

He Will Save His People: The Particular Extent of the Atonement

Selected Scriptures

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Introduction

Well, it is good to be back in the GraceLife Pulpit! I always appreciate Sundays in July and the bit of a change-of-pace that it provides during the summertime, but by the end of the month I'm always ready to be back in the Family Center with you, the precious saints of GraceLife. Absence does make the heart grow fonder, and though we are absent from you for that time, you are not absent from our prayers, or from our hearts. And I also want to say thank you for your prayers for me and our family, as we welcomed our fourth child, Emma, into the world at the beginning of this month. All is well on that front, relatively speaking. Everyone is tired, but everyone is healthy. And so we are grateful to the Lord for His grace and for your prayers.

Well with that, if you can think back to before Sundays in July, you'll remember that I had been in the middle of a series that I entitled *O Perfect Redemption!*—a phrase taken from that great hymn, “To God Be the Glory”—which celebrates the glorious work of atonement that Christ our Savior has accomplished on our behalf. “O perfect redemption! The purchase of blood! To every believer the promise of God: [that] the vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.” It is this Gospel of the cross that is the centerpiece and anchor of all our hope, as Christians. “Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” is the very heartbeat of our life, the ground of our forgiveness, the marrow of our ministry, the substance of our preaching.

To sinners—to those of us who know ourselves guilty before a holy God, helpless to pay for our own sins, doomed to face eternal punishment, there is no sweeter sound in the world than “Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” Every Christian is a student of Scripture, which means that every Christian is a theologian. The Holy Spirit of God has enrolled every Christian into the university of the study of God—of His Word and His ways. And so we discipline ourselves to know the person of God, the Triunity of God, the character and attributes of God, the person and work of Christ and the Holy Spirit, the doctrines of man and sin, the doctrines of the church and the last things. But amidst all that delightful study, the Christian exclaims with the Apostle Paul, “I determined to know nothing else but Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” There is no doctrine more excellent, no knowledge more pleasant, no course of study so worthy than the knowledge of the person of Christ and the work of atonement that He accomplished when He hung on the cross as the great Substitute and Savior of His people.

Can I put it simply? We love the atonement. We love the cross. “In that old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine, a *wondrous beauty* I see; for ‘twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died, to pardon and sanctify *me*.” And so, what? “So I’ll *cherish* the old rugged cross.” We cherish the cross. And so it has been our delight, in this series of sermons, to set our focus upon the doctrine of the atonement of Christ—to raise our affections to delight in a Savior who has accomplished so glorious a work of salvation for us—who bore the full weight of our sin up to Calvary and extinguished our guilt before God; who drank the full measure of the wrath of God that burned hot against us, so that we might drink only from the cup of divine blessing; who abolished in His flesh the hostility of God against our sin; who poured out His own precious blood as the ransom price to redeem His people from the bondage of sin and death; and who did it all in perfect unity with the Father and the Holy Spirit, carrying out the triune plan of salvation devised in eternity past.

And we’ve looked at that precious doctrine of the atonement through the lens of the age-old, oft-debated, controversial question: For whom did Christ die? For whom did Christ accomplish this glorious work of salvation? Whose sins did He bear up to Calvary? Whose guilt did He extinguish? Whose freedom did He purchase? Every single individual who has ever lived throughout human history? Or only those whom the Father chose and gave to Him in eternity past—those whom the Spirit draws to Him in repentance and faith?

And the reason we’ve sought an answer to this controversial question is not because we are lovers of controversy, or because we are overly infatuated with the minutia of what’s merely theoretical. It’s because the *extent* of the atonement is inextricably linked to the *design* and *nature* of the atonement—to the Gospel itself. We have seen that to whom the atonement extends is a function of what the atonement is, and what the Triune God intended to accomplish by the work of Christ on the cross. And those are matters of Gospel significance. The doctrine of the extent of the atonement is intensely practical, because it concerns the sovereignty of God and the value of the blood of Christ!

Sadly, the majority of professing Christians today have been taught a doctrine of the extent of the atonement that fundamentally undermines those very truths! that robs the cross of the very qualities that make it so glorious and so precious to sinners. You see, a universal atonement—an atonement in which Christ dies in the place of all people without exception, even those who are not finally saved—undermines the sovereignty of God. It suggests that He would save all people if He could—that He sent Christ to die so that everyone would have the possibility to be saved, if they only believe—but that unbelievers’ rejection of Christ thwarts the Father’s designs to save them. We cannot consistently hold to a universal atonement without making God out to be a failed Savior.

