interpreted that way; it must be carefully checked in context to see what it really means.

The Universalistic Texts

There are a few texts that superficially seem to support the Arminian position by suggesting that God's love is universal and not particular; i.e. God loves everyone equally and desires their salvation, while other verses seem to imply that Jesus died for everyone indiscriminately. Since sound theology teaches us that neither position is true, they cannot mean this and must be interpreted carefully.

Defenders of the idea that God shows grace and love to the wicked reprobate can find very few texts to support their position, while there are very many which show that God's only dealing with them is condemnation. Some say that this is because God did not want to encourage complacency in sinners, but that, nevertheless, God's intention to bless them is sincere. This is a very weak argument. There is not even one clear, undisputed text to set against the many declaring God's hatred for the wicked.⁴ A careful consideration of these texts is called for.

The Optative Passages

The word 'optative' means, 'something that is expressive of a wish or desire'; hence these texts are those in which it appears that God is expressing a desire for the salvation of the reprobate. One matter to be borne in mind in considering these verses is the unusual character of Israel. The Jews had been chosen as the people of God from amongst many nations, as such, they were an example and type of the particular election of God's people from the world. Israel, in general, demonstrates God's selection of some not others. In terms of the world's ancient nations, Israel is favoured with an especial relationship to God (Rm 11:1, 2, 5; Deut 7:6-8; Ps 147:19-20; Acts 14:16).

Within Israel, however, there is a further selection. Not all within Israel are truly Israelites (i.e. elect; Rm 9:6-7); there is a further process of discrimination in order to be an object lesson for the church (Rm 11:5, 7). Within God's decree, there is a call to Israel as a nation, and there is an effectual call to a remnant; but God called the whole nation his son because of this special relationship amongst the nations (Hos 11:1).

In order for God to justly remonstrate with his people as a nation, there are many passages where God speaks to Israel in very paternal terms and often with great longing. If God had not warned Israel, in this and many other ways, he would have been unjust; and so we have passages like the following where God is said to long for an obedient people who tended to be wayward. In some passages it is difficult to assess whether God is addressing Israel in general terms as an elect nation, Israel as elect but wayward needing to repent, or elect/reprobates from within Israel. It is not good enough for expositors to happily draw promises from Israel's experience as a rule, but suddenly declare that certain passages are actually addressing the reprobate or all men. Each passage has to be examined within context. We will look at three.

Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear me and always keep all my commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever! (Deut 5:29)

⁴ For example: Ps 5:4-5, 11:5-6, 34:21, 37:20, 37:38, 45:7; Prov 3:33; Mal 1:2-3; Rm 9:11-13.

It is the covenant people who are addressed here (5:1). Moses is reminding them of their commitment to God upon hearing the 10 Commandments. In this verse God simply states that this attitude of humble commitment would bear good fruit for them if they continued.

God is speaking of a covenant people who had submitted to his law and committed themselves to his ways, stating that such an obedient heart would bode well with them. Is this not true? An obedient, covenant people will do well. How can this be applied to the lost?

Oh, that you had heeded my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea. (Isa 48:18)

This is addressed to the house of Jacob, the elect line. God says that he will defer his anger to those addressed (v9) and that these people may not be 'cut off', but rather, refined (v10). The Lord speaks of these people, who swear by his name (v1), in terms of love (v14), calling (v15), redemption (v17, 20), leading and teaching them (v17), and then a longing for their obedience (v18). Though rebuked for failing, these people are elect, not reprobate.

Oh, that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways! (Ps 81:13)

The context of the whole Psalm shows that this text is very similar, being a warning to the wayward but elect. In fact, they are contrasted with those who hate the Lord.

Other Old Testament passages

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Ps 103:8

This verse does not say that God loves, or is gracious to the wicked. There is no question that this verse is referring to elect, covenant people (v18). The Psalm makes a distinction between his sons who fear him (v13) and the natural man whose days are like grass (v15); between those who know his ways and those who only see his acts (v7). The steadfast love of the Lord is upon those who fear him (v17). God's love is not said to be upon anyone else. The Psalm is a response of a righteous, redeemed man (v3-4) to this loving God who forgives iniquity (v3) and is merciful to his children (v13).

The LORD *is* good to all, and His tender mercies *are* over all His works. (Ps 145:9)

This verse is the nearest one can get in the Old Testament to God expressing love for the wicked. But does it?

Firstly, it says he is good to all. This is God's providence, his provision of rain and sun, seasons and harvest, to enable man to live. It is God that stops comets ploughing into the earth and prevents a global flood.

