

The Savior of the World: Universal Language and Particular Redemption

Selected Scriptures

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Introduction

Well we are continuing in our series, *O Perfect Redemption!*—a study on the doctrine of the atonement, and specifically on the controversial doctrine of the extent of the atonement. In this series, I've been seeking to prove to you from Scripture that the extent of Christ's atonement is limited to the elect alone—that Jesus Christ has died to save no more and no fewer than His Father has chosen in eternity past, and has given to Him as His sheep.

And each time I preach a sermon in this series, I feel a strong burden to reiterate that, the point of this series has not been to celebrate that there are people for whom Christ did not die. The point is not to emphasize the exclusion of some from the saving will of God. Instead, the point has been to safeguard the atonement from being robbed of what makes it precious and sweet to us sinners, who need a perfect redemption to stake all our hope and confidence upon.

You see, there are ways of thinking about the cross that unintentionally, maybe even subconsciously, fundamentally alter the very character of what the cross is. And those ways of thinking are so popular! “Jesus died for everybody!” “Christ atoned for the sins of the whole world!” “Oh? Well then why isn't everybody saved? Does that mean the whole world will escape punishment for their sins and go to heaven?” And the response comes back: “Oh no! I'm not a universalist! Jesus Himself says that people go to eternal destruction.” “So, Jesus' death doesn't *save* people?” “Well, He died to *provide* salvation—to make it *possible* for everyone to be saved. But those who don't believe in Him forfeit that salvation.” Ok. So Jesus died to make it possible for sinners to be saved, not to save sinners? And sinners' unbelief overrules His intent to save them?”

You see, it sounds good, and magnanimous, and even loving to say, “Jesus died to save everyone!” But when you tease out the implications of a universal atonement, you recognize: if you universalize the extent of the atonement without universalizing the extent of salvation, you empty the cross of its saving power. You make something other than Christ's death the decisive and determinative cause of salvation. And that is not Good News for sinners. But when you proclaim the Bible's teaching that, though Jesus does not die for every single individual without exception, every single one that He does die for is, by that very death, infallibly assured to be saved from sin and brought home to heaven, then you begin to taste the sweetness of the doctrine

of particular redemption. When you recognize that the atonement does not need faith added to it to give it its saving power, but that the atonement, of itself, is so savingly powerful that it purchases the very faith that unites us to Christ and the blessings of salvation in Him, then you feel the strength of the cross. Then you can rest your whole soul on the cross. Then you see the glory of a *perfect* redemption. And so that has been my burden in this series—to protect the power and glory and sweetness of the cross from the unlikely enemy of a universal atonement, which undermines all those things.

And to do that, I've focused on making a positive case for particular redemption, examining the whole Bible's framework of the doctrine of the atonement. I've criticized the methodology of rushing too quickly to the extent of the atonement, and therefore just volleying back and forth passages that say "Christ died for *all*" and others that say "Christ died for *many*." The antidote to that is to step back and place that debate within the context of the whole Bible's framework for what the atonement is and what the atonement was designed to accomplish.

And as we've looked to Scripture for instruction on the **design** and **nature** of the atonement, we have found that (1) particular redemption maintains the unity of the Trinity in salvation; that (2) particularism fits most cohesively with an atonement designed to save sinners, rather than merely to provide salvation or make people savable; that (3) particularism upholds the Bible's teaching on the nature of the atonement as an efficacious saving accomplishment rather than a potentially inefficacious provision; that (4) particular redemption best explains the atonement as a work of Christ's high priestly ministry, which is unmistakably particularistic; and, given all of those truths, that (5) particular redemption fits best with the inherently particularistic biblical metaphors for the atonement.