And not only that, but a universal atonement also undermines the value of the blood of Christ. It suggests that there are some whom Christ died to save who fail to come into possession of salvation—that the precious blood of the God-man was insufficient to satisfy the wrath of God in the case of the many sinners who perish eternally for their sins. When you universalize the extent of the atonement, without universalizing the extent of salvation itself and saying that it brings everybody to heaven, you empty the atonement of its inherent power to save. And you make the real, decisive, determinative cause of salvation something other than Christ and Him crucified. The center of gravity in salvation is shifted from the gracious work of the Savior to the faith or the decision of the sinner. Our faith becomes our Savior, rather than Christ. Our believing—rather than Christ’s dying—becomes the ground of our salvation. And so the blood of Christ is devalued and denigrated as insufficient to save those for whom it was shed.

And so we have sought to make the case that a *perfect* redemption must of necessity be a *particular* redemption—a redemption, which, though it doesn’t extend to every single individual in the world, nevertheless brings every single individual it *was* accomplished for all the way home to heaven. We have seen that an atonement of unlimited power and perfect efficacy must necessarily be limited in extent to those who actually enjoy its benefits. And who are they? They are the ones whom the Father chose in eternity past, the sheep whom He gave to the Son, the elect, who are eventually granted the gifts of repentance and faith in Christ by the Spirit.

Recap

And at every turn, we have found those claims to be wholly supported by the text of Scripture. We do not find the Scriptures to be an obstacle to the doctrine of particular redemption, as so many allege. We find the Scriptures to be the very foundation of the doctrine of particular redemption. And we’ve sought to discover Scripture’s teaching on the particularity of the atonement in this way. Just a summary of where we’ve been in this series so far.

First, we considered the most fundamental doctrine of Christian theology: the **trinity** of God. Because the Father, Son, and Spirit share an identical nature, they share an identical will. And that means the persons of the Trinity have the exact same intention for the atonement. It can’t be that the Father aims to save some, the Son aims to save others, and the Spirit aims to save still another group—without fundamentally undermining the unity of the Trinity. The Father has chosen some, and not all; the Spirit regenerates some, and not all; and therefore the Son atones for those same some, and not all. The persons of the Trinity are perfectly united in their intention for the atonement.

Then, we considered what that intention was. Why did the Father send the Son into the world? What the **purpose** of Christ’s death? And we found that Scripture uniformly identifies the Trinity’s unified intention for the atonement as exclusively salvific. First Timothy 1:15: “It is a

trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to *save* sinners.” Not to make sinners *savable*. Not to make salvation *possible*, or *available*. Not to make *provision* for salvation. But actually to *save* sinners! And so we concluded: if (a) God’s intentions must certainly come to pass, and if (b) His intention for the atonement is not to make provisions or possibilities but actually to save, then (c) all those for whom Christ died must certainly be saved. And since not all are saved, Christ’s atonement is particular, and not universal. The *extent* of the atonement is a function of the *intent* of the atonement.

But then, we moved past the **design** of the atonement and into the **nature** of the atonement—into what Scripture says Christ actually accomplished by His death on the cross. And we found that Scripture speaks of Christ’s death according to at least **four themes**, or **motifs**: sacrifice, propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption—all comprising a perfectly effective substitution. In every way that the Bible talks about Christ’s atonement, it insists on the fact that it perfectly accomplishes everything it set out to do, and that it was accomplished on behalf of particular individuals whom God has chosen to save, and not on behalf of all without exception. In other words, as a propitiation, the atonement actually satisfies God’s wrath. But if there are some people who suffer under God’s wrath for eternity as the just punishment for their sins, it’s plain that Jesus was not the propitiation for those people’s sins. If Christ redeemed all without exception from the curse of the law, but a great portion of those redeemed remain in bondage under the curse of the law for eternity, then Christ’s redemption does not really redeem us from the curse of the law. The **efficacy** of the atonement implies the **particularity** of the atonement. And so, as we’ve said, when you universalize the extent of the atonement, you necessarily undermine the efficacy of the atonement.