Secondly, it says that God's tender mercies are over all his works. What are these? The Hebrew root word is ~x;r; *racham*, (Strong's 7356) which is usually translated as 'mercy' by the KJV. It's root meaning is 'womb', and from that is derived the meaning of 'compassion'. It is not the word for 'love' or 'steadfast love' (*chesed*, 2617) which is the word applied to the elect in the OT. *Chesed* is conditional upon there being a covenant relationship;

without a covenant, there can be no steadfast love.⁵ *Chesed* is not ever applied to the reprobate in the OT. It appears in verse 8, translated as mercy by the NKJV, **The LORD is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and great in mercy.** The Lord loves (*chesed*) his covenant people but is compassionate (*rachamim*) towards all he has made - i.e. providentially supports his creation.

It is a remarkable fact that the word *chaciyd* [Strong's 2623, the adjectival form of *chesed*] when applied to man ... [indicates] that the persons ... belong in a special sense to God ... they are regarded as God's own.⁶

God's electing love is the word '*ahabah* (Strong's 157). It is this love that is the cause of the covenant between God and the elect and the means of its continuance. I can find no reference of '*ahabah* or *chesed* used by God to sinners (i.e. reprobates). The general benevolence of God = '*ahabah*, the covenant love of God = *chesed*.⁷

So, there is no mention of a love of God to reprobate sinners in this psalm.

Some Bible translations show the word 'love' in Ps 145:9, but the word does not appear in the best texts and is somewhat arbitrarily, and unwisely, added to modern versions like the NIV on the most flimsy textual basis. The NIV translation of v9b that God is 'loving to all he has made', is not found in the majority of manuscripts; in fact only one manuscript of the Masoretic text has this statement. It seems quite irresponsible to include it. The word 'loving' does not appear in the following translations: King James Version, New King James Version, American Standard Version, New American Standard Bible (1977), New American Standard Bible (1995), Revised Standard Version, New Revised Standard Version, Darby Bible, Bible in Basic English.

To summarise:

- The Psalm itself distinguishes between a providential goodness that supplies food (v15-16), through the giving of sunshine and rain, and a covenantal graciousness and mercy. It is this providential goodness which is referred to in v9.
- The Psalm distinguishes between the wicked (v20) and those that fear God, the elect (v19), those who call upon him (v18). The Lord is good in providential supply to *all* people, everyone. (In Hebrew this is further emphasised as a distinct group by using the definite article *the all*.) But God is gracious and merciful only to some. This distinction is repeatedly seen in the Psalm. God is only near to those who cry to him and love him, but the wicked he destroys (v19-20). All men proclaim God's mighty acts, seen objectively as terrible (v6); but those in relationship to the Lord (e.g. David, the writer of this Psalm) declare God's greatness (v6). A generation declares God's acts and mighty works (v4) but David meditates on these acts and sees the glorious splendour of God's majesty (v5). It is the saints who bless God (v10) - not said of ordinary men. In fact these saints make known to men God's deeds and the glory of his kingdom (v12).
- The Psalm does not say that God loves the wicked, that God is merciful to the reprobate wicked, that God loves everyone. Phrases like these do not exist.
- God is good. A perfect God, who is love, maintains the world he has created until the day of his wrath and judgment. As a God of purpose, he will not cease to supply food in general terms until the time comes in his plan for a reckoning with mankind. Food supply is, therefore, a benefit of God's loving kindness. This providence is not an

⁵ N Snaith; *Distinctive Ideas of the OT*; Epworth Press (1945); p95.

⁶ R.B. Girdlestone; *Synonyms of the OT*; Baker (1983); p31

⁷ Other words for love: Yediyd 3039, Rea' 7453, 'Aqab 5689, Chashaq 2836, Dowdiym 1730. Other words translated as love in LXX, eleos 1656 i.e. mercy, sometimes righteousness 1343 also 1654, 1680, 3741.

indication of a desire to save.

- The terms used in verse 8 are covenantal, *chesed* (steadfast love), but the terms used in v9 are not, *rachamim* (kindness, compassion, pity). Verse 8 is applicable to the elect alone and verse 9 to all people generally.

I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! (Ezek 33:11)
 'Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?' says the Lord GOD, 'and not that he should turn from his ways and live?' (Ezek 18:23)

God commands all people to turn, to repent. It gives him pleasure when they do. Those that turn are saved and are thus elect since repentance is a grace gift of God. Those that do not repent will die eternally. The Ezekiel passages particularly emphasise a distinction in salvation, not a universal desire for salvation. God's justice is seen in the condemnation of the wicked, but this does not give him pleasure. We should simply leave these passages to say what they say.

God does not gain pleasure from the death of anyone and thus has chosen some to eternal life in his great mercy. Those who choose to sin are left to judgment. The death of his own Son gave him no pleasure, but he allowed it because it glorified himself. God genuinely doesn't enjoy the death of anyone, but since all men by nature refuse him, he has sovereignly chosen some to life.

No Calvinist denies that God has no pleasure in the death of men and is pleased with man's repentance. This is all these texts say. There is no hint here that God desires, wills and intends the salvation of all.