We saw those last week—how Scripture says that Jesus died for "His people," for the "many," for His "sheep," for "the children of God," for "His friends," for "the church," and for "God's elect"—all of which are **particularizing designations**. And we saw how the "emphasis not exclusion" objection failed at every turn. The argument that "Just because He died for the sheep doesn't mean He didn't also die for the goats," doesn't hold water, precisely because those particularizing designations are **necessarily exclusive**. In John 10, when Jesus says He died for His sheep, He does explicitly exclude the Pharisees, whom He names as not His sheep. In Romans 8, when Paul makes the death of Christ for the elect the ground of their assurance of salvation, it has to be that that death of itself is determinative of salvation, otherwise the Christians could say, "What difference does it make if Christ died for me if He also died for those separated from Him forever in hell?" And in Ephesians 5, we saw how Christ is no polygamist—that when Paul says Christ died for the church and gave Himself up for her as His bride, that that metaphor is inherently exclusive. Christ's love for His wife must necessarily be of a distinct and special character, precisely because the marital union is distinct and special from all other relationships.

Now, those positive biblical arguments *are* sufficient to make the case for particular redemption. I think we could stop there and say: this teaching—that Christ died for the elect alone—as unpopular and as counterintuitive as it may be—is the teaching of Scripture, and so we are bound to believe it and confess it as the truth. However, it simply cannot be ignored that Scripture also casts the scope of Christ’s death in universalistic terms. First Timothy 2:6 says that Christ “gave Himself as a ransom for *all*.” First John 2:2 says that Christ is “the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of *the whole world*.” And so any legitimate defense of particular redemption must explain how this universalistic language doesn’t contradict particularism.

And besides that, the entire case for a universal atonement rests upon interpreting these universalistic passages to refer to all without exception. That means if it can be shown that when terms like “all” and “world” are interpreted in their contexts, they do not refer to absolutely all people without exception, then the case for universal atonement is shown to be groundless. At that point, all the positive argumentation for particular redemption that we’ve worked through together would be vindicated against its most weighty objection.

And that is what we intend to do this morning. We’re going to look at several **universalistic texts** that are often offered in support of universal atonement. And my aim will be to interpret them in their contexts, and to demonstrate how not one of them teaches a universal atonement. None of them contradicts the doctrine of particular redemption. And in fact, we’ll see how they all complement and, in some cases, even positively reinforce the case for particular redemption.

Now, we could spend an entire sermon on each one of the texts that we’ll cover here this morning, and so we’re not going to say everything that can be said about each of them. I’ll also have to leave a few of them out. But I do want to mention that earlier in our series, I treated 1 John 2:2 in our sermon on propitiation, 2 Corinthians 5:18–19 and Colossians 1:20 in the sermon on reconciliation, and 2 Peter 2:1 in the sermon on redemption. And so I’m going to skip those this morning, and refer you back to those sermons for our examination of those key passages.

Another caveat: I know that many will be tempted to hear this sermon as me trying to “explain away” several passages of the Bible. I plead with you not to hear it that way. What I’m saying today has to be taken along with what I’ve said in the 10 or 11 messages prior. And what I’m trying to do is to bring all of Scripture’s teaching on the design and nature of the atonement to bear on these individual passages that, at first blush, seem to contradict that teaching. But of course, because Scripture is inerrant—because it’s ultimately authored by the single divine mind—there can be no contradictions. And so I’m aiming to show how passages that sound contradictory only sound that way because we’re reading them superficially, rather than in context and according to the intent of the author.

All is Not Self-Interpreting

Well, with that, let's get to it. But before we get to our first text, we need to make an observation. And that is: the word "all" is **not self-interpreting**. I don't think anything sabotages the fruitfulness of discussing the extent of the atonement more than the unwarranted assumption that the "plain" or "natural" meaning of the term "all" is "all without exception." It is all too common in this discussion to hear assertions that "All means all, and that's all all means!" But of course, that kind of assertion assumes what needs to be proven, because Scripture often uses the term "all" to mean something other than "all people without exception." In fact, "all" is much more often used to mean "all without distinction," "all kinds," "all of some sorts," or "some of all sorts."

