

# Limited Atonement

(by Bob Pulliam)

"For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (I Tim 2:3f)

To whom has the grace of God brought salvation? There are some (Calvinists) who would tell us that salvation is dependent only upon the sovereign decree of God. For them, salvation depends not, in any way, upon our will. If God did not select us individually, then we (according to them) have no chance of being saved. The bottom line, in their estimation, is this: Jesus did not die for the sins of all mankind... He only died for the sins of those God wanted to save (and that did not include everyone).

So who is the "all men" of our text? The Calvinist would answer, "'All men' refers only to all whom the Lord chose, or selected." I concede that there are times when "all" does not refer to everyone. Romans 3:23 is a good example of this. While "all" have sinned is a general rule that is rarely broken; it does have exceptions that are understood by its general nature. Infants and lunatics are not to be included in this rule, for they have not the minds to be held accountable for actions. But they are not held accountable to the law, for you cannot be accountable to what you cannot (not "do not") understand. Jesus was an exception in that He was the free gift of God to pay the price for everyone else's sins. That all sin once they reach an accountable, reasoning age, is clearly understood.

Another answer given by the Calvinist is, "The grace of God that brings salvation has only appeared to all men. That does not mean that it goes to the extent of saving all." But our text above speaks God's desire that all men be saved. Regardless of what Titus 2:11 says, If God wants all men to be saved, then He would provide a sacrifice for all of them. And so this question comes down to another question, "for whom did Jesus die?" If we can answer that from scripture, then we will know if the atonement God provides is limited to just a few individually selected souls.

## ***For Whom Did Jesus Die?...***

Jesus said, "For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son..." (Jn 3:16). Now I must ask, "For whom did God give His Son?" Was it not for those whom He intended to save? Was it not those whom He loved? Was that number not defined in the first phrase of the verse as "the world"? The "world" was the object of God's saving grace not a number chosen from among the whole (which is "the world").

"Come to Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest..." (Mt 11:28). Here is the great invitation to salvation uttered by Jesus Christ Himself. To whom is this great rest offered? Is it not to "all" who labor and are heavy laden? But who are included in the word "all". It is limited to those who "labor and are heavy laden"; or, in other words, to sinners. So the invitation of Jesus is to everyone who has sinned.

Paul told Timothy to pray for all men, for God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (I Tim 3:1-4). I have been told that the "all" of this passage is limited to those whom God individually selected. But the context urges Timothy not to make exceptions for any man on any basis. How can we, then, begin to make exceptions to who God will save?

John wrote of Jesus: "And he Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world." (I Jn 2:2). Am I to conclude that there are some people in this world who really aren't in this world? I agree that the word "world" has a specific meaning here. It does not refer to all of creation, including rocks and trees and animals. It is limited to mankind!... All of mankind!

In II Peter 3:9, we find the apostle Peter speaking of the judgment. Two questions arise in my mind here. The first is, why must the Lord be longsuffering with us until we come to repentance, if salvation comes as a gift from Him apart from our actions? The second regards judgment. Will all be judged? All mankind? These are in the context of God "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance". "All" is obviously everyone!

### ***Why Limit God's Grace?...***

It is ironic that people try to limit God's grace on one hand (limiting those to whom it is extended); but also try to remove it's restraints on the other hand by making it over-power the will an individual might exert to resist it. Pulling off the restraints is another subject, so let's just ask, "Why do some want to limit God's grace?" The answer to this question is actually a little complicated. But let's make it as simple as possible...

We begin with the *assumption* that Man is totally depraved. Evil has so filled his head that he is incapable of doing any good. In order for man to be saved, God must give each individual the ability believe We know that not all believe, so God must not have given this ability to some.

God is said to have foreordained the saved (Eph 1:4f) before the foundation of the world. And God's decrees must come about as He declares. Man, as a result, cannot have a free will, and resist God when God says otherwise. If one is lost, it must be because God did not select (choose) him to be saved. This is why the same people believe one cannot be lost once he has been saved. If God has declared his salvation, then it must come to pass. Now, if only certain people are ever intended to be saved, then Jesus' blood must have only be shed for them. If it were shed for everyone else, then they would be saved!

To summarize: This doctrine rests on the assumption that man is wholly evil, and can only come to God by God's direct intervention (giving him faith). Since there are many in the world who do not believe, and will not be saved, God must not have given them this saving faith.

Now we know that God has all power, yet we cannot assume that He denies mankind a free will just because we want Him to fit our concept of being sovereign. To be sovereign merely means to be above all others. Giving mankind a free will does not negate God's sovereignty when we realize that He still has charge over those who disobey (ultimately He will judge them). (see [The Sovereignty of God](#))

And God's foreordination does not have to bypass man's free will either (see [The Election of God](#)). The means by which He has chosen us is "in Him" (Eph 1:4). He predestined us "by Jesus Christ" (Eph 1:5). Jesus Christ is the testing stone upon which we are either proven or broken (Rom 9:32f). If we will believe and serve God in Him, then we are within the boundaries that God predestined. "In Christ Jesus" is the determination of whether we are chosen or not; and we determine such by an exercise of will. Saving faith does not come by

a miraculous intervention of God. It comes by bearing the word of God (Rom 10:17). Such is the means by which one is called unto salvation (II Th 2:14).

### ***Conclusion...***

Jesus died for the sins of the entire world. To take advantage of this powerful sacrifice, we must exercise our will in the way God has determined. The grace of God appeared in the person of Jesus Christ (Jn 1:17). The power of His sacrifice is available for all to be cleansed. Such is determined by your reception of the word of God; for by it's testimony is faith attained (Rom 10:17). Don't blame God if someone doesn't believe. Don't blame God if they won't receive. Blame the individual for rebellion and self deception.