Such passages simply assert the essential benevolence of God. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He does take pleasure in the salvation of men. Yet as a matter of fact, in perfect consistency his benevolence, for reasons sufficient, though not revealed to us, he has provided no redemption for lost angels, and no efficacious grace for the non-elect of mankind.

A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*; Nelson (1883) p227

Perhaps we can look at this theologically. The word 'pleasure' is the Hebrew word *#pex' chaphets* (Strong's 2654) meaning to take delight in, pleasure in. This same word is used of the Lord's desire to kill Eli's sons for their sin, The LORD *desired* to kill them. (1 Sam 2:25). How do we square this? God doesn't desire the death of the wicked one minute, but does the next. We must try to imagine God's purposes in eternity where he sees all things and determines the future on Earth.

In general terms God looked upon the world of men, full of sin and rebellion, where their end is death and hell. He does not take pleasure in this; death is an aberration, an affront to God the creator of life. It is the fulness of sin that causes death and it is abhorrent. In his mercy, God determined to rescue a portion of mankind and undertook for them to bring hope and life to the world. God didn't need to do this, he could have destroyed the world and started anew, but in his love he chose to give grace and sonship to the elect. These elect people are saved and glorified through God's sovereign grace.

But God's justice must also be fulfilled, and sin must be condemned. So hell is decreed as

the punishment for sin. Those who are not chosen for salvation are left in sin and must suffer condemnation. Since Eli's sons were clearly reprobate, God desired their death, as he intends the death of all decreed to wrath.

God's taking no pleasure in the death of the wicked generally led to his election of some to life. His testimony of justice and wrath against sin leads to his specific desire for the death and condemnation of reprobates.

New Testament passages

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? Matt 5:43-46

But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. Lk 6:35-36

The argument is that if God commands us to love even our enemies as representatives of our Father, then our Father must also love his enemies. God, therefore, loves the reprobate. How can God command us to love those that he hates? Is the scope of our love greater than God's?

However, the fact that God is compassionate in his providence towards all, in that he sends rain and sun to provide food, does not mean that he exercises love as virtue to all. This is similar to the reasoning in Ps 145.

Our situation is not the same as God. We are on earth and do not know who is elect, consequently, we are to love all. Saul was an enemy of the church, but soon became the greatest apostle in the early church. The one that despised and persecuted the church became its chief supporter.

The church is here called by Jesus to be pacifist. There is no place for violence or even hating anyone. We must be indiscriminate in our love, and must love all. Just as God is indiscriminate in the way he provides sun and rain for all, even for those he hates.

We must take great care in trying to read back the character of God from his commands to us. It is much wiser to learn about God's attributes from clear statements about them elsewhere. For instance, who will be bold enough to say that God longs for Satan's rehabilitation or that Jesus intercedes for him on the basis that we must pray for those who persecute us? *In fact we know* that Jesus does not pray for reprobates (Jn 17:9). Such an interpretation from Matt 5 would be false and in conflict with other scriptures. The rule for the creature does not equally apply to the creator. He is wholly above our order. The parallel passage in Luke 6:27-36 adds the action of lending money, a notion totally unsuited of application to God.

The writer's argument is that God preserves his creation, even though it is spoiled by sin. God is good to all. Man's hate to God and nature's bondage does not stop a good God from providing for creation's welfare. Since we have a God like this, we also must be good to

others to the extent of our capabilities. Our capabilities are limited to good reactions to evil actions upon us. The reaction of a godly person to evil is to repay it with good (Rm 12:17-21). This is how we show love to enemies. Those we thus love are not loved by God, he will repay vengeance upon those who mistreat us (Rm 12:19-20).

There really is no problem here at all. The point that Jesus is making is that there is no credit to love or do good to those who love you or do good to you (v32-33). Our motive to do good to all people, including evil people, is that God has acted likewise. If we do good to bad people, we will be acting like him and be seen to be of him. [Note that Luke is careful to say that God is *kind* to the unthankful, not that he loves them.]

Scripture is full of references to God hating sinners, to suggest that these verses teach otherwise would strip them of any sensible meaning; hence these verses cannot teach that God loves everyone. In what way did God love Esau? All that God does is perfect and complete, without complication. If God loves someone, he loves them to the end. God's love, therefore, saves. If the reprobate are not saved, then God cannot love them, or else he would have failed to love properly. Those upon whom God sets his love, he protects and redeems. This sense of protection is contained within the meaning of the word love.

God has loved those that, at one time, were bad and against him - the elect. God's reaction to a world of men in rebellion to him was not to destroy that world, a just and righteous act by the way, but he expressed love to that world by redeeming a portion of the human race, by his own power and at great cost, in order to populate a new world with people that love and obey him. If we love others, then we are following our Father who expressed love to a fallen world.

