

A Saving God

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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. {1Ti 2:3-6}

This passage frequently surfaces in the ongoing debate among Christians as to election and salvation. Does God actually want every human being without exception to be saved?

Those who hold to this view must face their own set of problems with the idea. Did God devise the system of salvation before creation, knowing its results-how many people would be saved and how many would not? And if He knew that a small percentage of humanity would realize actual salvation based on His chosen system (the typical view of those who hold to God's universal "wish" for all mankind's salvation), why did He institute such an ineffective system? Why didn't He create a more efficient method of saving people? We have the assumption that God really wants every human being to be saved, but yet He instituted a pathetically ineffective system of salvation, knowing in advance its utter failure to accomplish His "wish". This idea is simply not reasonable, given the sovereignty of God.

We further have the conflict between this idea and such passages as Job 23:13, "But he is in one mind, and who can turn him? and what his soul desireth, even that he doeth." The conflict between the idea and this passage is irreconcilable. Does God wish the salvation of all mankind, while forcing Himself to accept the sad outcome of the system that He instituted? Or does He do whatever His soul desires? It can't be both ways.

We also must deal with the various passages that teach the doctrine of election and make it a matter of God's choice, not man's decision. This theological perspective imposes even more tension onto the situation. We have a God who specifically chooses a certain finite number of mankind to salvation, but He really "wishes" that all of humanity would be saved.

John Owen, the old Puritan theologian is credited with originating this sequence of questions and answers to deal with the various options regarding the question, "For whom did Christ die?"

1. He died for all the sins of all mankind.
2. He died for some of the sins of all mankind.
3. He died for all the sins of some of mankind.

Now let's go back over each option and see how it works out. Most contemporary Christians will strongly assert that they believe in the first option, but Owen's reasoning demonstrates that they actually do not.

1. He died for all the sins of all mankind. The only logical conclusion to this idea is the universal salvation of all mankind. If Jesus truly died for all the sins of all mankind, there is nothing that can prevent their eventual salvation. Universal salvation of all mankind is inevitable. Only a few people actually believe in universal salvation, so what is the problem?
2. He died for some of the sins of all mankind. Most of the folks who state that they believe in #1 above will avoid the conclusion of universal salvation by stating that God requires man to make a decision, accept Him in faith, believe the gospel, or do something cognitive and in response to faith in order to actually realize the salvation that God wants them to have. When asked the question, "Do you believe

that a person's failure to respond to God or to the gospel in faith constitutes a sin?" they will readily answer yes. Then the next obvious question, if they truly believe in Owen's first premise is "Did Jesus die for their sin of unbelief?" This question forces the point. They actually do not believe in the first idea. They believe that Jesus died for all the sins of all mankind except for the sin of not believing in God and accepting the gospel message. Therefore they actually believe that Jesus died for some of the sins of all mankind. When confronted with this point, they quickly realize that this idea cannot find Biblical support. It is the least tenable of the three, but it is actually what they believe.

3. He died for all the sins of some of mankind. This idea builds on the doctrine of Biblical election. God chose out of the whole of mankind those whom He would save, not out of merit on their part, but out of mercy and grace on His part. Please note; those who believe in the Biblical doctrine of election do not believe that election saves anyone. Rather they (we) believe that election marked out or identified those whom God chose to save through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only Savior of sinners. Jesus covers those thus chosen of God in Christ wholly by His substitutionary sacrifice. He died for all of their sins without exception or reservation. Of Owen's three, this option matches the teaching of Scripture more precisely than either of the others. It leaves God in charge of salvation, and its results bring God's desire and the outcome of His system of salvation into perfect harmony. Exactly the number chosen of God shall surely realize the salvation to which God chose them. This view does not leave the saved sinner free to live in sin or to ignore God's commands. It lays the foundation for the saved sinner to live freely and joyfully to the glory of His merciful Savior and to actively engage in the work of spreading the good news about who Jesus is and what He has done.

"...Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth." How then do we explain this point? In the last chapter we examined the term "all men" in terms of Paul's exhortation to prayer for civil leaders. Rather than referring to all mankind without exception (Most of humanity has nothing to do with civil government, so by definition they are excluded from this particular prayer exhortation.), it seems obvious that Paul's intent in that verse refers to all kinds of men in governmental positions of authority, from the President to the local city councilman.

Good exegesis requires a logical and reasonable conclusion that Paul's use of the same term in the same context carries a compatible meaning. Thus if in the first instance Paul intended that we pray for all kinds of men related to governmental authority, in this instance he intends for us to understand that it is God's desire or will that all kinds of men (as opposed to all mankind without exception), including but not limited to all kinds of men in governmental authority, be saved. Contextually this idea harmonizes with Paul's teaching, and it also avoids the inconsistency of making God's "wish" and His actual system of salvation contradictory.

