

The World's Propitiation, #1

1 John

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Bible Text: 1 John 2:2
Preached on: Sunday, August 5, 2012

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We're in the book of 1 John and what we've been saying all along to kind of reset things for those of you that are visiting and haven't been with us, is that the Apostle John wrote this letter to a group of Christians to help them achieve spiritual victory in the midst of a hostile world. They were plagued by false teachers who were teaching them a false Christ, and there was confusion in their midst, and there was a temptation to pull away from the true body of believers and follow after these false teachers who were saying that they had a secret better knowledge of God than what they had learned from the Apostle John. So the Apostle John writes to them to strengthen them spiritually and say, "You don't need to go anywhere. There is not a secret hidden knowledge that has been hidden from you. The truth is what has always been given to you." So he writes to believers to strengthen them.

Look at chapter 1, verse 4, he says, "These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete." Our joy, yours and ours, yours and mine. I want our joy to be made complete. And he says in 1 John 2:1, he says, "I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin." In the midst of a world that tempts you away from the true Christ, in the midst of a world that tempts you with its false teaching, in the midst of the world that calls you away from the true Christ, he says, "I'm writing these things to you so that you can live a holy life." He says, "God has given you the spiritual resources to live in joy and to live in holiness and to transcend the spiritual environment in which you live." That's the calling that comes to every true Christian. Then he says in chapter 5, verse 13, he says, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God," notice that he's writing to true Christians there. He says, "I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life." Joy and holiness and assurance are the goals of this letter and it is why the Apostle John wrote it to those believers in the first century, and by extension by the plan and intention of God, it's what he has for Christians here today as well, and as true Christians, it's what he has for us here today this morning here at Truth Community Fellowship.

And we've come in our teaching to a theologically controversial passage, the first two verses of 1 John. Let's read them and get them in our minds here. We've already spent three weeks, I think, three or four weeks just trying to unpack what's in these verses and now here we are at chapter 2, verses 1 and 2 where John says,

1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; 2 and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

Now, as we approach this passage, it's so important to keep the big picture in mind of what we just said. Somehow what John is saying here in these two verses is designed to enhance, promote and cultivate your joy, your holiness and your assurance of salvation; to bring you into a greater conscious awareness of the union that belongs to us as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ. So that is the spiritual goal that he's trying to accomplish as we're looking at them this morning; those are the spiritual goals that are being intended by this passage of Scripture that's in front of us today.

Now, no matter what you say about this passage, particularly verse 2, no matter what you say about this passage, someone will disagree with you. Someone will criticize what you did say, someone will criticize what you did not say. It doesn't matter. You're going to be in for a little bit of feedback no matter what happens. So let me state today what my goal is here this morning. I am not trying to give you the last and final word on these two verses that will end all discussion for all time. That would not be realistic and that's not at all what I'm trying to do. What I want to do this morning as we come to verse 2, is to simply help you understand what the issues are in this passage, and to give you some clarity, some perspective, so that you can have a better understanding about the nature of your salvation. Now, today we're focusing on that last phrase in verse 2 because that's where we've come to, that last phrase that says he is "the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." It's that ending phrase there in verse 2 that we're going to be looking at.

Now, earlier in the past couple of weeks, we saw that Christ is in heaven for believers acting as their Advocate in verse 1. This is, again, just by a little bit way of review. He's in heaven as our Advocate. He's there as our great high priest, having offered the perfect sacrifice for our sins, and now he represents us in heaven, having settled forever the matter of our reconciliation to God. He is our propitiation. He has satisfied the wrath of God. He has turned away the wrath of God from us. And as we discussed that word "propitiation," we saw that it refers to the reality, the spiritual reality that when Jesus Christ died on the cross, he turned away the wrath of God from those who believe in him. God will punish sin to uphold his law but Jesus has intervened on behalf of believers. He stood in our place as our substitute at the cross and then while he was hanging there, he absorbed God's punishment which should have gone on your sin, he absorbed it in his body on the cross so that God's wrath would be turned away and that we could receive eternal life.