Regarding the last part of Luke 6 35-36: *'He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be compassionate (merciful), just as your Father also is compassionate.'* We should note the following: Jesus is moving on to explaining that God even continues to be kind to fallen men now, he is so patient with this fallen world. 'Kind' is *chrestos*, meaning good, kind, easy and its base meaning is *something appropriate or superior for a particular use*. For example, Jesus' yoke is *chrestos* (easy). This cannot be stretched to mean loving or gracious. Again it refers to God's provision for those who hate him.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under *her* wings, but you were not willing! Matt 23:37

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen *gathers* her brood under *her* wings, but you were not willing! Lk 13:34

This is often taken as an expression of Jesus' love for all, including the wicked, in Jerusalem at that time; therefore, God must love everyone. But is this true? What do the texts actually say?

Firstly, Jesus does not say he wants to gather everyone in Jerusalem, but only the children. In fact, Jerusalem (i.e. the inhabitants of Jerusalem) is described as persecuting God's prophets and killing them. Clearly these are not elect people. Jesus wants to gather the children of Jerusalem, i.e. the elect true sons of the Old Covenant city of God. Instead, the inhabitants of Jerusalem prevented Jesus gathering the children he wanted to nourish and

persecute him just as they persecuted the Old Testament men of God.

What Jesus has in mind is his parable of the wicked vine-dressers (Matt 21:33-46). Even the Pharisees could see that this represented them.

Later he made a similar observation, **Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, 'If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things *that make* for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes'** (Lk 19:41-42). Jerusalem, represented by its religious leaders that should have known the Messiah, declared war on him instead of submitting to him.

Far from this passage being an expression of God's love for the wicked, it is the reverse. Jesus prophesies about Jerusalem's future, lamenting its failure to identify the Messiah. Jerusalem contained two sorts of people, those who trusted in the Messiah (elect) and those who did not. Some of those who initially failed to recognise Jesus as the Christ, later did so as we learn in Acts. If Jesus' tears show a disposition of goodness in God to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, it is applicable solely to the elect.

Israel was appointed originally to be a light to the Gentiles with the word of God and failed utterly in the task. Instead she prided herself on the privileged status as God's own; thus Rabbis called the Gentiles 'dogs'. All this was in God's plan that included a rejection of Israel as the means of testifying to the whole world, the church being appointed to this task (Matt 21:43). This is declared in both the Old and New Testaments.⁸ Jesus laments this failure in the same way that God mourns Israel's behaviour in the Psalms and prophetic books. The fact that the things that make for peace were hidden from their eyes, proves that this is referring to reprobates. Those that rejected the Messiah in Jerusalem were reprobates.

Jesus' lament is slightly amplified in Lk 19:41. Again a strong case can be made that he is referring to the elect that he wished to gather. It is a reference to Israel's failure, a statement that is too vague to draw out notions about God's attributes. If we insist that Jesus is here referring to reprobates, then we have a God who is sad, and longing for fellowship with a wayward creation, desperately holding out his arms in loving welcome and being completely frustrated by sinners who reject his offer. Neither does this make sense in a chapter about condemnation of religious leaders. Can Jesus really be holding out loving arms to those whom he condemned to hell a few verses earlier (v33)?

'Your children' (Matt 23:37) refers to the elect of Jerusalem who were spurned by unbelieving Jews and even murdered. This is the clear implication from the immediate context (v30, 31, 34, 35). The elect community could not be gathered as a testimony to the wider community because they were persecuted. Jesus grieves over this and declares that judgment is upon Jerusalem as a result (v38). Just as the historical testimony of prophets (God's children) was rejected violently, the culmination of the sin of Jerusalem's religious leaders was to be the rejection and crucifixion of the last in the line of God's testimony - Jesus, God's own son.

There is no love of God shown to reprobates here.

⁸ As God's people, Israel was to be God's priesthood, as part of a missionary work to the rest of the nations (Isa 42:6,45:4-6; Zech 8:23; Ex 19:5). Israel failed, not only in this venture but also in her own faithfulness to the covenant (Rm 11:21). Jesus came as the obedient servant who fulfilled the will of God and attributed the work of missionary to the world to himself and his people. He even lifts passages in Isaiah relating to the future glory of Zion (like 61:1-4, 42:1-6) and consciously fulfils them in himself (Mt 12:17-21; Lk 4:16-21).

And He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.' Mk 16:15

There is no problem here, the text means what it says. All believers are commanded to preach the Gospel to everyone. This does not mean that everyone is able to receive it and believe. Our obligation is to witness to every person possible; but there are two reactions to our witness for Christ. The first is that God gives grace to a person because they are elect and this person receives the Good News wholeheartedly and is converted. The second response is to reject the Gospel and be further hardened in sin.