But there are several instances in Scripture where the term "all" cannot mean "all without exception." For example, in Genesis 6:13, God says to Noah, "The end of all flesh has come before Me." But of course, it wasn't the case that every living thing without exception perished in the flood. Noah and his family, as well as the animals on the Ark, survived the flood by God's gracious design. "All flesh" evidently does not refer to absolutely all without exception.

In Acts 2:17, Peter quotes God's prophecy to Joel, where God says, "I will pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind," and literally, the term is "upon all flesh." But again, such a universalistic expression is limited by the context. God will *not* send His Holy Spirit to indwell, or give gifts to, all people without exception. Here, "all mankind" refers to the people of Christ from all nations, rather than from Israel alone.

In Romans 5:18, Paul says, "through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men." But are all men without exception justified? No. We know from other passages like Matthew 7:13 that "the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it." In context, Romans 5:18 means that just as Adam brought condemnation to all who were united to him, so also Christ will bring justification to all who are united to Him.

And my personal favorite is Romans 14:2, where Paul is discussing Christian liberty in food choices, and says, "One person has faith that he may eat all things..." Obviously, the sense here is limited to those things which are edible! Paul isn't speaking of someone having faith to eat iron nails or steel pipes!

And so it's plain that "all" doesn't always mean "all without exception" by default. Which means that "all" is **not self-interpreting**. Like anything else, universal language must be properly interpreted according to its context and consistently with the rest of scriptural teaching. There are

times when “all” does mean “all without exception,” though admittedly, those are the significant minority. Much more often, though, the sense of “all” in Scripture is “all without *distinction*,” or “all *kinds*.” That’s not “forcing your theology to override the plain sense of the text.” It is the plain sense of the text, over and against a superficial reading of the text.

I. John 12:32 – I Will Draw All Men

So let’s get to the texts themselves. And we’ll spend more time on some of these than others. But we’ll start with, **number one**, John 12:32. There, Jesus declares, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth”—which speaks of His crucifixion and thus His atoning death, as the next verse tells us—“if I am lifted up from the earth [I] will draw all men to Myself.” Proponents of universal atonement teach that the phrase “all men” refers to all without exception. They say that this “drawing” refers to a universal wooing. It invites everyone to believe in Christ, but it’s ultimately ineffectual, because God must respect the creature’s “free will.” But Scripture never speaks of such an ineffectual universal “drawing.” The only “drawing” that Almighty God does is the effectual calling of regeneration. John 6:37: “All that the Father gives Me *will* come to Me.”

Besides this, though, the context of John 12:32 favors interpreting “all men” as “all without distinction” rather than “all without exception.” A few verses earlier, in John 12:20–21, John reports that “there were some Greeks” who were asking to see Jesus. In response to this, Jesus explains that He must die, in verses 22 to 28, and then declares that by His death He will draw all men to Himself—by which He means, not only His Jewish countrymen but even Gentiles like those who were asking to see Him. “All men,” in this text, means “all *kinds* of people—both Jews and Gentiles.” It does not mean “all people without exception.” The only ones drawn *to* Christ are those who are eventually saved *by* Christ—namely, the elect alone.

II. 2 Corinthians 5:14–15 – One Died for All

Second, appeal is often made to **2 Corinthians 5:14–15**, where Paul writes, “For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.” Those who deny particular redemption claim that the phrase “He died for all” indicates that Christ died for all people without exception.

But that interpretation is not without significant problems. Paul immediately follows that statement by saying, “Therefore,”—that is, because Christ died for them, “all died.” Don’t miss this. Christ’s death on behalf of “all” *effects the death* of those for whom He died. But in what sense can it be said that all those for whom Christ died have died as a result of His death? Well, we have died with Christ in His death for us, He being the head and we being the body, such that

His death to sin counts for us. Colossians 2:20 speaks of believers having “died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world.” Colossians 3:3 says, “You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” Romans 6:1–3 says that in union to Christ, we have died to sin. And then 2 Corinthians 5:15 says we have died to ourselves and now live for Christ. The point of the passage is: Christ’s death for His people effects their spiritual death to sin and self in union with Him.