Now, as you know from reading the Gospels, while Jesus was hanging on that cross he said, "It is finished." The work was done. He had completed that work and John emphasizes that here in this particular passage; he emphasizes the reality of propitiation because he wants you as a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ to know joy, to know

holiness, to know an assurance of life. He's trying to bring a settled resolution of these things into the mind of believers who would study this passage so that they could grow spiritually; that there would be a growing maturity in our lives. We are not meant to live the Christian life – and this is so very important to understand – you are not meant to live the Christian life in a constant state of doubt and confusion, going back and forth, "Am I saved or am I not?" You're not to live in the midst of just continual struggling and despair. God wrote this letter through the Apostle John, God has given us the Scriptures, Christ saved us in order to produce in us a life of joy and holiness that is a reflection of his own life and his own heart.

So John is emphasizing these spiritual truths so that we as Christians could know with certainty that we have a settled forgiveness from our heavenly Father; that Christ has truly paid for all of our sins and that there is no longer the threat of judgment or eternal condemnation resting over us because we have fallen short of the glory of God. Christ has taken away that fear by his work on the cross and has revealed in his word these realities that those who believe in him could understand and know that the matter of eternal forgiveness has been eternally settled and there is an ever deepening, an ever growing awareness in the mind of a true Christian that he has a settled forgiveness that will never be taken away from him, and that certainty is the foundation upon which spiritual growth can occur, and that is why John wrote these things. We as believers are meant to confess our sins before our Father, but when we sin and when we are confessing sin, understand that we are confessing sin in a bigger context, a bigger context of a relationship with the Father that has been fully reconciled and that will never be overturned. We confess our sins in the context of a reconciled relationship. He has already manifested his favor toward us in bringing us to Christ in the first place. The favor of God upon you as a believer is settled. It's not going to change and so we have to understand what it is that we're doing when we are confessing sin and that's a big part of why John wrote in chapter 1.

Now, as we come to verse 2 and we kind of pivot into new material for this morning, John here in verse 2 is expanding on the significance of Christ's propitiation. Notice that he says at the end of verse 1, he says, "if anyone sins," referring to believers here, if a believer sins, "we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins." He says he is the propitiation for our sins and now he's expanding on that and he says, "Christ is the propitiation not only for our sins, but also for those of the whole world." Now, here's the question, this is the question any time you read the Bible: what does that verse mean? The question is not what it means to you, we need to know what it means if you had never been born. This verse has an independent meaning, a settled meaning that is our responsibility to get to the bottom of, and this verse takes us deep into the doctrine of the atonement. The atonement. By atonement, we are referring to the sacrifice of Christ by which he paid the penalty of sin. Christ atoned for our sins. He paid the penalty of our sins at the cross. Well, what does that mean? And here in 1 John 2, it raises this question, it says, "not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world," the question is this: whose sin was actually paid for at the cross? Whose sin was actually paid for at the cross? Stated somewhat differently, follow me here, it says that Jesus is the propitiation, he is the sacrifice that turned away

the wrath of God, right? You're all staying with me, that's good. The question is this: if Jesus' death on the cross turned away the wrath of God, from whom has the wrath of God been turned away? That's the question that we want to get the answer to.

Now, many theologians teach, many pastors will tell you that this verse is the silver bullet that destroys the doctrine of particular redemption; that the idea that God intended to actually save some men but not others. And the argument is this: it says that Christ is the propitiation for our sins and not for ours only but also for those of the whole world and therefore any limit on God's saving intention at the cross is necessarily false. It says right there that he's the propitiation for the whole world and if you try to say that God had anything other than an intention to save the entire world with the sacrifice of Christ, you are teaching a very bad form of heresy.

Now, is that with this verse means? Is that the implication of this verse? Well, there is a lot to consider here and we're going to take our time, we're going to think through this carefully. It's not enough to simply throw the verse out and then use a lot of inflammatory language against people who disagree with you and try to prejudice the argument so that the actual text of Scripture does not have to be considered. That is not serious Bible teaching and we're not going to go that route and we're not going to be intimidated by those who try to go that route against certain forms of doctrine. What we want to do is take our time. We believe that this is the word of God and therefore it is worthy of our time that one of the best uses that we could give of our time is to consider carefully what God says in his word and so that's what we want to do.