This text does not imply that anyone can believe if they want. It states that Christians must preach indiscriminately to all.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. Jn 3:16

John often uses the word *world* in a restrictive sense (e.g. Jn 12:19), just as we do today. When we say, 'Where in the world is my pen?' we mean, 'Where in this house is my pen'. John's use of it in 1:29 and 3:17 would imply Universalism if he meant everyone on the earth. It cannot mean everyone in 3:16 since it then must also mean everyone in the next verse [For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved]. This would mean that there are no people in hell and everyone is saved. If it meant 'all', what about the people in earlier history who had died in God's wrath, like the Canaanite nations or Sodom?

John records Jesus as specifically not praying for the world, but only a portion of it who would be saved (17:3-9). John also tells believers not to love the world in 1 Jn 2:15-17. How can we not love the world that God loves? We must obviously tread carefully here. 'World' clearly has a variety of meanings in scripture.

With one exception, the word 'world' in John's Gospel is the Greek word '*Kosmos*'. It originally meant *ornament*, but came to mean order, arrangement, beauty (from which we get *cosmetics*) in the sense of good orderly appearance. Pythagoras used it to refer to the ordered arrangement of the universe. From this it came to refer to the external framework where man lives and is the moral centre, thence to mean all men or all in a group.⁹ The general meaning then is: *orderly arrangement* or even *harmony, an organic whole*. When it refers to mankind it always involves man as organically related to the orderly creation.

Scripture uses several meanings; we can distinguish:

- The universe (Acts 17:24).
- The physical earth (Jn 1:10, 9:32, 13:1; Eph 1:4).
- The people on the earth (Jn 1:10).
- The earthly sphere of human existence (Jn 12:25).
- The local people in the vicinity of Jesus (Jn 7:4).
- A certain group of people in Israel (Jn 12:19).
- The world system ruled by Satan (Jn 7:7, 12:31, 16:11).

⁹ R. C. Trench, *Synonymns of the NT*, Baker, Grand Rapids (1989); p 227ff.

- Mankind (Rm 3:19).
- The world of the reprobate wicked (Jn 15:18).
- Those who do not receive the Spirit (Jn 14:17, 22, 27, 15:19).
- The people who cannot see that Jesus is God (Jn 14:19).
- Gentiles, non-Jews (Rm 11:2).
- Believers, the elect only (Jn 1:29, 4:42, 6:33, 51).

We can see how varied the meaning of the word is just in John's Gospel alone.

In Jn 3:16, therefore, the word *world* must simply mean the total of the elect as an organic whole. We've seen that it cannot mean all men, therefore, it must mean all those saved in Christ. John is also using this word to emphasise that it is not only Jews who would be saved, as the religious leaders taught.

God so loves the world of men, humanity, that he wants a world of people to be saved and love him. To this end he has decreed that a portion of the current world's population will be saved to make a new world of redeemed humanity. In the end, God will have a world of chosen people, a holy population in Christ. It is not everyone who ever lived or it would include those that God has already damned, like the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, or the Canaanite nations.

John, like other writers (especially Peter) uses universalistic terms to make the point to Jews that salvation is now being made available to Gentiles as well. Jews found this a difficult concept to grapple with. Salvation is now available to all the nations of the world.

A further comment; Arminians make much of the argument that God is love - this is a central and unbalanced preoccupation of today's evangelicals. He cannot sovereignly chose some and not give opportunity to all as that is not loving. If he is love, if his core of being is love, then such a choice would deny God's essential attribute.

Such an argument shows great ignorance of the person of God. It is true that John sates that God is love (I Jn 4:8), and that he is. John makes this emphasis in a section on the need for brotherly love. If we are true disciples, we will be like our Father and will love. But God is not just love. He is holiness. He is justice. He is righteousness. He is truth. He is terrible in majesty. God's 'attributes' are not characteristics tacked on to his core being of love, God is all that he is. We use the word 'attributes' to help us understand who God is. God is not just love, he is many things. He is all justice; he is all righteousness etc. If one characteristic is superlative, then it must be his holiness, not his love, since his holiness is mentioned far more frequently, and holiness is the only attribute that is mentioned in a triple-named format, 'Holy, Holy, Holy (Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8).

Since love is what God is, God's love is perfect, full, is ever applied to its objects from eternity, is complete and mature. There is no secondary love, no half love, and no full love for one but a lesser love for another. There is not a love applied to some forever and another love applied to others for a while. Those whom God loved in eternity, are always loved (Eph 1:4) and are loved fully and completely. No others are loved. To suggest otherwise is to suggest that God is not God, that he is not perfect, that he is subject to change and diminution.

COMMENTS

That "the world" in John 3:16 refers to the world of believers (God's elect), in contradistinction from "the world of the ungodly" (2 Peter 2:5), is established,

unequivocally established, by a comparison of the other passages which speak of God's "love." "God commendeth His love toward US"—the saints, Romans 5:8. "Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth"—every son, Hebrews 12:6. "We love Him, because He first loved US"—believers, 1 John 4:19. The wicked God "pities" (see Matthew 18:33). Unto the unthankful and evil God is "kind" (see Luke 6:35). The vessels of wrath He endures "with much long-suffering" (see Romans 9:22). But "His own" God "loves"!!

