

God So Loved The World

By Christopher Skinner

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. ¹

God is love. These are the words of Scripture (1 John 4:7). Love is not something that God does, but something that God is. It is essential to his nature. If God left us to perish, his justice would be satisfied but his love would not. God loved the entire human race so much that he was willing to send the Lord Jesus Christ down to earth to satisfy his just demands and purchase us back for himself, and to give eternal life to those who believe on him. A.T. Pierson stated:

World is the most universal term that we have in the language. For instance, we sometimes mean by it the whole earth on which we dwell; sometimes the whole human family that dwells on the earth; and sometimes the world-age, or whole period during which the whole family of man occupies the sphere. That is the word that God uses to indicate the objects of His love. But there is always danger of our losing sight of ourselves in a multitude of people. In the great mass individuals are lost, and it becomes to us simply a countless throng. But when God looks at us, he never forgets each individual. Every one of you stands out just as plainly before the Lord as though you were the only man, woman, or child on earth. So God adds here another word, whosoever, that is also universal, but with this difference between the two: world is collectively universal, that is, it takes all men in the mass; whosoever is distributively universal, that is, it takes everyone out of the mass, and holds him up separately before the Lord. If this precious text only said, "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son," one might say, "Oh, He never thought of me. He had a kind of general love to the whole world, but He never thought of me." But when God uses that all-embracing word "whosoever," that must mean you and me; for whatever my name or yours may be, our name is whosoever, is it not?²

The word "world", in our language, generally means the human world or the physical world. The New Testament Greek translation *Kosmos* means the same thing. Spiros Zodhiates in his *Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible* translates *Kosmos* as "*the sum total of persons living in the world*". A.T. Robertson, and W.E. Vine (M.A) both translate *kosmos* to mean "*the human race*". Other standard reference works concurring with these definitions include *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vincent's *Word Studies in the New Testament*, Arndt and Gingrich's *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* and *Bakers Dictionary of Theology*. To some, this study of the original Greek may seem unnecessary, but it does have a purpose. In personal correspondence with Calvinists, I have often been told that my understanding of the terms "world", "all" and "all men" are faulty – yet I was never offered any alternative satisfactory explanation. I still believe it to be the most natural way to read the passage. The next verse has that same word *Kosmos*:

For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

¹John 3:16. Bible quotations are taken from the Hebrew Names Version, based on the King James Version.

²A.T. Pierson, *The Heart of The Gospel*, Sermon, Metropolitan Tabernacle, Autumn 1891

<http://www.whatsaiththescripture.com>

Gods desire is that no man should be eternally judged and condemned, but that all men should experience this life.

He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Those who trust in the Saviour God has provided escape Gods judgment, but those who reject him have thrown away their only hope of salvation. Those who reject that salvation are no longer judged ultimately for their personal sins, but for their sin of rejecting the only provision God has made.

And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

Man stubbornly refuses to come to Christ as he loves his sin so much. It is not Gods desire that he should perish, but his own.

For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reprov'd. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God³

God, in his grace, has provided a way of salvation for man. Just as he did not want to create a robot to obey him at creation, he does not want to force people to be saved at salvation either. He offers them the choice. That is why salvation is not automatic. The new birth is a product of trusting in him, and the other benefits provided at the cross become effective at that point - he becomes a slave to righteousness, and his in Gods favour and is remitted of his former sins. Those who reject this provision shut themselves up to the only alternatives - judgment. God loves the entire world but he loves his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, so much that he cannot overlook someone despising that provision:

The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand. 36 He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.⁴

Christ stands between God and every individual man. He is either their saviour or their judge. John Calvin could not escape the clear meaning of it:

It is a remarkable commendation of faith, that it frees us from everlasting destruction. For he intended expressly to state that, though we appear to have been born to death, undoubted deliverance is offered to us by the faith of Christ; and, therefore, that we ought not to fear death, which otherwise hangs over us. And he has employed the universal term *whosoever*, both to invite all indiscriminately to partake of life, and to cut off every excuse from unbelievers. Such is also the import of the term *World*, which he formerly used; for though nothing will be found in the world that is worthy of the favor of God, yet he shows himself to be reconciled to the whole world, when he invites *all men without exception* to the faith of Christ, which is

3 John 3:16-21

4 John 3:35-36

nothing else than an entrance into life.⁵

Calvin expressed similar comments on John 1:29, the Bible verse says "Behold the lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world". Calvin's commentary followed:

He uses the word *sin* in the singular number, for any kind of iniquity; as if he had said, that every kind of unrighteousness which alienates men from God is taken away by Christ. And when he says, the sin Of The World, he extends this favor indiscriminately to the whole human race; that the Jews might not think that he had been sent to them alone. *But hence we infer that the whole world is involved in the same condemnation; and that as all men without exception are guilty of unrighteousness before God, they need to be reconciled to him.* John the Baptist, therefore, by speaking generally of the sin of the world, intended to impress upon us the conviction of our own misery, and to exhort us to seek the remedy. Now our duty is, to embrace the benefit which is offered to all, that each of us may be convinced that there is nothing to hinder him from obtaining reconciliation in Christ, provided that he comes to him by the guidance of faith.⁶

In contrast to the plain meaning of the John 3 passage, and despite Calvin's own clear understanding of it, many of Calvin's followers disagree. They maintain that Christ died only for the sins of the elect (an elite few) and not for every individual. That is, if one dies a confirmed unbeliever, then it is because God ordained him to eternal death as a result of his own sovereign decree. He never sent the Lord Jesus Christ to die for him. This teaching is known as "*Limited Atonement*" or "*Limited Redemption*". This undermines the force of the whole passage we have been considering. The words of A.W. Pink illustrate this point:

The "world" in John 3:16 must, in the final analysis, refer to the world of God's people. Must we say, for there is no other alternative solution. It cannot mean the whole human race, for one half of the race was already in hell when Christ came to earth. It is unfair to insist that it means every human being now living, for every other passage in the New Testament where God's love is mentioned limits it to His own people - search and see! The objects of God's love in John 3:16 are precisely the same as the objects of Christ's love in John 13:1: "Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour was come, that He should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end." We may admit that our interpretation of John 3:16 is no novel one invented by us, but one almost uniformly given by the Reformers and Puritans, and many others since then.⁷

On the contrary to Pink, I firmly believe that this is interpretation IS a novel doctrine invented by them. Where was this interpretation before the Reformers and Puritans? If we are to apply Pink's interpretation consistently, certain verses in John's writings would not make sense. Consider the following verses:

The whole world of God's people lies in sway of the evil one (1 John 5:19)

He was in the world of God's people, and the world of God's people was made

⁵ John Calvin, Commentary on John 3:16

⁶ Calvin's Commentaries, John 1:29. Emphasis added.

⁷ A.W. Pink, The Sovereignty of God. Online Edition Published by Grace Gospel Software.

through him, and the world of Gods people didn't recognize him. He came to his own people within Gods people, and those who were his own didn't receive him. But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become God's people, to those who believe in his name (John 1:12-13)

The Spirit of truth, whom the world of Gods people cannot receive as it does not behold him or know him, but you do know him (John 14:17)

If the world of Gods people hate you, you know that they hated me first (John 15:17).

When the Holy Spirit comes, he will convict the world of Gods people concerning sin because they do not believe in me (John 16:9)

I revealed your name to those whom you gave me out of the world of your people, they were yours...(John 17:6. This would mean that there are *some* people called out from among Gods people to be given to Christ to be Gods people - this would be nonsense)

To escape these conclusions, Pink resorts to changing the meaning of the word "world" in each of these passages. For example, he argues that John 15:17 refers to the "*world of ungodly*" as opposed to the "*world of Gods People*". In the Greek, however, it is the same word *Kosmos*, i.e. *world* in all passages. There is no hint of a change of meaning either in the original language or the context. If we apply Pinks interpretation on John 3:16-18 *alone* the passage would still fail to make sense:

For God so loved the world of his people that whosoever from among his people that shall believe on him shall not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world of his people to condemn it, but that the world of Gods people might be saved. Who he believes from among Gods people is not condemned, but he who does not believe from among Gods people is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only begotton Son of God.

The absurdity of Pinks interpretation is self-evident. It makes far more sense to define the word *Kosmos* naturally and consistently - i.e. it means the same thing where it is used throughout the passage. This is the method we use in daily communication. The context of John chapter 3 is about the *world of perishing sinners*, not about a select group. The Bible records one man whom Christ loved but never got saved - the Rich Young Ruler. Charles Ryrie rightly observed:

The Lord loved this rich young man. Incidentally, the verb used for love in Mark 10:21 is *agapao*. As far as we know, this man was never saved, therefore, he was one of the non-elect. His *agapao* love extended beyond the world of the elect. How then can the "world" of John 3:16 be limited to the elect, as some say it is?⁸

