

PARTICULAR REDEMPTION AND THE FREE OFFER OF THE GOSPEL

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Introduction:

One of the most beloved verses in the entire Bible is John 3.16, where we read, "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"¹. And yet these words of Jesus Christ Himself cannot be properly understood unless one understands the backdrop upon which they are presented. This is found in God's command to Adam, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die"².

In this command, God defined the purpose of Adam's existence, and his relationship to his Creator. Birds would be programmed to fly south in the winter, salmon would be programmed to swim upstream to spawn, but Adam would be given the freedom to choose whether he would fulfill his purpose for being, which was to glorify and thereby enjoy God through worship, service, and obedience. But this was to be out of love for God, heart, soul, mind, and strength, and a choice was given because true love is a choice. Adam chose ultimately to defy God's intentions for his very existence. As such, Adam chose death over life through his disobedience, and, "by one man's offense death reined through the one... through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation... by one man's disobedience many were made sinners"³.

Now a wonderful light is cast upon the import of Christ's words in John 3.16. In these words He proclaimed nothing less than a divine provision for putting away sin and all its consequences, which would be appropriated by belief. He went on to affirm in verse 17 that, "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved". And this gracious provision would be accomplished by the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ. Jesus confirmed this truth in the preceding verses⁴ when He stated, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life". And so, just as the snake bitten Israelites looked upon the bronze snake on the pole and lived, so too sinners are freely called to look in faith upon the crucified Savior, Jesus Christ, and live.

¹ All Biblical quotations are from the NKJV unless otherwise noted.

² Genesis 2.16-17

³ Romans 5.17, 18, 19

⁴ verses 14-15

However, the question arises, did Christ indeed suffer and die for every human being? Has Jesus definitely provided satisfaction for every sinner, but persistent unbelievers miss out on what has been done for them only because of their own stubborn unbelief? In this way, has Jesus only made sinners “saveable”, in that the final act necessary for their salvation is their faith?

The puritan theologian John Owen put it this way when he wrote, “God imposed his wrath due unto, and Christ underwent the pains of hell for, either the sins of all men, or all the sins of some men, or some sins of all men. If the last, some sins of all men, then have all men some sins to answer for, and so shall no man be saved; for if God enter into judgment with us, though it were with all mankind for one sin, no flesh could be justified in His sight: ‘If the Lord should mark iniquities, who could stand?’ Ps. cxxx.3” ... If the second, that is it which we affirm, that Christ in their stead and room suffered for all the sins of all the elect in the world. If the first, why, then are not all freed from the punishment of all their sins? You will say, ‘Because of their unbelief; they will not believe.’ But this unbelief, is it sin, or not? If not, why should they be punished for it? If it be, then Christ underwent the punishment due to it, or not. If so, then why must that hinder them more than their other sins for which He died from partaking of the fruit of His death? If He did not, then He did not die for all their sins”⁵.

As such, the answer to the question of for whom did Christ die gets to the very heart of what Jesus accomplished on the cross in His sufferings and death. There are those who are persuaded, as Owen writes, “of a *general ransom* to be paid by Christ for all; that He died to redeem all and every one, - not only for many, His church, the elect of God, but for every one also of the posterity of Adam. Now the masters of this opinion do see full well and easily, *that* if that be the *end* of the death of Christ which we have from the Scripture asserted⁶, if those before recounted be the immediate *fruits and products* thereof, then one of these two things will necessarily follow: - that either, first, God and Christ failed of their end proposed, and did not accomplish that which they intended, the death of Christ being not a fitly-proportioned means for the attaining of that end (for any cause of failing cannot be assigned); which to assert seems to us blasphemously injurious to the wisdom, power, and perfection of God, as likewise derogatory to the worth and value of the death of Christ; - or else, that all men, all the posterity of Adam, must be saved, purged sanctified, and glorified; which surely they will not maintain, at least the Scripture and the woeful experience of millions will not allow. Wherefore, to cast a tolerable colour upon their persuasion, they must and do deny that God or His Son had any such absolute aim or end in the death or blood-shedding of Jesus Christ, or that any such thing was immediately procured and purchased by it... but that God intended nothing, neither was anything effected by Christ, - that benefit ariseth to any immediately by His death but what is common to all and every soul, though never so cursedly unbelieving here and eternally damned hereafter, until an act of some, not procured for them by Christ, (for if it were, why have they it not all alike?) to wit, faith, do distinguish them from others. Now, this seeming to me to enervate the virtue, value,