A W Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*, Appendix 3 (Baker Edition not Banner of Truth which omits this and much more).

God, strictly speaking, has no attributes. His attributes are Himself. We speak, for instance, of the love of God, but God is love; of the justice of God, but God is just; of the holiness of God, but God is holy; of the purity of God, but God is pure. As He is all love, so He is all justice, all purity, all holiness. Love, then, is infinite, because God is infinite; His very name, His very character, His very nature, His very essence is infinite love. He would cease to be God if He did not love, and if that love were not as large as Himself, as infinite as His own self-existent, incomprehensible essence. The love of the Son of God, as God the Son, is co-equal and co-eternal with the love of the Father; for the holy Trinity has not three distinct loves, either in date or degree. The Father loves from all eternity; the Holy Ghost loves from all eternity. The love of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, as one, equal, indivisible, infinite Jehovah cannot be otherwise but One.

J C Philpot, *Through Baca's Vale*, meditation on Hosea 11:9

[God] desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 1 Tim 2:4

Does this suggest that God has provided a global salvation which is left for man to grab hold of? No! If *all men* is interpreted as every man and woman, then it clearly teaches that God will save every single person - Universalism. This is strengthened by verse 6 which states that Jesus gave himself as a ransom for *all*. We know that not everyone is saved, the Bible's doctrine of salvation is not universalistic. Jesus even specifically said some of his hearers would be damned. If only one person was in hell, then this makes God a liar. So these verses cannot apply to everyone on earth!

A little later Paul tells us that Christians can eat all sorts of food, **For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.** (1 Tim 4:4-5) To take this literally means that Christians could be cannibals if they give thanks first. This is ludicrous. Just because Paul uses the clause, 'nothing is to be refused' it does not mean that nothing is prohibited; he means that no normal food that is offered is to be refused. When he says, 'every creature' he does not mean every single creature on earth, but every animal normally used for food - even pork. His purpose was to emphasise that all types of normal food was allowed; there are no religious dietary restrictions for believers as there was for Jews. Similarly, 'all men' cannot mean every person who ever lived.

The Reformed interpretation of this passage is to identify the 'all men' as *all types* of men. Paul has suggested that thanksgivings be made for all men in verse one. This must mean all types, since it would be impossible to pray for everyone in the world. This is made clear as he begins to identify different types beginning with kings and those in high places. In other words, pray for those in authority in society, for God desires all sorts of men to be saved,

even these kings and princes who were oppressing the church at the time. A king (like Edward VI) or a church persecutor (like the apostle Paul) can be saved if God so wills.

The word 'all' is the versatile Greek word **pa/j** [*pas*, Strong's 3956] which has a variety of meanings; in an individual sense: each, every, any, all, the whole of, everyone, all things; in a collective sense: some of all types, each individual in a class, everything belonging to a class, all sorts, all of a few. It can also mean full, supreme, greatest.

Here it means 'some of all sorts'. There are elect people out of every nation, therefore, the church must pray for all sorts of people to be saved; even evil governors and wicked emperors. He again urges that men in the churches should pray without doubting that God can save people in gentile situations (v8), and even those who opposed them. Indeed, Paul had proved this as he had seen converts amongst the Praetorian guard who imprisoned him, and even some in Caesar's home (Phil 4:22).

So all does not necessarily mean everyone who ever lived. A concordance will show that *all* can be very restricted in its meaning (e.g. Mk 11:32, 5:20; Lk 3:15; Jn 3:26 etc.). This also explains Titus 2:11.

NOTES:

Some examples where 'all' does not mean everyone:

- And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. Matt 10:22
- All marvelled. Mk 5:20
- All counted John to have been a prophet. Mk 11:32
- All reasoned in their hearts about John. Lk 3:15
- He is baptising, and all are coming to Him. Jn 3:26
- Many of those who had practised magic brought their books together and burned *them* in the sight of all. Acts 19:19
- Your obedience has become known to all. Rm 16:19

COMMENTS

Hence we see the childish folly of those who represent this passage to be opposed to predestination. ... The Apostle simply means, that there is no people and no rank in the world that is excluded from salvation; because God wishes that the gospel should be proclaimed to all without exception. Now the preaching of the gospel gives life; and hence he justly concludes that God invites all equally to partake salvation. But the present discourse relates to classes of men, and not to individual persons; for his sole object is, to include in this number princes and foreign nations.