And then, in our last two messages, we aimed to set the accomplishments of Christ’s work in the context of His being the Great High Priest and Mediator of the New Covenant. As our high priest, He came to do the work of a high priest—which we saw to be the twofold work of **sacrifice** and **intercession**. And we found these two functions of high priestly ministry to be so inextricably linked that they were coextensive. The high priest offered sacrifice for everyone for whom he would intercede, and he interceded for everyone for whom he offered sacrifice. The same was true for the high priestly ministry of Christ. He offers Himself as sacrifice for the very same number for whom He intercedes before the Father. And yet Jesus Himself tells us that there are some for whom He does not intercede. In John 17:9, as He prays to the Father on the eve of His crucifixion, He says, “I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours.” And so, since the work of sacrifice and intercession are coextensive, and since intercession is limited to the elect alone, we found another argument that the extent of Christ’s atonement is limited to the elect alone.

And we also spent time considering what it meant that Christ was the Mediator of the New Covenant. We found that since His blood is nothing other than the blood of the New Covenant,

He purchased by that blood nothing other than the blessings of the New Covenant. And those blessings—at minimum—include regeneration, the forgiveness of sins, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. That means: those who will not finally be regenerated, forgiven of their sins, and indwelt by the Spirit of God are not partakers of the blood of the covenant.

All of that constitutes a **framework** of biblical teaching about the design and nature of the atonement—the unity of the Trinity, the singular salvific intention of God, the efficacious nature of the Son’s saving accomplishments, and the unified work of priestly sacrifice and intercession. I mentioned at the beginning of this series that the reason discussion on the extent of the atonement usually breaks down into unhelpfulness is because people aim to debate the extent of the atonement divorced from this very framework of the Bible’s teaching on what the atonement is and what the atonement was designed by God to do. And they just volley proof texts back and forth: “This text says *many!*” “Well, *this* text says *all!*” And on and on it goes. But now that we have set that biblical framework of the **design** and **nature** of the atonement before us, we can now appeal to the several texts of Scripture that comment directly on the **extent** of the atonement, and which explicitly identify the objects of the atoning work of Christ to be a particular people.

And that’s what we’re going to do with the rest of our time this morning. The rest of the message breaks down into **two parts**. First, we’ll consider **seven key terms** that designate the scope of Christ’s atonement to be limited to the particular people His Father has given Him. Then, we’ll answer another **significant objection** that non-particularists raise against the point I’m making.

I. Seven Particularizing Designations

In the first place, then, let’s consider **seven key terms** that Scripture employs to speak of the identity of whom Christ died for. We could call them: **seven particularizing designations**—words and phrases that characterize the objects of Christ’s atonement as necessarily particular, rather than universal.

A. His People

And that **first particularizing designation** is, number one, “**His people.**” Turn to Matthew chapter 1. When Joseph learns that Mary has become pregnant, he plans to call off the marriage. But an angel of the Lord comes to Joseph in a dream and tells him that Mary has not committed adultery, but that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And the angel says, verse 21, “She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save **His people** from their sins.” The name “Jesus”—or *Yeshua*—means “Yahweh saves.” And here, the angel tells Joseph whom Yahweh will save by the atoning work of Jesus: namely, His people.

But who are “His people”? Well, they are the people that belong to Him, because the Father has given them to Him. You might remember that scene in Acts chapter 18, where Luke narrates a discouraging season of Paul’s ministry in Corinth. The Jews in the synagogues resisted the Gospel and blasphemed, and Paul says, “Your blood be on your own heads! I’m going to the Gentiles!” Well, apparently Paul had become fearful of the danger, and so the Lord Jesus comes to Paul in a night vision and tells him, Acts 18:9: “Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, *for I have many people* in this city.” Now, what does Jesus mean, “I *have* many people” in this city”? Was there a group of already-converted Christians in Corinth that Paul just didn’t know about, who would help him fight the crowds looking to do him harm? No. Jesus means that there are many people whom the Father had already given Him—people that He has, by donation from the Father in eternity past, but who have not yet come to faith in Him. Jesus is comforting Paul by saying, “Don’t be afraid! Keep speaking the Gospel! Because it’s by your Gospel-preaching that those lost sheep who already belong to Me will be brought into the fold! Your preaching will lead to the conversion of sinners, because there are many of My elect people ready to hear the Gospel!” Now, not everybody in Corinth belonged to Christ; not everybody was “His people.” But these were.