But can those things be said of all without exception? Have all without exception died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world? Can even those who finally perish in hell say that their life is hidden with Christ in God? No. Only the elect can be said to have died to sin and self in union with Christ, and so only the elect are in view in this verse.

More than that, Christ not only died for His people; He was also raised on their behalf, verse 15 says. If union with Christ in His death necessarily effects the spiritual death of those for whom He died, it must also be the case that union with Christ in His resurrection necessarily effects their spiritual resurrection as well. And that’s exactly what Paul says in Romans 6:5: “For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection.” So there is no such thing as union with Christ in His death without union with Christ in His resurrection.

But unless hell is empty, you can’t say that all people without exception have died to themselves, have been raised to newness of life, and now live for Christ. No, what’s happening here is that Paul is using the language of corporate solidarity—that the One died for the many—to emphasize the union between Christ and His people. He has died for them, and they have died to sin and to self in Him, so that they now live for His honor and glory. The “one for all” motif does not indicate absolute universality, but corporate solidarity between the one and the many. It’s telling us that the actions of a single “One” affect the “all” whom He represents.

III. 1 Timothy 2:3–6 – Ransom for All

A **third** text often marshaled in support of a universal atonement is 1 Timothy 2:3–6, which speaks of “God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time.” If God desires all people to be saved, and if Christ has given Himself as a ransom for *all*, how can we deny a universal atonement?

Well, again, this passage must be read in its context. What was going on when Paul wrote 1 Timothy? Well, look at chapter 1 verse 3. Certain persons were teaching “strange doctrines.” Verse 6 says they were turning from sound doctrine to “fruitless discussion.” Verse 7 says these

false teachers had ambitions to be “teachers of the law.” When you combine that phrase with their speculation regarding genealogies (chapter 1 verse 4) and their forbidding of marriage along with certain foods (chapter 4, verses 1 to 3), it’s difficult to avoid the conclusion that their false doctrine consisted of an exclusive Jewish elitism. These were teachers, like the Judaizers, who were insisting that the only real Christians were those who observed the Mosaic ceremonies.

Against that backdrop, Paul’s universalistic statements throughout the letter, including this passage in chapter 2, make perfect sense. Paul isn’t teaching that Christ died for all without exception. He’s teaching that, contrary to this false teaching, Christ died for all people without distinction—for Gentiles as well as Jews. Even I. Howard Marshall, who held to an unlimited atonement, wrote, “This universalistic thrust is most probably a corrective response to an exclusive elitist understanding of salvation connected with the false teaching. . . . The context shows that the inclusion of Gentiles alongside Jews in salvation is the primary issue here” (*Pastoral Epistles*, ICC, 420, 427). In other words, by speaking of Christ giving Himself as a ransom for all, Paul does not intend to say that Christ has stood in the place of, and received the punishment due to the sins of, every individual who has ever lived throughout history. Rather, he intends to say that the benefits of Christ’s sin-bearing substitutionary atonement are not restricted to an elitist sect but are enjoyed by all kinds of people *throughout* the whole world.

Now, that conclusion is only strengthened by the fact that in 1 Timothy 2:1, Paul urges prayers to be made “on behalf of all men,” by which phrase he cannot mean that he wants the believers in Ephesus to pray for every single individual who has ever lived without exception. Not only would that require a lot of time, it would also require virtual omniscience! I couldn’t even pray for every single individual member of Grace Church without a membership roster, let alone for every individual on the planet—still less for every person in history. No, Paul’s exhorting the church to pray for all *kinds* of people—even as he immediately follows that request in verse 2 by defining “all men” as “kings and all who are in authority.” In other words, he’s saying, “Just because your prayers may seem to be wasted on unlikely converts, such as the rulers who persecute the church, don’t let that deter you! Pray for *all kinds* of people, even kings and those in authority! Let no class of person be excluded from your prayers!”