We find additional evidence for this interpretation. First, Paul immediately takes us from salvation to the divine means of salvation, the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Mediator between God and man. It is not man's decision, but Jesus' mediation that saves us. Any number of people will hold firmly that Jesus is the only Savior, but that He employs "agents" or "means" to convey salvation to individuals. Look up the word translated "Mediator" in this passage. It is generally defined as "means." Jesus is God's only agent or means of our salvation. God intends an invaluable work in faith and in the gospel, but He does not intend them to serve as surrogate agents or means. Paul clearly affirms that the Lord Jesus Christ is God's only "agent" or "means" in our salvation.

Additionally, Paul adds another corroborating point, "...to be testified in due time." If in fact God wishes the salvation of all without exception, why would there be any need to wait till the resurrection to see the actual results of God's salvation plan? Their presence in the resurrection at His right hand will be a factual testimony of God's eternal purpose in salvation? When we see them at His right hand, their presence will testify that Jesus gave Himself a ransom for their sins.

The statement, "Who gave himself a ransom for all," must be in some way qualified. The person who claims to believe that Jesus died for all the sins of all mankind-but who eventually faces the reality that he/she actually believes that He died for some of the sins of all mankind-must walk away from this verse. He/She really doesn't believe that Jesus gave Himself a ransom for all without qualification. They qualify their view by reserving the sin of unbelief, "unfaith," or failure to accept God's offer in the gospel. Thus at the core of the question, they reject the universal interpretation of this statement.

Those who hold to a wholly Arminian view of the passage equally qualify the passage. They join the first group in their reservation about Jesus giving Himself a ransom for all the sins of all mankind. Their view effectively holds that Jesus gave Himself a ransom for all, but ransomed none unless they accept the terms of His offer of ransom to them. Thus they directly deny that Jesus actually gave the ransom price at all. The view of those who hold to Owen's third premise, that Jesus died for all the sins of some of mankind, offer, I believe, a more reasonable qualification to this passage. Jesus gave Himself a ransom for all kinds of men, but not for all mankind without exception. The actual identity of those for whom Jesus gave Himself a ransom will be testified in due time, at the resurrection and judgment when they appear with Christ in resurrected and glorified bodies.

Thus what appears to be a universal passage is not actually accepted by most Christians as factually as they claim to believe it. If you make the statements in this context literal and divorce them from Paul's earlier comment regarding prayer for all men, you force yourself into the universal salvation view, that all of mankind will in fact be saved eventually. This view is so alien to Scripture that few indeed hold to it.

Central to the passage and to Biblical doctrine is the work of Jesus as the only Mediator between God and man. We cannot embrace a theology that adds endlessly to the list of mediators in the salvation process. Whatever we believe at the end of the day, we must embrace the clearest statement in the passage, the exclusive mediatorship of the Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot adopt a compromised theology that makes any other being or force function as mediator; not the gospel, not the faith or other actions of the sinner. Nothing can serve as the true Mediator between God and man other than the Lord Jesus Christ alone. Owen's third premise honors Christ in this role and, I believe, states the true teaching of Scripture regarding our salvation. May we praise Him for unmerited salvation and mercy.

D. A. Carson makes a core observation regarding this lesson. "In the context of 1Ti 2, Paul is anxious to stress divine compassion towards all people irrespective of race, status or condition. Probably he is combating a tendency towards elitism that tries to limit God's compassion inappropriately." {1} The elitist spirit would more than justify the points that we made above regarding the various possible interpretations of the apparent universalistic terms. Rather than supporting universalism, with the significant problems related to that interpretation, it seems far more likely that Paul is indeed combating a growing elitism within the early church. Throughout Acts and subsequent New Testament letters we constantly encounter the ongoing tension between Jews and Gentiles within the faith. If this premise is accepted, the theological tension between a universalistic "wish" on God's part and the number of people who will actually be saved vanishes.

Roy Zuck seems to support the problem of an elitist spirit at Ephesus, though he does not embrace Owen's third premise in his theology. "The exclusivists in the Ephesian church evidently felt that the gospel was only for Jews. This was a common problem, as seen preeminently in the case of Peter." {cf. Ac 10:9-43; Ga 2:11-13} {2}

FOOTNOTES:

{1} Carson, D. A. (1994). New Bible commentary: 21st century edition. Rev. ed. of: The new Bible commentary. 3rd ed. / edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970. (4th ed.). {1Ti 2:1} Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press. cf. confer, compare

{2} Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). The Bible knowledge commentary: An exposition of the scriptures. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.