Now, let me call a little time out here and remind you of something that's, in one sense, unrelated to the whole context of 1 John here. The Bible says that there are things in the Scriptures that are hard to understand, in fact, Hebrews 5:11, the writer of Hebrews said, "these things are hard to explain," talking about the doctrine of Melchizedek. In 2 Peter, Peter said about the writings of the Apostle Paul, he said, "in his writing there are some things that are hard to understand," that's 2 Peter 3:16. So I say that simply to give you a sense that when we come to the Scriptures, when we come to the significant doctrines that the Bible teaches, we should expect to find in the Scriptures some things that are not readily apparent; some things that we have to wrestle with; some things that we have to think deeply about.

Now, I realize particularly in our culture, we are not conditioned that way. We want a little soundbite mentality. We're taught to expect a soundbite and images flash by every two seconds on television. It compromises our level of concentration. But if we're going to treat the Scripture seriously which is exactly what we're going to do at Truth Community Fellowship, if we're going to treat the Scriptures seriously, then we have to expect that there are going to be some things that we have to take some time with, some things that are a little bit difficult, but we trust the Holy Spirit to illumine our understanding, to expand our ability to comprehend these things, trusting him that what's on the other side of the process is going to be to our spiritual blessing; it's going to promote our joy, it's going to promote our holiness, it's going to promote our assurance of salvation. So we're happy to take our time with God's word. We want to proceed on God's

timetable, not say, "God, this is taking a little bit too long and I want to hurry it up," particularly on something of this magnitude, and so we're going to take our time and be careful with it.

Now, based on this verse, based on that assumption that we're going to address the statement that in light of chapter 2, verse 2, any limit on God's saving attention at the cross is necessarily false, that God intended to accomplish salvation, in one manner or another, he intended to accomplish salvation for all men. Now, there are two ways that you could make that argument and we're going to look at these two questions and basically there are two ways that you could argue that the work of Christ extends salvation to all men without exception, and we're going to structure today's message around two questions to help you as you take notes. Okay, "Christ is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." Question 1: does this verse teach actual salvation for all men without exception? Does it teach actual salvation? Does it teach that in the end every man who ever lived throughout the course of human time is ultimately going to end up in heaven? The question is that, does this verse teach that? You could make that argument and that's the concept known as universalism, that all men will ultimately be reconciled to God because of the work of Christ on the cross.

Now, if Christ is indeed the propitiation for the sins of all men in the world in an absolute sense, if he has actually turned away the eternal wrath of God from all men without exception, then this verse would teach that all men will be saved in the end. There are multiple reasons really to reject that possibility. I'm going to give you only two here this morning that are quite convincing. Does this teach that all men will be saved in the end because Christ is the propitiation for the whole world? Is that what it teaches? No, that's not what it teaches and here's how you can know that. First of all in answering that question, does it teach actual salvation for all men? No, it does not. Why? First of all, the context of 1 John refutes universalism. That's a sub point if you're taking notes. Does it teach actual salvation for all men? No, because the context of 1 John refutes universalism. One of the key principles of biblical interpretation is that you have to read a verse in its context. You cannot and it's an abuse of Scripture to simply try to build your doctrine by taking one verse here and one verse from another book and never really considering the surrounding contexts of those verses. We can't take God's word out of context and build systems of doctrine around it, we have to understand each verse in its context. That's a basic principle of biblical interpretation.

Now, what does the context of 1 John say about the concept of universalism? Well, the context shows that John absolutely was not teaching universal salvation. Look at chapter 2, verse 19. I'm just going to show you a few verses here. The last thing that John was teaching is that all men were going to be saved in the end. He says in chapter 2, verse 19, "They," meaning the false teachers, "went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us." So there is this circle of true believers and there are these other false teachers who are outside the true circle of believers and those two are not the same. He's not teaching that all men are going to be saved in the end.

Look at chapter 3, verse 1, where he says at the end of the verse...ah, let's read the whole verse, it's a good one, he says, "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us," circle of true believers, "that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him." There are true believers and there is the world who does not know us. In fact, he goes on, I believe it's in verse 13, that he says, "Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death." He's creating this sense of separation. There is this clear identity of those who know Christ and those who do not.

Look at chapter 3, verse 10, where he again makes a distinction, he says, "By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious," a clear distinction between true Christians and those who are not, "anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother."

And finally one more, chapter 4, verse 1, he says, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." These men who were actual human beings, were false prophets, they are not part of the true church and they are never going to be. They are false teachers.