He says something very similar in John 10:16. After saying that He lays down His life for His sheep—a passage we’ll revisit in a moment—He says, verse 16: “I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd.” Do you see it? There are sheep who are not yet in the fold; they’re not yet saved. But they are nevertheless those whom Christ *has*. “I *have* them, now, even though they still need to be brought in.” And so, Titus 2:14 says, Christ “gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself *a people for His own possession*, zealous for good deeds.” Christ has died to redeem and purify a people for His own possession—for His people. And since there are people in the world who do not belong to Christ—people whom Jesus does *not* save from their sins—therefore, “His people” does not refer to all without exception, but only those who will eventually be brought to salvation: the elect of God alone.

B. Many

A **second particularizing designation**, number two, is the word “**many**,” which we see in many verses. Matthew 20:28 and its parallel in Mark 10:45 both say, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for **many**,” not for all. This is a comment that echoes the promise of Isaiah 53:12, which says that the Suffering Servant “bore the sin of **many**.”

We spoke in our most recent sermon about the fact that Jesus’ blood was the blood of the New Covenant. At the last supper, in Matthew 26, verses 27 and 28, Jesus gives the disciples the

communion cup and says, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for **many** for forgiveness of sins.” Jesus’ blood will be shed in His atoning death for the forgiveness of sins, and He says that blood is poured out for **many**.

Similarly, in Hebrews chapter 2, the author identifies Jesus as the merciful and faithful high priest, who has come “to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” And in this context of His propitiatory death, just a few verses earlier in verse 10, the author says that God is “bringing **many** sons to glory,” by means of the sufferings of the author of their salvation: namely the sufferings of Jesus. And so the high priest’s propitiatory sacrifice, accomplished by His saving sufferings, is that which Scripture calls “bringing *many* sons to glory.” Then, later on in Hebrews chapter 9, and verse 28, the author says that “Christ [was] offered once to bear the sins of **many**.” Not all people without exception; but the “many” who are “His people.”

C. Sheep

Number three, Jesus died for His **sheep**. Turn to John chapter 10. We see in John 10 and verse 11 that Jesus says of Himself, “I am the good shepherd.” And then He says, “The good shepherd lays down His life for the **sheep**.” In Hebrews 13:20, the author refers to Jesus as “the great Shepherd of the sheep.” Now, this metaphor is intended to emphasize the personal bond and union that exists between Jesus and those for whom He lays down His life. He calls them “His own.” Look at verse 14: “I am the good shepherd, and I know *My own* and *My own* know Me.” Back in verse 3, He says, “the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep *by name* and leads them out.” These—His sheep, His own, whom He knows by name—these are the ones for whom the Good Shepherd lays down His life.

These sheep are to be distinguished from the goats. In Matthew 25:32–33, Jesus says that in the judgment, just “as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,” so also “He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left.” The sheep will be saved, verse 34, but the goats, verse 41, will depart into eternal fire.

D. Children of God

Well, not only do we have “His people,” the “many,” and the “sheep.” We also have, number **four, the children of God**. And for this we turn to John chapter 11. And, starting in verse 49, we learn that Caiaphas, the high priest, “prophesied,” verse 51, “that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one **the children of God** who are scattered abroad.” Now, these “children...scattered abroad” can’t refer to anyone who was already believing in Jesus at that time, because the Good News of what Christ accomplished in Israel hadn’t yet been taken to the nations. But, even as we saw before, they are nevertheless regarded as “the children of God.” They are the sheep of another fold, as

we saw in John 10:16. They are those who belonged to God by virtue of His choice of them for salvation before foundation of the world. John is saying that Jesus wasn't only going to die for the nation of Israel; He was going to die for *all* of **the children of God** that the Father had elected in eternity past. Jesus would die for all of God's elect.

We see the same concept back in Hebrews 2. Turn back there with me. Starting in verse 11, it says, "Both He who sanctifies," that is, Christ whose death saves and purifies His people, "and those who *are* sanctified," that is, the beneficiaries of Christ's sanctifying death, "are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren." And then the author cites a couple of Old Testament texts to substantiate his point. And in verse 13 he quotes Isaiah 8:18, and calls these "brethren" of Christ: "the **children** whom God has given" to the Son.

Now, of course we know that not all without exception are the children of God. Back in Hebrews 2:12, the author tells us that the Son will praise the Father along with His brethren in the assembly of the righteous. That certainly isn't true of all without exception. Indeed, Jesus says to the Pharisees in John 8:42, "If God were your Father, you would love Me." No, He tells them, verse 44, "You are of your father the devil." And so, Jesus dies for the **children of God**, not for all without exception.