⁵ John Owen, The Works of John Owen, Banner of Truth Trust, 1993, Volume X, “The Death of Death in the Death of Christ”, p. 173-174

⁶ Owen previously cited the effects of Christ’s atonement as reconciliation, justification, sanctification, adoption, and finally glory and immortality forever.

fruits and effects of the satisfaction and death of Christ, - serving , besides as a basis and foundation to a dangerous, uncomfortable, erroneous persuasion”⁷

The Savoy Declaration of Faith states,

“To all those for whom Christ has purchased redemption, He does certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same; making intercession for them, and revealing unto them, in and by the Word, the mysteries of salvation; effectually persuading them by His Spirit to believe and obey, and governing their hearts by His Word and Spirit; overcoming all their enemies by His almighty power and wisdom, in such manner, and ways, as are consonant to His wonder full and unsearchable dispensation”⁸

Clearly, what is stated here is that the beneficiaries of the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ are the only ones for whom Christ died. Only they, through the mysterious and powerful workings of the Holy Spirit, will respond in belief, repentance, and obedience to the Word of reconciliation in the gospel.

But another question arises. Given that Christ only suffered and died for those to whom He would through His mediation effectually apply the benefits of His atoning work, then can the message of the gospel be sincerely presented to all without distinction, even those for whom He did not die? Should a preacher freely exhort all of his hearers to come to Jesus Christ in repentance and faith for salvation, while knowing there may be some hearing whose sins were not paid for by Christ in His giving of His life as a ransom? Some, citing the great commission, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every living creature”⁹, argue that Jesus would never have given this command if He hadn’t died for every sinner. As such, they reject one truth, the particular nature of Christ’s atonement, in order to rationalize in their minds the acceptance of another truth, the free offering of the gospel.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, will be to demonstrate that the particular nature of the atonement is no barrier to the sincere and earnest pleading with men to be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. Paul wrote, “now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God”¹⁰. Undeniably, it is “God our Savior who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”¹¹.

⁷ Owen, X, pages 159-160

⁸ Chapter VIII., Of Christ the Mediator, paragraph VIII.

⁹ Mark 16.15

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 5.20

¹¹ 1 Timothy 2. 3-4

God's Decreed Purpose In the Atonement:

In our Bibles we read, "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"¹². It does not read that sinners are made "saveable", nor is any additional work like believing attached to Christ's work. It simply says that the effects of Christ's work in His incarnation are such that sinners are really saved. Yes, belief is involved, but not as a contribution to salvation by the sinner, but as an appropriating tool. Someone has likened this faith to a coupling between a locomotive and the freight cars. It is the locomotive that pulls the cars, and not the coupling. And yet the cars receive the benefit of the work of the locomotive by being coupled to it.

This saving work of Christ can best be understood by examining chiefly His Priestly Office. Calvin observed that the ratifying of Christ's Priesthood with an oath, "The Lord has sworn and will not relent, You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek"¹³, demonstrates "what a weighty matter this is... God undoubtedly willed in these words to ordain the principal point on which, He knew, our whole salvation turns"¹⁴. The writer to the Hebrews defined for us this priestly work by writing, "For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins"¹⁵. As the verse states, clearly, the office of the priesthood with all of its actions are directed immediately towards God, "on God's sovereignty, and character, and claims, and law... It propitiates God; it intercedes to God. It satisfies God's justice; it pacifies God's wrath; it secures God's favor; it seals God's covenant love; and it gives effect to God's eternal purpose and grace"¹⁶.

The nature of Christ's priesthood is clearly seen in the Levitical priesthood. These ordained priests, "taken... from among the children of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the children of Israel"¹⁷, acted specifically on behalf of God's chosen people, Israel. Their actions in sacrifices for sins, and mediation were not of a general, vague, indefinite, unlimited, universal nature, but were exclusive and particular for the children of Israel. And, "for whomsoever a Levitical priest sacerdotally officiated, he was completely successful – completely successful in averting the evil, or procuring the privilege, which his official action contemplated"¹⁸. Shouldn't this same complete success also mark the priestly work of the greater High Priest, Jesus Christ? Indeed, how profoundly odious is the idea that Christ's work of atonement in the sacrifice of himself was less successful than the sacrificial work of the Levitical priest, in that many, if the universal atonement proponents are correct, never received the gracious blessing. Thus we would be left scratching our heads trying to understand how the priesthood of the inferior Old Covenant could be more successful than the