So in light of that, we see that John contrasts true believers with those who walk away from the faith. He contrasts true believers with the world that does not know us. He contrasts true believers with the children of the devil who do not practice righteousness. He contrasts them with those who do not love the brethren. He contrasts them with false prophets who express the spirit of the antichrist. So even in the context of 1 John, he does not paint a picture of universalism, an idea that everyone will be saved in the end, and so we can reject that 1 John 2:2 teaches universalism on that basis alone. Not everyone is going to be saved and so this verse is not teaching that concept.

Now, secondly, does this verse teach actual salvation for all men? Does it teach universalism? Answer: no. Secondly, how can we know that? Biblical teaching on hell refutes universalism. Biblical teaching on hell refutes universalism. If you expand into the rest of the Bible beyond the context of 1 John, you would find that the idea of universalism is emphatically excluded.

Turn back to the book of Matthew 7:13 and 14. Jesus in making an evangelistic call at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, says to his hearers, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it." Jesus says most explicitly that all men will not be saved by the general mercy of God. Stated differently, not every man is going to be saved. There are many who are headed to destruction and so God is not this benevolent deity that passes over all sin of all men without regard for their sin and punishment, the Bible teaches that there will be real men that go to a real hell for punishment on their real sins. It couldn't be

any clearer. Revelation 20:15 says, "if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." So hell is real. It's going to be populated with real men who walked on this earth and never bowed their knee to the true Christ, and so this passage in 1 John 2:2 could not possibly be teaching an idea of universalism and so we can safely set that idea aside as the correct way to understand 1 John 2:2. It's not teaching universalism.

Now, let's get to the hard question here. This is going to be the more difficult question to come to grips with. Point 2, this is our second question, the second main point: does this verse teach potential salvation for all men? Does this verse teach that Christ made it possible for all men to be saved? That's really the question. That's a popular view, maybe even the dominant one that you would hear in American pulpits is that Christ's death makes salvation possible for all men throughout the entire world. One writer puts it this way and I'm going to give you some quotations so you can hear it in their own words, one writer says this, he says, "John rules out the thought that the death of Jesus is of limited effectiveness. The possibility of forgiveness is cosmic and universal." Possibility. I want you to key on that word "possible." That's what we're dealing with, potential that may or may not be realized. That's where you've got to drive your thinking. Is that what Jesus was doing? When he said, "It is finished," was he saying, "It's possible"? That's really the question that we've got to come to grips with. Well, if Jesus only made salvation possible, what is it under that view that makes it effective? What makes it real? What makes it actual? Some Christian writers routinely say that the decisive factor in salvation is whether a person believes or not. Christ made it potential, your belief made it actual.

Listen to some of these quotes. One writer said, "Christ's atoning work has made it possible for anyone in the world to be saved but each sinner must personally accept Christ as his Redeemer." Another quote, "The effectiveness of Jesus' propitiation for salvation is dependent on the one believing in Jesus." The whole responsibility under what that writer just said, the whole responsibility depends on the person believing in Jesus. Wow. Really? Here's another one, "Jesus' sacrifice does not become effective until people believe in him." These men are all saying that Jesus died to make salvation possible. It only becomes actual if you choose to believe in him.

What do we have to say about that? That's what most of us grew up hearing. How could you even raise a question about that, that's accepted biblical truth, right? No, it's not. It's not. There are so many issues wrapped up in this discussion that I can only begin to introduce some of the issues now and we'll finish it next week, but what I want you to do, here's what I want you to do for me: I want you to just kind of try to take it all in. This is going to be a lot to take in this week and next week, but I want you take it in and just be teachable and be willing to think; be willing to look at the text of Scripture itself to see what the Bible says about that view. None of those people that I quoted were pointing to Scripture when they talked about potentiality. We have to look at this and see what Scripture says. That is the only thing that matters is what does the Bible say about this.

Look at the verse with me again, 1 John 2:2. It says that, "He," referring to Christ, "Christ is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole

world." Remember what we said last week, he's writing to give believers an assurance that their sins are actually paid for so that when they confess their sins, they have confidence that they are going to be well received by the heavenly Father when they confess their sins. That's based on an actual real propitiation. John is addressing believers here in verse 2, and he is assuring them that their sins are forgiven. Christ is in heaven as our Advocate, and his advocacy – follow me, every little word here is important – the advocacy of Christ is based on the reality of an actual propitiation that was accomplished on behalf of believers. That's what makes his advocacy effective. The reason that Christ can represent you in heaven is because of what he did on the cross, not because you believed in him, right? It's okay to nod your head in agreement with me. This is so very important. The reason that Christ's advocacy on our behalf is effective is because he offered an actual real sacrifice of his own life that actually turned away the wrath of God from us. That's how we can have certainty in our Christian life that our sins have been forgiven. That's what he's saying in the context of the prior verse.