And so, just as the “all” of verse 1 ought to be interpreted as “all without distinction,” “all kinds of people,” so also the “alls” of verses 3, 4, and 6 ought to be interpreted the same way: that Christ atoned for all kinds of people—people from different social classes (rulers versus common people); people from different ethnicities (Jews versus Gentiles); and so on.

IV. Titus 2:11 – Bringing Salvation to All Men

The same conclusion is warranted for Paul’s statement in our **fourth** text: Titus 2:11, that “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men.” But the phrase “all men,” is

necessarily defined by the immediately preceding list of different *classes* of people: verse 2 speaks of “older men”; verse 3 of “older women”; verse 4: “young women”; verse 6: “young men”; and verse 9: bondslaves. Since not all men without exception are actually saved, it is best to interpret “all men” as “all kinds of men,” that is, people in every station of life as enumerated in the previous verses.

V. 1 Timothy 4:10 – All Men, Especially Believers

A **fifth** passage has been the subject of much discussion: 1 Timothy 4:10, where Paul describes God as “the Savior of all men, especially of believers.” Proponents of universal atonement teach that Jesus is the Savior of all people in the sense that He provided for the salvation of all in His universal atonement, but that He is especially the Savior of believers because the benefits of salvation are applied only to them.

But there are a number of problems with this interpretation. First, it assumes that “the Savior” in view here is Christ. But the nearest antecedent of “Savior” is “the living God,” which is a title that Scripture employs to speak of the Father rather than the Son. We see that in a couple of instances in which the Son is distinguished from “the living God,” like in Matthew 16:16, for example, where Peter confesses that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And besides that, there is no place in Scripture where “the living God” refers unambiguously to the Son. Now, obviously the Son is perfectly equal to the Father; I don’t mean to suggest that the Son is not “the living God.” It’s just that when Scripture uses that title, it seems to restrict it to the Father in distinction from the Son. So, “the living God” who is “the Savior of all men,” in this passage, likely refers to the Father rather than the Son. And when you add that there is no mention of atonement or the cross in the context of 1 Timothy 4, that case becomes stronger. So, at the very least, assuming that Christ and/or the atonement is in view in 1 Timothy 4:10 is saying more than is self-evident.

Second, the universal interpretation reads the concept of “potentiality” or “provision” into the text where it simply is not. Nothing in 1 Timothy 4:10—explicitly or implicitly—signals that we should see a distinction between a potential provision and an actual application. They have to read that into the text in order to explain how Christ can be the Savior of all men when all men are not eventually saved. It’s a notion brought to the text, not read out of the text.

Third, as a result of that, it reduces the atonement to a potentiality or possibility, rather than an efficacious accomplishment. The move from a definite accomplishment to a provision or a making possible is a fundamental change in the nature of the atonement, and, as we’ve seen, it’s one that’s not warranted by Scripture—and one that, if taken to its logical conclusion, undermines the Gospel.

And then fourth, very related to that, there is a significant problem with saying that God is the Savior of men who are never in fact saved. It's really toying with language to speak of someone as the Savior of people whom He desires to save, or gives the opportunity to eventually be saved, but whom He does not in fact save. The death of Christ is held out as a universal provision that makes salvation possible for all without exception on the condition that they believe. But in the case of the overwhelming majority of those whose salvation has been "provided," God in His providence never sends a word either (a) of the Gospel by which they must believe to be saved, or (b) of the Savior in whom they must trust to be saved. What does it mean to provide salvation to people upon the fulfillment of a condition, when the One who must act for them to fulfill that condition refuses to do so? And on that basis, to be called their Savior? No, as John Owen says, "A Savior of men not saved is strange." It's gratuitous to call God the Savior of those who are not actually saved. It stretches language to its breaking point.