¹² Ibid, 1.15

¹³ Hebrews 7.21

¹⁴ John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion", The Westminster Press, Book II, Chapter XV, page 502

¹⁵ 5.1

¹⁶ Hugh Martin, The Atonement, Reformed Academic Press, page 59

¹⁷ Numbers 3.12

¹⁸ Hugh Martin, page 65

Priesthood of the better New Covenant, which would be characterized generally by failure, since all for whom Christ sacrificed did not receive forgiveness and reconciliation with God. But thankfully we read, "if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second... but Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"¹⁹.

John Owen helps us further in our understanding of the above verses from Hebrews. Having quoted 1 John 2.1-2, "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and He is the propitiation for our sins", he wrote, "He must be an advocate to intercede, as well as offer a propitiatory sacrifice, if He will be such a merciful High Priest over the house of God as that the children should be encouraged to go to God by Him. This the apostle exceedingly clears and evidently proves in the Epistle to the Hebrews, describing the priesthood of Christ, in the execution thereof, to consist in these two acts, of offering up Himself in and by the shedding of His blood, *and* interceding for us to the utmost"²⁰.

As such, if Christ's oblation and His intercession be so joined, and they are, then it necessarily follows that Christ must intercede for all those for whom He provided an oblation. Owen observed from Isaiah 53.11 (By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities") that, "The actual justification of sinners, the immediate fruit of His intercession, certainly follows His bearing of their iniquities. And in the next verse they are of God so put together that surely none ought to presume to put them asunder: 'He bare the sin of many' (behold His oblation!), 'and made intercession for the transgressors;' even for those many transgressors whose sin He bares"²¹.

Thus, to insist on a universal atonement, leads to the wretched conclusion that Christ not only failed in His work of sacrifice to save everyone, but He continues to fail in interceding for the "all" for whom He died, since millions never come to God through Him in repentance, faith, and obedience, but enter into eternal damnation in unbelief. But praise be to God, how different is the finished work of Jesus Christ who "is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make *intercession* for them... who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for his own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself"²².

¹⁹ Hebrews 8.7; 9.11-14

²⁰ Owen, X, page 183, *italics mine*

²¹ *Ibid*, page 182

²² Hebrews 7.25, 27

A very dramatic picture of the particular nature of Christ's atonement is presented to us in the confrontational showdown on Mount Carmel.²³ Following the failure of the prophets of Baal to summon their non-existent god, it became Elijah's turn, and he prayed, "Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that *this* people may know that You are the Lord God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again", and it immediately followed that, "the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice"²⁴. Here, an innocent sacrifice received the fire of God's judgment in place of "this people". Thus, through Elijah's mediatorial work of intercessory prayer, combined with a sin sacrifice on their behalf, the people were spared the well-deserved judgment of God for their unfaithfulness. However, the prophets of Baal, for whom no sacrifice of prayer was offered, were executed at Elijah's directive. In this event, we cannot help but be pointed ahead to particular nature of Christ's oblation hand-in-hand with His intercession who, "gives His life for the sheep"²⁵ in oblation, and who interceded for them by praying, "I do not pray for these (*His disciples*) alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word"²⁶.

George Smeaton addressed the particular nature of Christ's work of atonement from another perspective. He wrote, "that the atonement, as a fact in history, is as replete with saving results and consequences, as the fall of man, with which it must ever be contrasted, is replete with the opposite. Its extent coincides with its effects. In the Scripture mode of representing it, we find it placed in causal connection with man's salvation, as a fact not less real than the fall, and not less fraught with consequences (Rom v. 12-20). The words intimate, that if the fall was fruitful of results for man's condemnation and death, the atonement is not less so for man's restoration"²⁷. He says in effect that Adam's transgression produced real results, and not just the potential for those results. That is, "Death spread to all men... all sinned... many died... one offense resulted in condemnation... death reigned through the one... judgment came to all men... many were made sinners". He then noted that the Apostle Paul used the fall with its real results, as a contrasting background for the superior and real results of Christ's atonement: "the grace of God and the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many... the free gift... resulted in justification... those who receive abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ... the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life²⁸... many will be made righteous". Thus, Christ's atonement did not just result in the "potential" for blessing, with the caveat of belief, but "by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being set apart"²⁹. Or in other words, Christ's death really did put away the sins of God's elect, and the elect would prove their election, and therefore Christ's dying for them, by really