Other Calvinists interpret the term "world" to mean *Jew and Gentile* as opposed to just Israel. John Gill, for example, argues that the term *world* in this passage means "*Gods elect among the Gentiles*". In other words, when the Lord Jesus told Nicodemus that God loved the world, he was reminding him that his love was not exclusive to Israel. In other words, God loves the elect amongst the Jews and the elect amongst the Gentiles. But even this fails to prove a limitation of Gods love, it merely provides a *possible* doubt against the *general atonement* interpretation. In the end I believe no reasonable person would find Gills explanation convincing. The term "world" is a

8 Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, Moody Press 1997, p78.

general statement, it does not mean “a preselected group”. Although Bishop J.C. Ryle held to the Calvinist view of election, he warned other Calvinists not to tamper with the meaning of John chapter 3:

Beware, again, of the common doctrine that God's love is limited and confined to His own elect, and that all the rest of mankind are passed by, neglected, and let alone. This also is a notion that will not bear examination by the light of Scripture. The father of a prodigal son can surely love and pity him, even when he is walking after his own lusts, and refusing to return home. The Maker of all things may surely love the work of His own hands with a love of compassion, even when rebellious against Him. Let us resist to the death the unscriptural doctrine of universal salvation. It is not true that all mankind will be finally saved. But let us not fly into the extreme of denying God's universal compassion. It is true that God "loves the world." Let us maintain jealously the privileges of God's elect. It is true that they are loved with a special love, and will be loved to all eternity. But let us not exclude any man or woman from the pale of God's kindness and compassion. We have no right to pare down the meaning of words when Jesus says, "God loved the world." The heart of God is far wider than that of man. There is a sense in which the Father loves all mankind..

I confess, boldly, that I hold the doctrine of particular redemption, in a certain sense, as strongly as any one. I believe that none are effectually redeemed but God's elect. They and they only are set free from the guilt, and power, and consequences of sin. But I hold no less strongly, that Christ's work of atonement is sufficient for all mankind. There is a sense in which He has tasted death for every man, and has taken upon Him the sin of the world. I dare not pare down, and fine away, what appear to me the plain statements of Scripture. I dare not shut a door which God seems, to my eyes, to have left open. I dare not tell any man on earth that Christ has done nothing for him, and that he has no warrant to apply boldly to Christ for salvation. I must abide by the statements of the Bible. Christ is God's gift to the whole world.⁹

Matthew Henry, a puritan and typically Calvinistic, also saw the plain meaning of the passage in his well known commentary:

Though many of the world of mankind perish, yet God's giving his only-begotten Son was an instance of his love to the whole world, because through him there is a *general offer* of life and salvation made to all.¹⁰

John 3:16 is not the only passage that indicates God's general offer of eternal life to all mankind. 1 John 2:1-2 is a similar passage and deals a death blow to the Limited Atonement view:

My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: 2 And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

Christ is the propitiation (satisfaction) for the sins of the whole world, not just a few. The pastoral epistles contain a number of passages which clearly indicate that God desires the salvation of all

⁹ J.C. Ryle, Do You Believe?

¹⁰ Matthew Henry's Commentary

men. The first one is found in the epistle of 1 Timothy.

I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.(2:1-6)

This verse clearly states that God desires *all men* to be saved. The term “all” means “the totality of the person or things referred to”¹¹. C.H. Spurgeon stated:

It is quite certain that when we read that God will have all men to be saved it does not mean that he wills it with the force of a decree or a divine purpose, for, if he did, then all men would be saved. He willed to make the world, and the world was made: he does not so will the salvation of all men, for we know that all men will not be saved. Terrible as the truth is, yet is it certain from holy writ that there are men who, in consequence of their sin and their rejection of the Savior, will go away into everlasting punishment, where shall be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.¹²

Spurgeon took the passage as it stood and rightly stated that God desires but does not force the salvation of all men. This is because God has respected man's free choice. Yet some would argue that “all men” means “*all kinds of men*” and not “all men”. In other words, the phrase means “*all men without distinction but not all men without exception*”. They reason that the verse “*for kings and all who are in high places*” means that various classes are in mind rather than each man alive. This is a strained interpretation. *All men* means all men, and the simple reason we are commanded to pray for “*kings and all that in high places*” is so that we may lead tranquil and godly lives, and that *all men* under their authority may get live tranquil and godly lives, *because God wants all men to be saved*. The reason for this desire for *all men* to be saved is that there is one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ. Not one mediator for *some* men, but for *man* (i.e. the entire human race). Spurgeon was no stranger to this arguments and said in regards to it:

You must, most of you, be acquainted with the general method in which our older Calvinistic friends deal with this text. "All men," say they,—“that is, some men”: as if the Holy Ghost could not have said "some men" if he had meant some men. "All men," say they; "that is, some of all sorts of men": as if the Lord could not have said "all sorts of men" if he had meant that. The Holy Ghost by the apostle has written "all men," and unquestionably he means all men. I know how to get rid of the force of the "alls" according to that critical method which some time ago was very current, but I do not see how it can be applied here with due regard to truth. I was reading just now the exposition of a very able doctor who explains the text so as to explain it away; he applies grammatical gunpowder to it, and explodes it by way of expounding it. I thought when I read his exposition that it would have been a very capital comment upon the text if it had read, "Who will not have all men to be saved, nor come to a knowledge of the truth." Had such been the inspired language every remark of the learned doctor would have been exactly in keeping, but as it happens to say, "Who will have all men to be saved," his observations are more than a little out

11 W.E. Vine, Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, p21, Thomas Nelson 1985.

12 Sermon Number 1516, Salvation by Knowing The Truth

of place. My love of consistency with my own doctrinal views is not great enough to allow me knowingly to alter a single text of Scripture.¹³

Where the Bible says “*all* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” it does NOT mean that *all sorts of men* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. No Calvinist would dispute the plain meaning of “all” in *that* passage as it is not detrimental to their theological system. Later we find the truth repeated:

For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe. (4:10)

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world (Titus 2:11-12)

There is a distinction in these verses between “all men” and “those who believe”. If the Calvinistic interpretation of 1 Timothy 2v4 is correct then we should expect this passage to read as “God is the Saviour of all kinds of believers, especially those who believe”. This is nonsense. Most Calvinists, however, do not interpret the passage this way. Whilst they would dispute the “Arminian” understanding of “all” in chapter 2v4 they do not contest it here. Instead of redefining the term “all” in the latter passage, they redefine the word “Saviour”. This latter word is understood to mean that God is the *preserver* of all men in that he provides them with temporal benefits like food and air to breathe, The preservation apparently does not include eternal salvation. This again is a selective translation which they do not apply to the same phrase in chapter 1 verse 1 “God our Saviour” and other verses such as “Our great God and saviour Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). A more honest approach is to allow the terms “all” and “Saviour” to mean what they say and to allow them to mean the same thing in each occurrence.

What does 1 Timothy 4v10 mean? It means that Christ is the saviour of all men in terms of *his role*. A.T. Robertsons commentary on this verse states that God is the *potential* saviour of all¹⁴. J.C. Ryles exposition (on another passage relating directly to Christ) is very helpful in understanding this:

Christ is to the souls of men what the sun is to the world. He is the center and source of all spiritual light, warmth, life, health, growth, beauty, and fertility. Like the sun, He shines for the common benefit of all mankind--for high and for low, for rich and for poor, for Jew and for Greek. Like the sun, He is free to all. All may look at Him, and drink health out of His light. If millions of mankind were mad enough to dwell in caves underground, or to bandage their eyes, their darkness would be their own fault, and not the fault of the sun. So, likewise, if millions of men and women love spiritual "darkness rather than light," the blame must be laid on their blind hearts, and not on Christ. "Their foolish hearts are darkened." (John 3:19; Rom. 1:21.) But whether men will see or not, Christ is the true sun, and the light of the world. There is no light for sinners except in the Lord Jesus.¹⁵

Christ is the Saviour of all men in the sense that he provided salvation at the Cross. It was sufficient to cover the sins of the whole human race, but it's effect can only be experienced by belief. A

13 Ibid

14 A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in The New Testament*.

15 John 1, Provided by www.gracegems.org

father is the provider for his family, but the children still have to eat that provision. If the child rejects it and starves, the father is still the provider. In the same way, man can reject Christ and go to eternal doom, yet he is still their saviour as he has already provided it for them. There is further evidence that Christ died for the unsaved. He died for false teachers:

But false prophets also arose among the people, as false teachers will also be among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, *denying even the Master who bought them*, bringing on themselves swift destruction (2:1)

There have been many attempts by Calvinists to get around the clear meaning of these words. Some may argue that Peter was only stating that these false teachers *claimed* to be bought by Christ. This interpretation does not do justice to the text. At face value, it clearly says that Christ bought them. Paul uses the same word in reference to Christ buying believers (1 Cor 6:20). The word *Despot* (translated Master in this passage) is God, used also in Jude 4.