Well, what's the alternative? Well, in the first place, given what we said about God the Father being "the living God," "the Savior" spoken of in this text—and given that there is no explicit mention of the atonement in the near context—it's only reasonable to interpret the term "Savior" in the only other sense in which the Father is a Savior: namely, that by His providential care, He is the rescuer and preserver of life for all His creatures. And there are many texts which speak to His goodness to all His creatures. He "gives life to all things": 1 Timothy 6:13; Acts 17:25. He is "good to all," and "His mercies are over all His works": Psalm 145:9. He brings sun and rain on the evil and the good: Matthew 5:45. And though all people without exception *have* sinned against God, God has not immediately visited His justice on them, like He did with the fallen angels (cf. 2 Pet 2:4). Even the non-elect enjoy a temporary stay of execution and thus experience the joys of life in a world infused with the common grace of God.

And the point is: In the uncertainties of this life, even those whom God has not chosen to save are spared from countless natural calamities. Would-be car accidents, plane crashes, violent attacks and robberies, or ten thousand other disasters are averted by the providence of God—and many times without people even knowing they were in danger. God is a kind God! In that sense, He is the Savior of all men.

But in what way is God the Savior *especially* of believers? In the sense that: He not only rescues believers from temporal dangers like He does for all other people, but He extends that rescue and deliverance all the way into eternity by blessing them with spiritual salvation from sin. The entry for "savior" in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* puts it this way: He is "the Benefactor and Preserver of all men in this life and of believers in the life to come" (7:1017). Homer Kent takes this view and writes, "As applied to unbelievers [God being their Savior] includes preservation and deliverance from various evils and the bestowal of many blessings during this life. To believers, however, this salvation does not end with earthly life but goes on for all eternity" (*Pastoral Epistles*, 154).

And the context does give us reason to see physical life alongside eternal life in verse 10. Let's look at verses 7 and 8. Paul says, "But have nothing to do with *worldly* fables fit only for old women, but discipline yourself for the purpose of *godliness*; for *bodily* discipline is only of little profit, but *godliness* is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for *the present life* and also for *the life to come*." So there is a reference to "worldliness," on the one hand, and "godliness" on the other; "bodily discipline," on the one hand, and "godliness," on the other. And then there is mention of what is profitable for "the present life," on the one hand, what's profitable for "the life to come," on the other. Those are strong contextual foundations for expecting a comment on how God saves men in both a *temporal* sense, on the one hand ("all men"), and an *eternal* sense, on the other ("especially for believers").

So, this is Paul's point. Not that Christ has potentially atoned for the sins of all men by dying for all of them, but that the Father whose beneficence manifests itself to all people—even His enemies—in His providential preservation and care for them in temporal dangers, is the Father whose beneficence extends to His chosen people even into eternity, in their spiritual salvation from sin.

VI. 2 Peter 3:9 – Wishing for All to Come to Repentance

We'll address a **sixth** passage: 2 Peter 3:9. And though this text doesn't explicitly speak of the atonement, proponents of a universal atonement argue that it reveals a universal saving will in God that contradicts a particular redemption. Peter writes, "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." Since God wants *none* to perish but *all* to repent, they argue that God must have sent Christ to die for them all. But it simply does not follow that since God in some sense takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (as He says in Ezekiel chapters 18 and 33), that Christ has atoned for all without exception.

There is much to be said as to why 2 Peter 3:9 doesn't support a universal atonement. But the most decisive answer comes from considering (a) the recipients of Peter's letter and (b) the immediate context of this particular passage. In this very verse, Peter addresses those he's speaking to. He writes that the Lord is "patient toward *you*." Who are the "you"? Well, look at the previous verse. 2 Peter 3:8 calls them the "beloved," a term often used of fellow believers in Christ. Or, we could go back to the beginning of the letter, chapter 1 verse 1, where Peter addresses the epistle to "those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ." Peter is speaking to the people of God! The "you" in 2 Peter 3:9 are the people of God "scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are *chosen* according to the foreknowledge of God," as First Peter 1:1–2 says (cf. 2 Pet 3:1). These are the elect.