E. Friends

Fifth, we have the term **friends**. And for this we may turn to John chapter 15. And as you're turning there I'll remind you that 1 John 4:10 says that the greatest expression of the love of the Father is His sending His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Well, by His atoning death, Jesus demonstrates the greatest love a man can have. John 15:13: "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his **friends**." The term "friends," here, is a necessarily particularizing designation. It excludes those who are the enemies of God, whom Scripture doesn't hesitate to speak about. First Corinthians 15:25 says that Jesus "must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet." Philippians 3:18 speaks of the "enemies of the cross of Christ." If Jesus' saving love is expressed in no greater way than that He lays down His life for His **friends**, and yet there exists such a thing as His enemies, then He did not lay down His life for all without exception.

F. Church

A sixth key term is the word **church**. Turn to Acts chapter 20. In Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders at Miletus, he charges his fellow-pastors, verse 28, to "shepherd the **church** of God which He"—that is, Christ, God the Son—"purchased with His own blood." Christ has purchased the **church** with His blood! The Apostle John uses the same language of "purchased with blood" to describe the atonement in Revelation chapter 5 and verse 9. The song of the saints

in praise of the Lamb is, “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” Now, notice what John doesn’t say there. He doesn’t say, “You have purchased for God with Your blood *every tribe* and tongue and people and nation.” No: he says Christ has purchased men *from* every tribe and tongue and people and nation. The purchase that God the Son made with His own blood is the purchase of the **church** of God. And so Paul says in Ephesians 5:25, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the **church** and gave Himself up for her.” It is for the eschatological assembly of the Lord, and not those excluded from that assembly for eternity, for whom Christ has given Himself in His atoning death.

G. Elect

And so, we have had “His people,” the “many,” the “sheep,” “the children of God,” “friends,” and “church.” That brings us to, number **seven**: the **elect**. That’s right. Scripture explicitly uses the term “elect” itself to describe those for whom Christ died. And we see that in Romans 8. So many of us are familiar with that great “Golden Chain” passage in verses 29 and 30, where Paul says that everyone God has chosen, He also calls, justifies, and glorifies. We have the span of salvation from eternity past—“foreknew” and “predestined”—to the moment of conversion—“called” and “justified”—all the way to eternity future—“glorified.”

And while it might seem like Paul skipped straight from “redemption planned” to “redemption applied” and skipped over “redemption accomplished,” he actually discusses the atonement in verses 32 and 33. He says, “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” And then Paul names the “us all” for whom the Father delivered the Son over to death. He says, verse 33: “Who will bring a charge against God’s **elect**?” Christ has died for the **elect**.

II. Objection: Negative Inference Fallacy?

Now, you say, how can those who reject a particular redemption deny what’s right there in those texts? Well, in response to all these particularizing designations that identify the objects of Christ’s death as a particular people, opponents of particular redemption raise the following objection. They say, “Sure, the Bible clearly affirms that Christ laid down his life for His sheep. But,” they claim, “the Bible does not say that Christ dies *only* for His sheep.” “Sure, Romans 8 says Christ was delivered over for the elect. But it doesn’t say that Christ was delivered over for the elect *alone*. You’re treating Scripture’s emphasis as if it were exclusiveness. And just because Scripture emphasizes some for whom Jesus died, it doesn’t necessarily mean to exclude others He died for.” And that is a reasonable objection. Especially given the fact that in other passages Scripture speaks of Christ giving His life for “the world” and dying as a ransom “for

all,” it’s reasonable to question whether we should read these texts that emphasize Christ’s work on behalf of the elect to the exclusion of the non-elect.

Well, how do we respond? In the **first** place, we must acknowledge that the universalistic language is significant. Just like there are particularizing designations concerning the scope of the death of Christ, there are also universalizing designations like “all” and “world.” And those passages cannot simply be overlooked. However, as we’ve seen several times in our series already, references to “all” and “the world” need to be interpreted in their context. When they are, we find that none of them teach that Christ died for all without exception, or for every person who has ever lived in the world. They intend to speak of all without distinction, or all kinds of people, throughout the world. But never genuinely every single individual in history. And in addition to the texts we’ve discussed already, we’ll actually address many of those universalistic passages in our next sermon. But in the first place, no text properly interpreted teaches that Christ died for all without exception. And when that becomes plain, this objection becomes little more than an **argument from silence**.