Now, here is a simple but crucial observation. Okay, the question we're asking now: does this verse teach a potential salvation, and what we're saying is no, it does not teach that. And why can we say that? Because this view, the potential view, ignores the context of actual propitiation. The context is teaching an actual propitiation, not a potential one. Here's a simple but crucial observation. Look at chapter 2, verse 2 with me again. When you understand where this is going, you understand why this is so crucial and so vital, and at the end of this is something so very precious to your soul that you'll never want to go back to the potential view if that's what you've always believed. That's what's coming at the end of this, I absolutely promise you. You'll never want to go back to the potential view once you have seen it exposed and see what John is actually saying here. Look at what he says in verse 2, he says, "Christ Himself is the propitiation for our sins." That is a statement of reality. It is in the indicative mood in the original language. It's a statement of reality, not potentiality. There is Greek grammar that would express the idea of potentiality with great clarity but that's not what John says. He is teaching actual reality. He says, "Christ is the propitiation for our sins." He has actually and in reality turned away the wrath of God from us.

Look at chapter 1, verse 7, and I want you to see this, see it in the context, see that I'm not making anything up here. It says in verse 7, "the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin." Chapter 2, verse 14, "I have written to you because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one." Actual salvation for real people. Look at chapter 5, verse 13, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have," present tense reality, actual possession of, "eternal life."

Let's step back and think for a little bit. Think about what that's saying. As a believer in Christ, your sins are actually forgiven. The wrath of God has actually been turned away from you. That is a settled reality. That is what really is and John is saying that here at the beginning of verse 2, "He is the propitiation for our sins." Christ is the sacrifice that has actually turned away the wrath of God from us. Follow me here: John is not describing

potential propitiation for believers in this verse. He's not saying that God has potentially turned away his wrath. He's not saying that Christ has potentially turned away wrath from you as a believer, he has actually done it. Now, it is an actual reality rooted in an actual death of Christ for our actual salvation. He's talking about something actual and real here.

Now, notice this, look at verse 2 with me again, "He Himself is the propitiation for our sins," actual propitiation and now he's expanding it and he says, "and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." His starting point here is the actual propitiation of Christ and then he expands it somehow to expand it to the rest of the world. Now, here's a question for you: where in that verse is the language that justifies making this actual propitiation for believers but suddenly only potential for the rest of the world as these writers say? Where is the language of possibility as though it might not happen? Where is the language of potentiality injected in verse 2? Where do you see that rising up from the text of Scripture itself? Do you know what? It's not there. He's talking about actual propitiation for believers and he is extending the idea to actual propitiation for the rest of the world somehow. There is no language of potentiality in this verse at all. It's a theological convenience that writers injected there and they have to inject it there otherwise they're going to end up teaching universalism and we know that's not true. We just saw that. And so they have to inject the idea of potentiality in order to keep themselves from drifting into universalism, alright?

Now, John does not say potential propitiation, he's speaking in the indicative. He's speaking about reality, that which is actual. He doesn't change what's technically called, he doesn't change the mood, the grammatical mood from actual indicative to potential subjunctive in this verse. It's all actual all the way through and we've got to come to grips with that.

Now, these well-intentioned writers insert the concept of potentiality to avoid universalism. It's as simple as that but it doesn't work. That's not what it says. Now, there is a second problem with this idea of potential salvation that is even more decisive in my mind and I want you to listen to me very carefully here on this second point. Why could it not be teaching potential salvation? It's not teaching that at all? Here's why, here's another reason why: this view, the potential view, makes sinners decisive in salvation. That view by definition makes sinners decisive in salvation and listen, salvation cannot ultimately finally depend on the sinner's response to Christ. It cannot ultimately depend on what the sinner in his unaided natural state how he responds to the Gospel. It could never be that way because if it was that way, no one would ever be saved. Not one of you would be in Christ if salvation depended on your personal response to Christ.