John Calvin on 1 Tim 2:4

All who are saved God wills they should be saved; nor are any saved, but whom he wills they should be saved: hence by all men, whom God would have saved, cannot be meant every individual of mankind, since it is not his will that all men, in this large sense, should be saved, unless there are two contrary wills in God; for there are some who were before ordained by him unto condemnation, and are vessels of wrath fitted for destruction; and it is his will concerning some, that they should believe a lie, that they all might be damned; nor is it fact that all are saved, as they would be, if it was his will they should; for who hath resisted his will? But there is a world of ungodly men that will be condemned, and who will go into everlasting punishment: rather therefore all sorts of men, agreeably to the use of the phrase in (1 Timothy 2:1) are here intended, kings and peasants, rich and poor, bond and

free, male and female, young and old, greater and lesser sinners; and therefore all are to be prayed for, even all sorts of men, because God will have all men, or all sorts of men, saved; and particularly the Gentiles may be designed, who are sometimes called the world, the whole world, and every creature; whom God would have saved, as well as the Jews, and therefore Heathens, and Heathen magistrates, were to be prayed for as well as Jewish ones.

John Gill on 1 Tim 2:4

For to this *end* we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is *the* Saviour of all men, especially of those who believe. (1 Tim 4:10)

Arminians who teach that God is the actual Saviour of all men on Earth fail to see the utter folly of their claim. For instance:

- Paul himself continually teaches that not all men are saved and explains that God even predestined some for destruction (Rm 9). This isolated verse would thus contradict Paul's entire ministry.
- Paul says in the context that even some church members would depart from the faith in the latter times and follow demons (1 Tim 4:1). These cannot be saved.
- If God saves all men, how does one explain the millions of people in the Old Testament that are said to be lost? E.g: the majority of the pre-deluvian world; the Canaanites and other tribes committed to judgment; the heathen who don't know God; those who were cut off from Israel etc.
- Arminians claim that God only provides as global salvation but not all avail themselves of it. However, this contradicts Paul's repeated teaching that no one can do good, all are dead in sin and only those God regenerates can believe by grace alone. The whole NT teaches this explicitly (e.g. Jn 6:44, 65). God saves those he chooses alone.

What Paul is saying here is that God saves all kinds of people, Jews as well as Gentiles. All those alive and dead who are saved are saved by God alone. However, God is especially the saviour of those 'believing' (literal translation), those who are alive today. Those who currently believe are especially the ones who testify that God saves.

An alternative view is that God is the saviour of all men in terms of being the life-giver of all. Man is only alive today because of God's providence. The Lord supplies all things that men and animals need for life: air, water, food etc. Without God's continual providence Earth would not sustain life, and thus God is the continual saviour of all men and all creatures. However, God is especially the Saviour of those believing. Only the elect know the fulness of God's salvation. Some (like Gill) believe that the special salvation for the elect here is not eternal life but a special divine providence in their temporal situation, compared to the mere sustenance of others.

God's patience waited in the days of Noah. (1 Pt 3:20)

We need spend little time with this. The obvious interpretation of this verse is that the patience of God was exercised towards the benefit of only eight people, Noah and his family. He waited patiently for them to build the ark according to his instructions. There is also a sense in which God's patience, as tolerance of sin, was towards the wicked remainder of the world's population; but this lends no support to a supposed goodness in God toward

them. God's patience in goodness was extended to Noah's family. God's tolerance to sinners was a temporary respite before he poured out his wrath upon them.

We should note that the New Testament frequently alludes to the days of Noah being a type for the end of this present world. God's dealings with the wicked are exactly the same now; there is no grace or mercy being extended to the reprobate.

The Lord is not slack concerning *His* promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. (2Pt 3:9)

Peter is clearly referring to the elect here. He is talking about 'us', the ones that God is longsuffering towards; the ones the promises relate to, the ones called 'beloved' in the previous verse. If Peter really meant that all would come to repentance, then there would be no sinners in hell and Peter would be teaching Universalism, which we know he did not hold. Peter had harsh things to say about the wicked who are not elect; in fact, Peter speaks of the wicked only a few verses later (v17). In chapter two there is a long condemnation of the reprobate; of these he says, God will reserve the unjust under punishment for the Day of Judgment (2:9). The reprobate are reserved for condemnation because they are not chosen to life.

The context of this verse is Peter's encouragement about the coming of the Lord and his point here is to confirm that Christ will not return until all the elect of God are saved. Since the full number of God's people has not yet been born, the Second Coming is delayed. God will hold back the Last Day until all his chosen people come to repentance.

COMMENTS

That what men count slackness is truly *long-suffering*, and that *to us-ward*; it is giving more time to his own people, *whom he has chosen before the foundation of the world*, many of whom are not as yet converted ... for God is not willing that any of these should perish, but that all of them should come to repentance ... the principal design of God in his long-suffering is the blessedness of those *whom he has chosen to salvation* ... the great reason why he did not hasten his coming was because he had not accomplished *the number of his elect*.

Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, in loc.