Second, it’s important to reiterate that these seven particularizing designations are **not presented in a vacuum**, divorced from the Bible’s theological framework for the doctrine of the atonement. This argument is more than lobbing proof-texts, aiming to cancel out “alls” with “manys.” It’s saying: given the unity of the Trinity, given the single saving intention of the atonement, given the inherent efficacy of Christ’s accomplishments, given what it means for Christ to be the priest of His people, and what it means that no blessing purchased by Christ is enjoyed apart from union to Him—in light of the intricate interconnectedness of everything God has to say on this matter—consider how these particularizing designations fit so seamlessly in that context! Viewed against that backdrop, these passages are far more than proof-texts. They are the coherent conclusion of the whole Bible’s doctrine of particular and effective atonement.

Third, this objection seems to assume that an author would have to include the word “**only**” for us to interpret an expression as necessarily exclusive or discriminating. But such an assumption is unwarranted. We don’t speak that way to one another: if I tell my wife I’m going to the grocery store, I don’t have to tell her that I’m *not* going to the movies, or to the gym, or to a restaurant. It’s understood that by naming where I *am* going, I’m necessarily excluding where I’m not going. But more than that: we don’t consistently require that standard of a host of texts of Scripture. In Genesis 12:2, when God promises Abraham, “I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great,” He doesn’t say that He’ll make a great nation of Abraham *only*, and yet we understand that Israel alone was Yahweh’s covenant nation. In Colossians 2:9, Paul says of Jesus, “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.” But he doesn’t say “*only* in Him.” But even so, we ought not to think that maybe there was another in whom the fullness of deity may have dwelt. No, the very nature of these categorical

statements, along with their contexts, gives us enough reason to read them as particularizing and discriminating, even without the appearance of terms like “only” or “alone.”

A **fourth** response to this objection is to make the observation that it seems easier to explain how “all” and “world” don’t necessarily mean all people without exception throughout history than it is to explain how particularizing language is intended to be genuinely universal. In other words, if the writers of Scripture believed that Jesus died for everyone who ever lived, why would they ever limit the scope of His death with necessarily exclusive designations like *sheep*, *church*, *friends*, and *many*? And especially if they believed—like so many advocates of a universal atonement do—that what makes the love of God manifested in the death of Christ so great is that it embraces everyone! If the glory of the death of Christ consisted in its universal breadth, why not *always* say “all,” or “world”? Why *ever* limit the death of Christ to “His people,” “the children of God,” and so on? And so as much as we have to explain the “alls” and “worlds” in context, the other side has to explain why it would ever make sense to deviate from that practice.

But then, in the **fifth** place, we respond to this objection by observing that the contexts in which these particularizing designations appear constrain us to interpret them as necessarily exclusive. For example, in Ephesians 5, when Paul says that Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, he does so in a context in which he makes Christ’s sacrificial love for the church the pattern or standard for a husband’s love for his wife. Well, husbands must love their wives in a way that is special and different from the way they love anyone else. But if (a) Christ’s love for the non-elect issued in His laying down His life for their sins just as He did for His own bride, and if (b) husbands were called to love their wives after that pattern, then (c) the measure of a husband’s love to his wife would be indistinguishable from the measure of his love to any other woman. And I think you’ll agree with me, ladies, that that is an interpretive bridge we cannot cross! Paul does not mean to endorse polygamy! No, the doctrine of union with Christ, coupled with the necessarily exclusive imagery of the marital union, constrain us to understand Paul to be saying that the church, as the bride of Christ, is the only one for whom He gives Himself up in His atoning death.

We spoke of Romans 8 earlier, where Paul called the “us all” for whom Christ was “delivered over” in death: “God’s elect.” Now, on its face, the term “elect” is an exclusive, discriminating term. The very term implies that some are chosen and some are not. But even beyond that, Paul says in verse 32 that the “us all,” the “elect” for whom Christ has died, will be freely given all things along with Christ by the Father. In the context of Romans 8, where Paul discusses salvation from eternity past to eternity future, these “all things” are all the saving benefits of God’s grace. In verses 35 through 39, Paul says this same “us” will never be separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. It’s plain that, since there will be some who do *not* receive all the blessings of salvation and who *will* be separated from the love of God in Christ for eternity, Paul certainly means to speak of Christ dying for some and not others.