Why is that? That seems so counterintuitive because we're called to believe, we are commanded to repent and believe in Christ? Well, listen, you have to understand the fullness of the environment into which the Gospel is presented. Sin, the sin of mankind and your personal sin has left man in a state of rebellion against God, a state of utter unqualified rebellion against God. Jesus says, "Men do not come to the light because they prefer their evil deeds," John 3 says. Man cannot, he cannot and he will not take the first

step of faith toward God when he hears the Gospel. He won't and I'll show you that from Scripture.

Turn back to the book of Romans. We're going to look at four different passages here and to the extent that you've always thought about the potential view and, you know, we've got to gear people up to somehow come down an aisle or something like that, we have to come to grips with what the Scripture actually says. Romans 3:10. What is the sinner like? That's really the question. When the Gospel is being presented to sinners, what are they like? What is their natural heart like? Romans 3:10. I hear those pages crinkling and I like that. Romans 3:10, "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one." Look at that, verse 10, none, not even one. Verse 11, none, none. Verse 12, all have turned aside, together they are useless, none who does good, there is not even one. Where in the world is a favorable positive response to a holy God going to come from someone who is like that? You mean to tell me that a sinner is incapable of good, incapable of seeking God but he has somehow the capacity, the power and the desire to come to that God unaided from the desires of his own heart? It's an absolute falsehood. That is not true. That is not what the Bible says.

Look at Romans 8:6, "For the mind set on the flesh," those who are unredeemed, "is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God," and watch this, "for it is not even able to do so." It is beyond the capacity of an unconverted sinner to subject himself to the law of God. He does not have that ability within him. Verse 8, "and those who are in the flesh cannot please God." That's what it says and yet this potential view, the implication of this potential view is that, no, actually they can make a saving response to the Gospel that will secure the forgiveness of all their sins and turn away the wrath of God from them, and thus please God. No. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God, it says.

Turn to 2 Corinthians 4:3. The Apostle Paul talking about his own ministry says, "even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." Our adversary, the devil, has blinded the minds, it says, of those who are not receiving the Gospel. How can a blind man see? How can a natural man overcome the supernatural opposition of Satan himself who has blinded him? How can a leopard change his spots?

Look at Ephesians 2, beginning in verse 1. It says, "you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest." He makes a universal statement about the total lostness of man. He says sinners are

dead in sin. They are dominated by the devil. They are doomed to suffer the wrath of God.

Where is this supposed saving faith going to come from from someone who is spiritually dead? How can a dead man make himself live? How can a blind man open his own eyes to see? How can a leopard change his spots? How can the Ethiopian change the color of his skin? These things are impossibilities. This is beyond our natural capabilities. This is beyond our natural power to do that. And here's the problem, beloved, these things are so fundamental, they are so very important and here's what you have to understand as you're thinking through these issues about the proclamation of the Gospel and about where saving faith comes from: you must understand that when the Gospel comes to the sinner, that sinner is not neutral under the sound of God's word, he is actively hostile to the God of salvation. He is actively hostile to the word of God. And that's true of each one of us before Christ. That's what each one of us were like. We were actively hostile. We preferred the lusts of our flesh to the holiness of God. We were in chains and we didn't have the key. Now listen, because the sinner is not neutral, he's actively hostile, that's what Romans 8 said, the mind and the flesh is hostile toward God. He's dead in sin and here's the point: the sinner would never choose salvation on his own accord if it was left entirely up to him. He wouldn't do it because he hates God, he hates Christ and he wants nothing to do with it. So, beloved, here's the implication of that: if Christ died only to make salvation potential, no one would ever be saved because no one would ever turn to him on their own.

Now, stay with me here, as I said, these are things difficult to understand but stay with me. Some writers who hold this view of potential salvation would acknowledge this fact, they would say, "You're right. A sinner can't believe on his own. God has to help them." Okay. One writer said this, a southern Baptist writer, he said, "Human beings are sinful," and this is a guy holding to the potentiality view, "Human beings are sinful in all aspects of their humanity and are unwilling and unable to receive God's salvation revealed in Jesus apart from the enabling work of the Holy Spirit." They are unwilling. They are unable. They need the help of the Holy Spirit in order to believe. I agree with that. I think that's exactly right. John 6:44, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him." The sinner has to have help from outside himself.