²³ A. W. Pink, *Elijah, Banner of Truth Trust*, 2002, page 168-169

²⁴ 1 Kings 18.37-39, *italics mine*

²⁵ John 10.11

²⁶ *Ibid*, 17.20, (*parenthetical insert mine*)

²⁷ George Smeaton, *Christ's Doctrine of the Atonement, Banner of Truth Trust*, page 366

²⁸ Clearly, the context for Paul's use of the word "all" can only refer to those who also receive "justification of life". Otherwise, all men would be justified, which I don't believe even universal atonement advocates could accept, unless they are also proponents of universal salvation!

²⁹ Hebrews 10.14

coming to God through Christ by faith, thus demonstrating the effectual intercession of Christ on their behalf.

The words of Jesus Himself clearly demonstrate the particular nature of His work of atonement. He plainly stated, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep", and again, "I lay down My life for the sheep"³⁰. Soon after, Jesus would say to a crowd of Jews, "You do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, Who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand"³¹. In these verses, we see unmistakably the sovereign divine prerogative of God the Father giving the sheep to the Son, who then gives His life for the sheep only. And who are these sheep if they are not the elect, and, "whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified"³². As such, it is the sheep only who believe, because as Jesus also declared, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me... This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day"³³. And this belief is the direct result of Christ's mediation on their behalf, and theirs only. Christ himself clarified the extent of His intercession in His prayer to the Father when He said, "I pray for them (His disciples). I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are yours... I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word"³⁴. As such, we again see that Christ prayed only for those for whom he died, and He died only for those for whom He would intercede.

These sheep for whom Christ died are called the *many* in reference to those for whom His blood was shed: "'For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins", and "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many"³⁵. Furthermore, they are called His *friends*: "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for His friends"³⁶. Smeaton commented regarding this verse, "This special love wins its object, finds its object, and rescues its object". He went on to write, "The answer to the inquiry, who are the special objects of Christ's atonement? Would have been simple, if men had contented themselves with Scripture statements, and with ideas derived from Scripture. Whatever be the infinite value of the atonement, considered as a divine fact, as well as a human transaction, yet, in point of saving efficacy, *it does not extend beyond the circle of those who believe in Christ*. Though in intrinsic worth it could save the whole world, and a thousand worlds more... yet the redemption-work does not extend, in point of fact, beyond the circle of those who approve of it as a fit and proper method of salvation;

³⁰ John 10.11,15

³¹ Ibid, verses 26-39

³² Romans 8.30

³³ Ibid 6.37, 39

³⁴ John 17.9, 20, parentheses insert mine

³⁵ Matthew 26.28, 20.28

³⁶ John 15.13

or, in other words, who, by a faith which is the gift of God, are led to accept it as the ground of reconciliation with God"³⁷.

In spite of the overwhelmingly plain statements in Scripture stating the particular nature of the atonement, there are those who still object, pointing to certain verses such as we find in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, where he wrote, "we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again"³⁸. Here, the verse fragments, "One died for all", and "He died for all" are often presented as proof positive that Christ's atonement was such that He paid for the sins of all without any restriction. But as always, one needs to consider the context for Paul's use of these phrases. In particular, the direct effect of Christ's dying for the "all" is that the same "all" died. Hodge wrote concerning the "all" in this clause, "His death involved, or secured their death. This was its design and effect, and, therefore, this clause limits the extent of the word *all* in the preceding clause. Christ died for the all who died when he died... the death of Christ was legally and effectively the death of His people... His people are so united to Him that His death is their death, and his life is their life "³⁹. This understanding is the very essence of the purpose and effects of Christ's death, that the elect be saved from the legal and moral repercussions of the fall, in that their sins are paid for, and new life is secured for them so that it can be said that they have died to self and sin, and now live for Christ. This is consistent with what Paul wrote to the Romans where we read, "If we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him"⁴⁰. And concerning himself, Paul wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me"⁴¹. If Christ truly "gave Himself" for all men, as some insist, then the logical conclusion from these verses is that all will die and live for Christ, which is not only inconsistent with the rest of Scripture, but is also something we do not know from experience.