What does this mean for our verse? Peter is saying that the Lord Jesus delays His return because He is patient toward *those who are His*—those whom the Father has given Him, and for whom He has died to save but who have not yet come to faith. This passage isn't saying God desires the repentance of all people without exception—those very people to whom He refuses to grant the gift of repentance. No, it's saying that God desires the repentance of all those He has given to the Son, for whom the Son has died to save, and who therefore must come to faith before God judges the earth and casts unbelievers into eternal punishment!

World is Not Self-Interpreting

Now, you might notice that all of the texts we've addressed so far have the term "all" in them. But we also hear much about those passages of Scripture that use the term "world." Because "world" is such a seemingly expansive term, many argue that to say that Christ "takes away the sin of the *world*" (John 1:29), or that the atonement is the result of the love of God for the *world* (John 3:16), or that Christ is "the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of *the whole world*" (1 John 2:2), is to say that that Christ has paid for the sins of all people without exception who have ever lived in the world.

But just like with the term "all," "*world*" is **not self-interpreting** either! Just as "all" can mean "all without distinction," and not necessarily refer to all people without exception, so also "world" is used in numerous different senses. In fact, there are at least seven different ways "world" is used in the writings of the Apostle John alone: it can refer to (1) the created order, or the universe at large (John 1:10b; cf. 1:3); (2) the inhabitable earth (John 1:10a); (3) every individual who has ever lived on earth (Rom 3:19); (4) an indistinct large number of people (John 12:19); (5) mankind as hostile to God (John 15:18–19; 17:9; 1 John 3:1); (6) the world system (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 1 John 2:15–17; 4:5; 5:19); and (7) Gentiles in contrast to Jews (John 3:16–17; 4:40–42; 1 John 2:1–2; cf. Rom 1:8; Col 1:6). And just like "all," there are several passages in which "world" simply cannot mean "every person who has ever lived in the world," or even "every person alive in the world at the time." John 1:10 says, speaking of Jesus, "The *world* did not know Him." But of course, some in the world did come to know Jesus, as even two verses later John says that "as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God." In John 8:26, Jesus says, "...the things which I heard from Him, these I speak to the *world*." But Jesus did not speak to all people alive in the world. This signifies that He spoke openly to those in Israel, without distinction. In John 15:18–19, Jesus tells His disciples, "...because you are not of the world, but I chose you *out* of the world, because of this the world hates you." Here, "the world" is distinct from the people of Christ, and therefore is not inclusive of them. Which means it is not an absolutely universal designation. And we could keep going. The point is: naked appeals to the so-called "plain meaning" of "world" being "all without

exception” simply does not satisfy the demands of faithful biblical exegesis. Just like anything else, “world” needs to be interpreted in its context.

VII. John 3:16 – For God So Loved the World

Now, one of the most significant “world” passages in this debate is 1 John 2:2. But as I said earlier, we discussed that passage at length in our sermon on propitiation, which I preached back on March 20th. If you’d like to hear more on that verse, go ahead and find that message.

And if time permitted, I could probably comment on three or four others. But for the sake of time I’m going to do just one more. Our **seventh** text this morning, and that is John 3:16. I’m sure most of you know it well: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” Proponents of a universal atonement claim that, by giving His only Son over to a substitutionary death for sinners, God has expressed His love for the entire world, which they believe refers to every individual who will have ever lived on the earth.

But nothing in the passage demands that “world” be interpreted to mean “every person who ever lived in the world, without exception.” In fact, there is good reason to understand it as “people throughout the world, without distinction.” In the first place, consider the **nature of the love** spoken of here. God’s love, signified by the Greek term *agapaō*, does not consist in mere fond affection or a powerless wish to see the beloved benefited—which is what I’m convinced most people hear when they read John 3:16. “Ooh, God just loves you so *much!* His soul just delights in you, because of how precious you are to Him!” But that’s not this word! Divine love consists in the determinative act of God’s will to purpose to accomplish the benefit of His beloved. And that means: it is an unmistakable mark of this divine love that its intended aim or determined purpose be brought to fruition. Almighty God is not a frustrated lover! His love is always efficacious! It always secures its desired end.