And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world. 1 Jn 2:2

This has to be understood in the context of John's teaching in chapter four (see next section) and also the doctrinal position he consistently maintains in his Gospel (see earlier section). John cannot be teaching universalism here but selection everywhere else.

If 'world' means everyone here, then it means absolutely everyone. This would include people that scripture already says are in judgment (Sodom, Gomorrah, the Canaanite tribes, the people who rejected Jesus in Tyre, Sidon, Capernaum etc.). This proves too much and cannot be used to substantiate the idea that Jesus died for everyone. Jesus cannot be the propitiation (turning away anger) of those God has expressly stated he was angry with and condemned. If it meant everyone, there would be no hell.

John's point is to emphasise that Jesus died to produce a world of people that would love

God, not just for Jews.

And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son *as* Saviour of the world. 1 Jn 4:14

Firstly, John has in mind two sets of people. He introduces chapter 4 by explaining the need to judge false prophets who have arisen in the church. After this John distinguishes between those who are of God and those who are not:

We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

The thought of *us* and *them* is then carried on throughout the passage. There are those that love God and those that do not:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. (v7-8)

The love of God is directed to the elect, the *us*:

In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (v9-10)

What could be clearer? The love of God is directed to a certain group identified as *us*. The *us* that John refers to are those that know Jesus Christ as the propitiation of their sins. The effect of God's love results in the giving of Jesus for atonement. God's love is seen to be upon those whose sin is dealt with. John emphasises this by saying, 'herein is love ... propitiation for sin'. Those whom God sets his love upon are those who have sins cleansed and put away. You cannot know God's love and not be delivered from sin.

Another test of seeing where God's love is directed is to see who is reflecting that love to others. Those loved by God are of one family. Those in the family love all the members in it because they share the same root - the love of God. God's love is upon his family and they love each other because God has loved them first (v11-12).

John moves on to another distinctive of those loved by God, they dwell in Him because they share His Spirit (v13). Those whom God loves are those who dwell in Him and those who have His Spirit.

It is only after all these distinguishing marks are explained that John states that *we* (i.e. the *us* we saw earlier, the family of God, the elect) see Jesus as the saviour of the world. **And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son *as* Saviour of the world.**

As in his Gospel, John has in mind here the effect of Jesus as saviour upon the world - to draw out a world of believing people. He is not the saviour of everyone in the earth or everyone would be saved. He comes to the world as a saviour, his role in coming is that of saviour, and then he rescues his people from their sins.

But then John draws further marks to distinguish the elect, those who dwell in God. They also confess Jesus to be God's Son (v15) and they have also believed in God (v16). Again John states that it is a certain group, it is *we*, not all men, who know this love of God. Only those who dwell in God can know God's love. The elect are united with God.

John concludes his logic, in this chapter, by drawing to a climax. The end result of knowing

the love of God is that we can have boldness and no fear on the Day of Judgment. Receiving God's love destroys all fear of condemnation. If you know that you are in God's family, you will not fear his actions as a judge to his enemies (v17-19).

John then draws all this out in practical application. Those who do not love other believers cannot be true Christians and cannot love God. God's love cannot be upon such people according to John's earlier statements (v20-21).

What John actually says in this chapter indicates that God's love is only shared with a certain group. This group consists of those who: love God, love their brethren, dwell in God, have had their sin propitiated, are heard by God, confess Jesus to be God's Son, have received His Spirit, have believed in God and are assured of no condemnation on the day of judgment. Far from teaching that God's love is given to sinners, to all men indiscriminately, God's love is particular; it is only towards the elect and its end is to truly save to the uttermost.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. Rev 3:20

Is this a picture of God needing our permission or decision to save us? This statement of the Lord is specifically aimed at Christians not unbelievers. It forms part of a letter addressed to the church at Laodicaea. The Lord takes this church to task in the strongest terms but then offers comfort for those who repent. The invitation is directed to those believers who respond to their Lord's chastening. They are not words to be used in Gospel preaching.

And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely. Rev 22:17

This is often confused with the hymn that says: 'whosoever will unto the Lord may come'.

Is this a problem? Not at all. We have no objection to the teaching that whoever wants to come may come to Jesus. This is entirely Biblical. However, only those that are drawn by God will actually come (Jn 6:44, 65). The sinner has no desire for Christ naturally. He wants to stay in enjoyment of his sins. All may come, indeed all are commanded to come; but only those that God empowers actually will come.

John 6 is a clear commentary on this. In verse 35 there is the promise of Jesus that all who come will never thirst. In v 36: he confirms that, however, people do not believe. Then Jesus explains that only those whom the Father gives to Jesus will actually come (v37, 39). In verse 44 it is again forcefully stated that unless the Father draws a person, no one can come at all.

Conclusion

There are other passages that seem to imply a universalistic breadth to grace, but the ones we have looked at are the main texts used by Arminian apologists. If difficult verses are carefully examined in context, apparent difficulties are soon overcome.