But here, follow this all the way through and you can see how this just leads to a dead-end. It can't possibly be the right view of Scripture. That doesn't solve the dilemma with particular redemption because if you say, "Okay, I agree. I agree. It's pretty obvious in Scripture. A man is dead in sin, he's blind, he's under the domination of the devil. Of course he can't save himself with some exercise of faith that comes from utter blackness in his heart. I get that. I buy that but I think then the Holy Spirit has to help him." Okay, good. We're making some progress now as we're thinking through these things, but that doesn't solve the dilemma that makes him want to make it potential in the first place because you're left with this question: why does God, let's say you believe that, Jesus died to make salvation potential, the sinner is utterly lost and therefore the Holy Spirit somehow has to help them believe in order for them to be saved. Okay, we're making progress here but here's the question, that doesn't solve the problem, it just pushes it one

step back because the question becomes this: why is it that the Holy Spirit moves on some hearts and not on others? Why? Why doesn't he just move on every heart and everybody gets saved? You're still left, here's the point, you're still left with God showing grace and favor to some but not to others. You're still left with God's sovereign pleasure being the determining factor in salvation, not the response of the sinner and that exposes the weakness of the potential salvation view of the cross. When you follow it through to its conclusion, you're left with one of two choices: it either says a totally lost sinner somehow has the capacity to exercise saving faith, which is not true, or it leaves you with God acting on some hearts and not on others and that only re-creates the dilemma. You've moved it from the cross to the work of the Holy Spirit in time. Either way, you're left with realizing that this salvation is exactly what Jonah 2:9 said, "Salvation belongs to the LORD." It's his gift to dispose of. It's his to bring to pass.

There is a much better way to view this passage but we're going to have to save it for next week, but here's what I want to say but I don't want to just leave you hanging there. Let's step back and think about this for a minute. Go back to 1 John 2. Let's end up where we began. 1 John 2:2. And I realize all we've done is explain what this verse doesn't mean here this morning. To explain what it does mean takes another hour and we can't do that. Look at it again. Let's just step back and let the verse say what it says. Chapter 2, verse 1, "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." It's actual salvation that he's talking about. Actual propitiation that he's talking about.

We're going to save this for next week but for now let me say this. I know some of you are going to have some questions and we're going to address those next week. There are common questions when this is brought out: what about John 3:16? What about 2 Peter 3:9? We're going to answer all of that next week and it's really pretty compelling. But let me say this for now, what John is teaching and the biblical teaching of the work of Christ from the cross is this and I'm just going to summarize it and then we'll unpack it next week: at the cross, Jesus Christ accomplished actual salvation for those that he came to save. If you are a Christian, Jesus Christ came to actually save you; to guarantee the certainty of your salvation; to guarantee and to purchase with his blood everything that was necessary to secure the certainty of your salvation so that there was no possibility whatsoever that you could end up in hell. His actual work on the cross, his actual propitiation on the cross, was a complete work that guaranteed the certainty of your salvation and did not leave it up to the sinful whims of your sinful heart. That is how great his work of salvation is. That is how powerful the certainty of his love is, is that he made certain that you would get saved, he didn't leave it up to you.

And listen, beloved, you want it to be that way. You may not realize it, but you want it to be that way. When Christ went to the cross, we'll talk about this next week, when Christ went to the cross, he wasn't dying for a big glob, a big mass of humanity, an indistinguishable mass of humanity, when Christ went to the cross, he was thinking about you by name. The Apostle Paul in Galatians 2:20 says, "He loved me and gave

Himself up for me." This potential salvation view takes that spiritual treasure away from you and says, "No, Christ was just dying for the world in general and then you had to do it." That's not true. That is not true at all. Praise be to the blessed name of our Lord Jesus Christ, praise be to the blessedness of his saving intention that he had a people that he intended to guarantee the certainty of their salvation and when he went to the cross, he did it and that's why he said, "It is finished." The results were guaranteed. It all flows from his work on the cross. At the cross, Christ actually accomplished salvation for all those he had chosen before the foundation of the world. No one whom Jesus Christ intended to save on the cross could ever be lost because his sovereign saving purpose would certainly be carried out.