Well, if that’s true, what is the benefit that God intends to accomplish by loving “the world” in this way? Well, the text says that the intended effect of His love is that all who believe in the Son—*pas ho pisteuōn eis auton*: “everyone believing in Him”—would not die in their sins, but rather be saved unto everlasting life. The intended benefit that God purposes to accomplish by His love of the world in John 3:16 is nothing other than salvation itself! And given that divine love must accomplish its purpose, we are constrained to conclude that none are objects of this divine love except those who finally receive its intended, purposed benefit of salvation. And who are they? Who does the text say they are? “All the believing ones,” or, “Everyone believing in Him.” And who are the ones who believe? Only those to whom God sovereignly grants the gift of saving faith: the elect alone.

Now, like I said, many believe that “world” here refers to the whole of humanity—elect and reprobate alike. But I continue to struggle with how it can be an act of the love of God *to the reprobate* to send Christ into the world to bring eternal life to *all the believing ones*. The reprobate by definition are those who will never believe. More than that: they are those to whom God has chosen never to grant the gift of saving faith, because, in His inscrutable wisdom, He has chosen not to save them. We read in Romans 9:22 that they are “vessels of wrath fitted for destruction,” and in 1 Peter 2:8 that they were appointed to doom. And so we must ask: How can it be an act of love to those who will never believe to send Christ to accomplish the salvation of only those who will believe? That would be to say, “God so loved *all* in such a way that only *some* of them will enjoy the benefits of His love.” But given that divine love always secures its design, those who fail to receive salvation cannot be said to be “so loved” in this way.

More than that: It’s not only that God never grants faith to these He supposedly loves by making them “savable” through faith. It’s that He has so ordered the circumstances of providence that vast numbers of those whom He is said to love by sending Christ to save believers never hear one word of the Gospel of Christ. John Owen writes, “Strange! that the Lord should so love men as to give his only-begotten Son for them, and yet not once by any means signify this love to them, as to innumerable he doth not!—that he should love them, and yet order things so, in his wise dispensation, that this love should be altogether in vain and fruitless!—love them, and yet determine that they shall receive no good by his love, although his love indeed be a willing of the greatest good to them!” (*Death of Death*, 328). In other words, what love is it to those who not only never believe the Gospel, but who, by the providential ordering of God, never even hear of the Gospel, nor even of the Christ whose coming is supposedly designed to be a signal of God’s eminent love for them? In my judgment, this introduces an incongruity that cannot be solved.

So, if “the world” can only refer to the elect throughout the world, why does Jesus use the universalistic terminology? The answer is in the context. As Jesus speaks of God’s salvation of sinners, He’s talking with Nicodemus, whom verse 1 calls “a man of the Pharisees,” and “a ruler of the Jews” (John 3:1). The Pharisees, like virtually all of Israel in Jesus’s day, regarded Gentiles as unclean and alienated from the covenant promises of God. As Jesus discusses salvation with this ruler of the Jews, He explains that God’s love terminates not only on Israel but also on men and women throughout the whole world—Gentiles as well as Jews who believe in Jesus. “World,” here, isn’t meant to signify all persons without exception. It’s meant to signify all peoples without distinction.

Conclusion

And so, at the end of the day, when the so-called universalistic texts are interpreted in their context, and when they’re interpreted consistently with the rest of Scripture’s teaching concerning the nature and design of the atonement, no text genuinely teaches that Christ has died

to atone for the sins of all without exception. And without that, there are no exegetical or theological grounds for seeing a universal extent of the atonement. And that happens to fit perfectly with all the positive arguments for particular redemption that we've worked through in our previous sermons on the matter.

But if that's so, how can we consistently preach the Gospel to all people without exception? I mean, you hear me do it, week by week, and even throughout this series. But how can I do that consistently? How can we believe in a strictly particular redemption, on the one hand, and a genuinely universal free-offer of the Gospel to all people without exception, on the other? Well, that will be the subject of our next sermon.