Another passage used by those who object to the particular nature of the atonement is found in John's letter, where he wrote, "He himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world"⁴². At first glance, it might appear to imply a universal aspect to Christ's atonement, in that one might conclude He died for all, the whole world. But one needs to look closer. The meaning of the word propitiation is to appease. In this case, it is God who is propitiated, or appeased, in that His holy and righteous character has been vindicated through the vicarious sacrifice of Christ, who suffered the just penalty of God's law on behalf of those given to Him by the Father. In this way, God who is just, now justifies those who have faith in Christ, or in other words, elect sinners. Therefore, if the proponents of a universal atonement insist that this propitiation has been accomplished for "all", then they are effectively arguing for a universal salvation, since appeasement has been provided for "all".

³⁷ Smeaton, page 371

³⁸ 2 Corinthians 5.14-15

³⁹ Charles Hodge, A Commentary on 1&2 Corinthians, Banner of Truth Trust, 1994, page 512

⁴⁰ Romans 6.8

⁴¹ Galatians 2.20

⁴² 1 John 2.2

Instead, it is helpful to look at the context of this verse where believers who have sinned are encouraged to look to their "Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous"⁴³ who is "the propitiation for our sins". But John carefully adds, "and not for ours only but also for the whole world". In this way, he reminds the believer who has fallen into sin that his means of recovery is no different from the means whereby he first came to Christ by faith, nor is it different than the means and way offered to the whole world. Robert Candlish wrote concerning this verse, "We have no special fountain opened for our cleansing, but only the fountain opened in the house of David for all the inhabitants of Jerusalem indiscriminately. There is no way in which we can get rid of that sin of ours, - its guilt and curse, its deadly blight and canker, eating out the very life of our soul, - except that way, patent and open to all, in which all the world, if it will, may get rid of its sins. Doubtless when we sin we have an Advocate with the Father to stand by us, and lift us up, and plead our cause, and place us again on a right footing with the Father. But He can do all this only by interposing himself as 'the propitiation for our sins', in the very same sense and manner in which he interposes Himself as the propitiation 'for the sins of the whole world'"⁴⁴.

God's Desired Purpose In the Atonement:

The Scriptural record is clear regarding the extent of the atonement, which is that Christ's life, sufferings, death, and resurrection were such that He really did secure redemption and reconciliation to God for His people. Therefore, should the gospel be freely offered to anyone without distinction, knowing that God has decreed that salvation is only for His people, and that those He has passed over will never respond to the gospel call?

As seen by the above subtitle, it is helpful to make a distinction between God's *decrees*, and God's *desires*. As regards God's decrees in election, it is very clear in the Scriptures that it is God who does the choosing, or decreeing of some for salvation. And it is the elect who are the beneficiaries of the atoning work of Christ, as has already been discussed. The Apostle Paul wrote regarding election, "So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy"⁴⁵. We also read, "As many as received Him (Christ), to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God"⁴⁶. These elect are the very ones for whom Christ came to save, and did save.

But the Scriptures also tell us of the desires of God towards mankind. With that in mind, it's useful to first examine God's revealed general benevolence in the grace He

⁴³ Ibid, verse 1

⁴⁴ Robert Candlish, A Commentary on 1 John, Banner of Truth Trust, 1993, pages 72-73

⁴⁵ Romans 9.16

⁴⁶ John 1.12-13, parentheses insert mine

extends not only to His people, but indiscriminately to all of mankind. Christ spoke concerning His Father, "He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust"⁴⁷. Christ made it clear that God extends favor to all in these common gifts of providence, whether they are His beloved chosen people, or those passed over by decree. And it is this expression of goodness by God to His enemies that is given as the very reason as to why God's children should love their enemies. Can it not be stated plainly therefore that God loves His enemies, and demonstrates it in these acts of kindness? God does not bestow these gifts grudgingly, but out of the goodness and lovingkindness of His heart. This is reinforced for us by Jesus when He taught His disciples, "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 is merciful"⁴⁸. That Jesus would point us to God's mercy, pity, kindness, goodness, and compassion to all as the supreme ideal of attainment in the walk of a Christian, makes it clear that these attributes are fundamentally reflective of the very perfections of God. Furthermore, this lovingkindness that God's people are commanded to model is not restricted by any expectation of receiving anything in return. And therefore, this lovingkindness of God in these common gifts has no required prerequisite of repentance and faith. God does not ask that His people do that which He cannot do Himself in these displays of goodness, but to the contrary, uses Himself as the highest example. And so, as John Murray wrote, "It would appear that the real point in dispute in connection with the free offer of the gospel is whether it can properly be said that God *desires* the salvation of all men"⁴⁹.