Now, the response comes back: “No, you don’t understand! Yes, Paul is speaking of Christ’s death for the elect here in Romans 8. But just because he speaks of Christ’s death for the elect here, it doesn’t mean Christ hasn’t died for more than the elect!” And the answer to that is: yes it does. It would undo Paul’s entire argument in this passage. His whole point is to give encouragement and assurance of salvation to those for whom Christ died. And to do that, he lists all these saving blessings that they enjoy, and he *explicitly grounds them in the death of Christ on their behalf*. If not everyone for whom Christ died is guaranteed to receive those blessings—if someone could bring a charge against them or could separate them from the love of Christ—why would Paul make Christ’s death the very basis of their comfort? It would be no consolation at all. If Christ died for the reprobate as well as the elect, the troubled Roman Christians could say, “Paul, what does Christ’s death have to do with my security? He died for everyone without exception, and millions are separated from His love forever in hell.” You see, Paul can’t make the death of Christ the very ground of their assurance of salvation if that very death of itself doesn’t infallibly secure the salvation of *everyone* for whom Christ dies. And so the objection fails.

One more, from John chapter 10. You hear it all the time: “Sure, He dies for the sheep! But it doesn’t say that He *doesn’t* die for the goats!” Well, actually, yes it does. In the first half of the chapter, Jesus says He lays His life down for His own, His sheep, whom He knows by name. But then in verse 26, He speaks directly to the Pharisees and says to them, “But you do not believe because *you are not of My sheep*.” Now, first of all: don’t miss that. He doesn’t say, “You are not My sheep because you do not *believe*.” He doesn’t say that goats turn into sheep by believing in Him. No. He says the prerequisite for having faith is first being a sheep. “The reason you don’t believe, Pharisees, is because you’re not among those sheep whom the Father has chosen and given to Me before the foundation of the world.”

Now, for Jesus to say that He lays His life down for His sheep, and then for Him to immediately identify certain people as those who are not of His sheep, is to say, almost as plainly as could be said, that He did not lay down His life for those Pharisees. “I lay My life down for the sheep! And you’re not sheep!” So, contrary to what is so often asserted, this passage does say that Jesus doesn’t lay His life down for the goats. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep, and not for those who aren’t His sheep.

Conclusion

And so here we are again, friends—once again, having vindicated the glorious cross of Christ from the denigrations of the unlikely, unintentional enemy called “universal atonement.” If we are going to cherish that old rugged cross in all the fullness of its glory, in all of the plenitude of its power to save, we have to protect our thoughts against any species of argumentation that

would empty it of its power, that would curtail its efficacy, that would downgrade its effectiveness, that would turn it into a provision rather than a victorious accomplishment, that would supplant it as the decisive, determinative cause of our salvation! And so we protect the particular extent of the atonement, not because want to exclude people, but because it is only a particular redemption—a redemption that saves everyone for whom it was accomplished—that can be a perfect redemption.

And for those of you here today who remain outside of Christ, who are *not* yet a believer in Jesus: I call you to repentance and faith in this perfect redemption that our Savior has accomplished for sinners! You say, “But what if I’m not a sheep? What if I’m not one of the many? How can I know whether I am one of the particular people for whom Jesus died?” And the answer to that is: God never calls you to penetrate into the eternal counsels of the divine decree to determine whether you’re elect or not. The call of Christ to sinners is not to determine whether the Father has given them to Him from eternity. The call of Christ to sinners is: “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” It’s: “The one who comes to Me I will never cast out!” It’s: “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

Dear friend, are you a sinner? Of course you are! You’re just like the rest of us! You’ve broken the law of God. You’ve disobeyed His commandments. And so you lie open to the just punishment of God’s righteous wrath. And yet, it is precisely your being a sinner that qualifies you to come to this Christ! “I have not come to call the righteous but *sinners*.” All the warrant you need to come to Christ is that you’re a sinner, and you need just such a Savior as Jesus, who has fulfilled the very demands of the law of God that you’ve broken, who has died the very death you deserved to die as a result of your crimes, fully satisfying the just demands of God’s holiness, and who has risen again in victory over sin and death, and now freely offers cleansing and forgiveness and righteousness to everyone who will come to Him and drink of the water of life! O, it is just such a full and free salvation that His perfect redemption has secured! And it is yours for the taking, if only you’ll lay hold of Christ this morning by faith alone.

The only way to know whether you’re a sheep or not is whether you hear the Shepherd’s voice and follow after Him. Come to Christ. Turn from your sins. Abandon any confidence in yourself to even contribute to your own righteousness before God. And trust in Christ alone for your salvation. And His death will avail for you, just as it has for us, precisely because it *is* a *perfect* redemption.