Now, if you are a Christian, understand that Jesus Christ secured the certainty of your salvation on the cross. He even secured the certainty of the gift of faith that you would need to receive him. He guaranteed that and that means – get this – that means that God gets all of the glory for your salvation. Not 95% and you get 5% because you were smart enough to put your faith in Christ; that you had somehow an insight that other people didn't have or that your heart was more broken than somebody else's and so therefore you were more conditioned than somebody else. You have got to understand this. You have got to understand this.

Go back to Ephesians 2. So the question is: well then, how is it that I came to be saved then? How is it, if what you're saying is true, if what the Bible is saying is true that a sinner on his own cannot exercise faith in Christ, how is it then that anybody becomes saved? The Scriptures is plain about this. Ephesians 2, we'll pick it up in verse 3, "Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest." He paints a picture of a universal lostness of every man everywhere with no hope of escaping their bonds of sin and condemnation. How is it then that you came to Christ? How is it that I came to Christ? It was an act of God, not an act of man. It was God acting on you, not you acting on God.

Look at verse 4, "But," by contrast, "But God," but God, "being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, God made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)." If you are a Christian, it is because God acted on your sinful unredeemed heart. He changed your heart and drew you to Christ. And having loosed you from the bonds of your sin by a prior first act of God, you came in willing faith and surrendered to him. It is because God was gracious to you, not because you in your unaided sinful self came to Christ. It's because God came to you and drew you to Christ. That's what's at stake here. That's why this is so very important.

Listen, I understand that this teaching puts human pride in the crucible and takes up the mortar and crushes it and that's exactly what's supposed to happen. We cannot boast that we are Christians. Paul said, "God forbid that I should boast in anything save in the cross of Christ." It wasn't my great insight that brought me to Christ. No, God intervened with me by name and drew me to himself. We're going to talk about this all more next week

but understand that God gets all of the glory and, yes, it humbles your heart; yes, it puts yourself in the right perspective that had God not been gracious to me, I would be eternally lost. And it's not because Christ died to make salvation potential – listen, beloved – Christ died to make your salvation certain. He didn't leave it up to you. He took it on his shoulders, bore it to the cross, and then having finished the work, went up into heaven where he now serves as our Advocate forever. That's the greatness of Christ. That's the greatness of salvation. When you understand it from a biblical perspective, you are left in awe, wonder and praise.

Now, if you're not a Christian here this morning, know this one thing for certain: the only way that you can be reconciled to God is through Christ's propitiation. We're not talking here, incidentally, we're not talking here about how we preach the Gospel. The question here this morning has been: who did Christ intend to save on the cross? How certain was his work to guarantee the results for which he came? That's the question we've been asking and answering here today. The question about the Gospel is a slightly different question but we can say this: based on the work of Christ, Christ died for sinners just like you, and Christ calls sinners just like you to come to him for free forgiveness, for salvation in him, and he commands you to come to repent and believe and that call goes out to everyone who hears. And if you are here today and you are not a Christian, understand that Christ on the basis of his finished work calls you and says, "Come to me." He says in John 6:37, "anyone who comes to Me, I will most certainly not cast away." You can come to Christ in response to his call and say, "I come to you in response to your call. I humble myself. I repent of my sin. I put my faith in you. Please save me from my miserable sinful self." And if you come to Christ with that kind of heart attitude, do you know what he will do? He will save you because that is the point of the Gospel. You can believe in him. He truly paid it all. And the invitation goes out now to anyone who will believe to come to Christ knowing that his work of salvation is perfect to meet the spiritual lostness of your sin sick soul. Praise his name.

Let's bow in prayer.

As the musicians come, our Father, we ask that you would take these truths from your word and just do a mighty and magnificent work in our hearts. Father, help us to see the utter lostness of our souls as it is presented by Scripture; that men apart from Christ are dead in their trespasses and sins and that if anyone is going to be saved, Father, it's going to have to be you making a move on their human hearts in order to draw them to Christ and in that way, Father, you truly do get all of the glory. Father, there is so much more to be said about this as we come and think through questions and have issues as we respond to what you word has said about these things, Father, give us grace to be a noble Berean to seek these things out in the Scriptures and to see just exactly what your word says and then by your grace bring us back next week so that we could look at this and see what the verse is actually saying about how Christ's propitiation extends to the rest of the world. Father, we love you. We honor you. We give you all of the glory for our salvation. And now, Father, as we sing, we pray that we would do so from hearts humbled by your grace and grateful for the work of Christ on our behalf. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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