The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, "God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth"⁵⁰. An enormous degree of insight about our great God can be gleaned from these verses as regards His gracious and merciful desire. They don't say that He desires only those whom He has predestined to be saved, although some would insist this to be the case. They, in order to harmonize in their minds their understanding of God's eternal purposes in predestination, contend that the "all" does not mean all of mankind, but refers to "all" of the elect, or men from "all" the nations, tongues, tribes, and time periods.

Others, simply reject the idea that God, at His pleasure, would only chose some for salvation, and purposely pass over others. They acknowledge "election", but insist that God only elects someone solely on the basis of what He sees when He looks down the corridor of time to observe how a particular person responds to the gospel. If God sees one believing, He then chooses him. They maintain, therefore, that every man has an equal opportunity, or possibility to be saved, and in this way they harmonize for themselves the "all men" in our verses.

⁴⁷ Matthew 5.45

⁴⁸ Luke 6.35-36

⁴⁹ John Murray, Collected Writings of John Murray, Banner of Truth Trust, 1982, Volume 4, "The Free Offer of the Gospel", page 113

⁵⁰ 1 Timothy 2.3-4

Charles Spurgeon, however, wrote concerning these verses, "'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... My love of consistency with my own doctrinal views is not great enough to allow me knowingly to alter a single text of Scripture"⁵¹. This desire, therefore, is consistent with that common mercy to all, without distinction, or any precondition of election.

In Deuteronomy we read, "Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep My commandments"⁵². The very expression, "Oh", is an "expression of earnest desire or wish or will that the people of Israel were of a heart to fear Him and keep all His commandments always"⁵³. But some would stop at this point and acknowledge that the desire of God is here expressed, but they would insist it is only in regards to God's people Israel. But Murray went on to say, "It is apparent from the book of Deuteronomy itself (cf. 31:24-29) and from the whole history of Israel that they did not have a heart to fear God and to keep all His commandments always. Since they did not fulfill that which was optatively expressed in 5:29 (26), we must conclude that God had not decreed that they should have such a heart. If God had decreed it, it would have been so. Here therefore we have an instance of desire on the part of God for the fulfillment of that which He had not decreed, in other words, a will on the part of God to that which He had not decretively willed"⁵⁴.

Another passage that should be examined in this light is found in Ezekiel where it is written, "'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?'"⁵⁵. Again, some would argue that the wicked here are those of God's people who will not ultimately die, but will respond to this warning, and thus prove themselves to be regenerate. But for a qualification to be placed on the wicked referred to, would seem to be an unwarranted limitation, particularly in light of the warning to Ezekiel regarding faithfulness to his ministry. We read, "When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man you shall surely die!' and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at his hand. Nevertheless if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul"⁵⁶. These verses clearly imply that there will be some wicked who will not respond. Otherwise, the warning would have no meaning, since if the "wicked" were limited to God's people, then none would perish due to God's eternal electing decree. The very same expression of God's sincere desire for the wicked, all the wicked, is given again in the verse after the next where it is written, "'As I live,' says the Lord God, '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! For why should you die, O house of

⁵¹ Iain H. Murray, *Spurgeon v. Hyper-Calvinism*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1995, pages 150-151

⁵² Deuteronomy 5:29

⁵³ John Murray, page 117

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, page 117-118

⁵⁵ Ezekiel 18:23

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 33:8-9

Israel?"⁵⁷. Murray wrote regarding this verse, "It means that the reason why no one should die, why there is no reason why any should die, is, that God does not will (His desired will) that any should die. He wills rather that they repent and live"⁵⁸. Again, we see this addressed to Israel, who are an outward picture of God's chosen people, but one should never assume that all of ancient and typological Israel were covered under God's decreed covenant of grace in Christ Jesus. There were the wicked among them who would never repent, and yet were recipients of God's gracious, merciful, benevolent, and sincere plea to "turn and live!" Such was the case with Korah, who is cited by name in Jude's letter⁵⁹ as an example of God's certain judgment on ungodly apostate men who are among God's people.

We see this indiscriminate love in Christ Jesus who, "when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd"⁶⁰. When the rich young ruler mistakenly attempted to justify himself to Jesus by stating that he had kept the law, we read the poignant statement that, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him"⁶¹. We further read that he went away from Jesus "sorrowful", and for all we know, he never believed, and yet there was a sincere compassion and pity in Jesus towards him.