My belief is that these people were *bought* by Christ but not *born again* and therefore *not saved*. Some would object that it being saved and bought by Christ is essentially the same thing but that is incorrect. We were bought by Christ 2000 years ago but were not saved until we personally placed our faith in him some time during our lives. What if you died before you were saved? You would have died in your sins and been eternally separated from God. In the same way, Christ has bought these false teachers at the Cross, but because of their unbelief are still dead in their sins. If they die in their unbelief, they shall perish even though Christ bought them. The atonement, and Christ's love extends to all, even over those who are not finally saved. This is because God is not willing that any should perish, as Peter later states:

The Lord is not slow concerning his promise, as some count slowness; but is patient with us, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance¹⁶

Some explain this verse another way in order to reconcile it to their view on predestination. It is often argued that it means "*God is not willing that any of the elect should perish*" and argue that the term "patient to us" means that he is patient towards believers¹⁷. The argument is flawed. Of course God is not willing that the elect should perish, and none of them *will* perish (if Calvinists think deeply enough to be consistent with their theology). The term "us" could legitimately be understood as *the human race*, not the elect. This makes more sense when one examines the larger context which is nothing to do with the believers but the destruction of ungodly men (v7 and 10). It is *ungodly men* that God does not want to destroy and for this reason he is delaying his judgment upon this world.

There are a number of scriptures which limited atonement advocates use. Here are a small number of them:

She shall bring forth a son. You shall call his name Jesus, for it is he who shall save *his people* from their sins.¹⁸

I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and I'm known by my own; even as the

¹⁶ 2 Peter 3:9

¹⁷ These arguments are offered in the following volumes *The Grand Demonstration* by Jay Adams, *The Sovereignty of God* by A.W. Pink and *The Death of Death* by John Owen

¹⁸ Matt 1:21

Father knows me, and I know the Father. I lay down my life for *the sheep*¹⁹

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for *his friends*²⁰

These passages do say that Christ died for the sins of his people, as Calvinists assert and non-Calvinists likewise affirm. They do not say that Christ died *only* for the sins of his people, contrary to the belief of many Calvinists. If you give a gift to an entire group of people, you can still give it with individuals within that group in mind, and to each individually as well as collectively. When Christ died for our sins, he had the entire human race in mind, but he also had me in mind. He had you in mind also, as well as his church (Eph 2:25) and his people Israel. This is why the Scriptures teach particular redemption in some places whilst affirming general redemption in others. We saw the “*general atonement*” passages in a previous section. Church Historian Phillip Schaff said of the doctrine of “general atonement”:

This doctrine of a divine will and divine provision of a universal salvation, on the sole condition of faith, is taught in many passages which admit of no other interpretation, and which must, therefore, decide this whole question. For it is a settled rule in hermeneutics that dark passages must be explained by clear passages, and not vice versa. Such passages are the following: “I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord our God: wherefore turn yourselves, and live” (Eze_18:32, Eze_18:23; Eze_33:11). “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw *all men* unto myself” (Joh_12:32). “God so loved the *world*” (that is, all mankind) “that he gave his only begotten Son, that *whosoever* believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life” (Joh_3:16). “God our Saviour *willeth* that *all men* should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1Ti_2:4). “The grace of God hath appeared, bringing salvation to *all men*” (Tit_2:11). “The Lord is long-suffering to you-ward, *not wishing* that *any* should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2Pe_3:9). “Jesus Christ is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but *also for* (the sins of) *the whole world*” (1Jo_2:2). It is impossible to state the doctrine of a universal atonement more clearly in so few words.

To these passages should be added the divine exhortations to repentance, and the lament of Christ over the inhabitants of Jerusalem who “would not” come to him (Mat_23:37). These exhortations are insincere or unmeaning, if God does not want all men to be saved, and if men have not the ability to obey or disobey the voice. The same is implied in the command of Christ to preach the gospel to the whole creation (Mar_16:15), and to disciple all nations (Mat_28:19). It is impossible to restrict these passages to a particular class without doing violence to the grammar and the context.²¹

Is there any person God does not want saved? The answer to this can only be yes or no. The overwhelming evidence is an overwhelming NO. Does God love you enough to send The Lord Jesus Christ to pay the price for your sins? Yes, whether you believe it or not. If you do, you can personalise it in the words of the Apostle Paul “I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me” (Galatians 2:20)

19John 10:14-15

20John 15:13

21Phillip Schaff, History of The Christian Church, Volume 9, Chapter 14, Section 117