A very dramatic expression of the love of God for fallen man occurred when Jesus came into Jerusalem and, "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!'"⁶². He knew full well the severe judgment that would be poured out on the people for their rejection of their Messiah, and yet Jesus experienced a sincere pity, compassion, and love for them, desiring them to be spared. Murray wrote, "Our Lord in the most specific and unique function as the God-man gives expression to a yearning will on His part that responsiveness on the part of the people of Jerusalem would have provided the necessary condition for the bestowal of His saving and protecting love, a responsiveness, nevertheless, which is not the decretive will of God to create in their hearts"⁶³.

Do we not see something of the mystery of this divine love and compassion mirrored in our human experience? What truly loving parent enjoys disciplining their child? They do it because the child willfully has disobeyed and is deserving of punishment. But their sincere and heartfelt desire is for the child to obey so that they might embrace them in love. Our loving and good Creator is perfectly just in judging all mankind, and yet genuinely desires all mankind to be reconciled to Him through Jesus Christ. Therefore, all who do not respond to this gracious and sincere offer of forgiveness can only ultimately blame themselves with their stubborn willful refusals.

⁵⁷ Ibid, verse 11

⁵⁸ John Murray, page 125, parentheses insert mine

⁵⁹ Jude 11, See Numbers 16.1-3, 31-35

⁶⁰ Matthew 9.36

⁶¹ Mark 10.21

⁶² Luke 19.41-42

⁶³ John Murray, page 120

But none would respond if God did not intervene. As such, the mercy and grace of God is magnified in that He mercifully changes some, His elect, so that they are not only enabled to come to Him in tears, humility, confession, repentance, and faith, but they are made willing. Praise be to God!

Conclusion:

God's holy Word declares the particular nature of Christ's work of atonement. Its testimony is that the Son of God, the second Person of the Godhead, came in the flesh specifically to save the people of God, those who had been graciously included in God's covenant of grace, which rests on the eternal foundation of God's gracious love. His very name Jesus attests to this fact, for Joseph was commanded to, "call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins", with all the repercussions of guilt, the bondage to sin, condemnation, and death.

This truth is the hope of every truly repentant and believing sinner who rests in the finished work of Christ on the cross in the putting away of sin for the believer and the procurement of a pardon from God with whom they are now reconciled. To imply that Christ accomplished this great work for unbelievers is to place in doubt the whole plan of redemption, for it implies that Christ failed in this work for many. It implies that ultimately the sinner saves himself through the exercise of faith. At that point one can only wonder if they were smarter, or more loveable, or were "luckily" in the right place at the right time that they were saved. Thus God is stripped of His sovereignty, and His glory in fulfilling His divine and gracious purposes in the redemption of His people by lifting up the efforts of man in his so-called free choice. As such, it minimizes sin in that it implies some residual good in man who is able and willing, somehow, to do the right thing in trusting Jesus.

Instead, how humbling, and how reassuring it is to know for sure that salvation is an undeserved gift, which relies not a whit on anything deserving on the part of the sinner. The true believer now fully sees the utter sinfulness of sin in that it was only through Jesus becoming sin on his behalf and suffering the full repercussions of it in His life and death. What a contrast that is to the Savior of the universal atonement proponents who give us only a Savior who made us "savable" at best, helplessly dependent on our work of belief.

Should not this truth of God's sincere love, coupled with His gracious election drive one to his knees in awe, humility, and thanksgiving that so great a mercy has been shown, if in fact that one is a true believer? Should not one who have experienced this absolutely undeserved favor and mercy be one who exhibits the same mercy, lovingkindness, and goodness in dealing with fallen men around him?

The Scriptures are also clear in presenting a God who is supremely benevolent in His sincere and pleading call, and yes command, to sinners to repent and believe. How foolish to attempt to try and fully resolve what might appear to be conflicting truths, God's election of some, and yet His sincere free offer of the gospel to all men.

Remember, "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?" (Romans 11:34). We are mere creatures, and fallen at that, with puny and corrupted understandings. Instead, we are called to be like the Apostle Paul who wrote what was cited at the beginning of this paper, "we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20). In that way, we mirror the gracious desire of our God who desires that all men, without distinction, repent of their sins, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and be saved!