

The Extent of the Atonement: Answering Objections

by Matt Perman

In the first article we saw the many biblical reasons for affirming that everybody whom Christ died for will be saved, which we called “successful redemption.” A necessary corollary of this truth is that Christ did not die for everybody, since not everybody will be saved. We also saw that this is not only an inference to be made from the Biblical teaching on the success of Christ’s death, but that the Bible also does explicitly teach that Christ’s death was only for believers.

But what about all of the passages which say Christ died “for the whole world,” that He “died for all,” and the passages which seem to say that people whom Christ died for either have or might perish? A closer investigation of these passages reveals that they are not contrary to the biblical teaching we saw in the last article on successful atonement. I think that it will be clearer and easier to study my comments if I leave them in outline form which I prepared for a Bible study. Since I only gave references to, and did not write out, the passages, I strongly suggest that you look up for yourself each verse that is being discussed.

Passages which speak of the “whole world.”

A. 1 John 2:2

1. “Whole world” is a vague term. To simply declare that this phrase overthrows successful atonement is sloppy scholarship. The question we must ask is: “

What is meant

by the term whole world?”

a. Remember that propitiation means a removal of God’s wrath. So if “whole world” means in this verse “every person to ever live,” then everybody would be saved (since they would all be, by definition, rescued from God’s wrath), which we know is not a biblical teaching (see, for example, John 3:36).

b. Look at how John uses the term “whole earth” in Revelation 13:3: Does John mean that “every individual in the world” followed the beast (see v. 8)? What, then, does he mean (see verse 7)?

c. Likewise, we read in Revelation 12:9 that Satan “deceives the whole world.” Again, this clearly doesn’t mean every individual in the world because two verses later we read that the saints of God have overcome Satan. Thus, “whole world” here must mean something like “the world in general.”

d. See also Romans 1:8.

2. Scripture, therefore, does not always use the phrase “whole world” to mean every individual in the world. In fact, John Owen points out that it would be

hard to find even one instance where it is used this way. Very often it means “people from all parts of the world.”

3. In the early church, it was a big issue that Gentiles were part of the church as well as Jews. Some people thought that salvation was only for Jews. The apostle John is probably trying to refute this error and make clear that salvation is not limited to Jews—it is for “the whole world” (i.e., people of all races). So this verse doesn’t mean that Christ died for every individual in the world, but that Christ’s death is not limited to the Jews—it is for people from the Gentiles as well. It is for the elect, who are scattered throughout the whole world.

a. Notice the parallel between 1 John 2:2 and John 11:51-52 (both written by John). John 11:51-52 is clearly affirming limited atonement, and by virtue of its parallel with 1 John 2:2 it is hard to escape the conclusion that John intends the same thing in both verses:

He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2).

He prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad (John 11:51-52).

b. “Whole world” (1 John 2:2) therefore means “the children of God who are scattered” throughout the world (John 11:52-53).

B. John 1:29

1. We are to understand this verse in the same way. Notice, that if world here means every individual, the problems are not just for limited atonement. For if Christ takes away the sins of every individual in the world, then everybody would be saved (for their sins would be gone).

C. John 4:42; 1 John 4:14; John 6:51

1. These verses call Jesus the Savior of the world. If world meant “every individual to ever live on earth” we would have to take this verse seriously and conclude that they teach that Christ saves everybody. Clearly, he does not save everybody. “Savior of the world” means that 1) Christ is the only savior in the world and 2) Christ saves everybody who is saved. Furthermore, because of the fact that Christ saves people from every people group in the world, He saves the world as whole by virtue of saving some people from every part of the world. Because of Christ, the whole world is not lost. It is saved. Thus, Jesus is the “Savior of the world” and made propitiation for “the whole world” and takes away the sins “of the world.”

Passages which speak of “all.”

A. Like the word “world,” “all” doesn’t always mean “every individual without exception,” but “some people from all groups.” It means “both Jews and Gentiles” but not “every Jew and every Gentile.” Read Mark 1:5. Does “all” in this verse mean every individual in the world?

1. John 12:46

a. Jesus is saying that both Jews and Gentiles will be drawn.

2. 1 Timothy 2:6

- a. Jesus gave Himself as a ransom for all classes and groups of people.

B. Also, if we do use the word all to mean “every individual without exception,” we mean “every individual within a certain group.” For example, if I say to our Bible study group “is everybody here?” I do not mean “every individual to ever walk the face of the earth.” I mean everybody who is in our group.

1. Hebrews 2:9

- a. “Every” means “every believer.”

2. 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15

- a. “All” means “all believers,” “all of the elect.”

3. 1 Corinthians 15:22 4. Romans 5:18

Do some passages say that people Christ died for have perished?

A. 2 Peter 2:1

1. “Lord” here most likely does not refer to Jesus Christ, but God the Father.
 - a. In the following verses, God the Father is spoken of.
 - b. The Greek word for Lord used here is never used of Christ, but only of the Father (from John Owen).
 - c. Thus, it is unlikely that the atonement is in view.
2. The “purchase” here probably doesn’t refer to eternal redemption, but a deliverance by God’s goodness from the defilement of the world in idolatry. The word used to say they were “bought” can be used to denote any kind of deliverance, and so does not necessarily indicate that they had been purchased by the blood of Christ.
 - a. That is the context of the letter.
 - b. Peter is comparing these false teachers to the OT times, and the corresponding OT Hebrew word to the one here means any deliverance.
 - c. The Jews in the OT were considered bought by virtue of their deliverance from Egypt (see Exodus 15:16).
3. No mention of Christ’s blood here, as in other places that treat His redemption. Again, this makes it doubtful that the redemption of Christ is in view.
4. Later on Peter affirms the deliverance to be “escaping the pollution of the world” by the knowledge of the gospel; but no mention is made of being washed in Christ’s blood. Don’t we know of many unsaved people who for a time reform their lives, but soon go back to their old ways?
5. It is uncertain whether Peter is speaking of the reality of a purchase, or according to their outward appearance and profession. In other words, the verse may mean, “denying the Master who [they say] bought them.”
6. There is no true spiritual fruit ascribed to these people showing true redemption.
7. All of these reasons show that this is not a good text to use in order to try

and show universal redemption. There are just too many ambiguities.

B. Romans 14:15; 1 Corinthians 8:11

1. "Destroy" and "ruin" probably does not refer to eternal ruin and destruction, but to great hindrance in their spiritual life or ministry.
2. Even if the words do refer to eternal ruin, it is most likely a hypothetical possibility. In other words, if such and such happens, it may lead to the eternal ruin of God's saint. But God's saints can never be eternally ruined (which Paul teaches, the same person who wrote these verses), and thus such a thing will never truly be allowed to happen. For example, a parent may tell a child, "If you touch the stove, you will burn your hand." But that doesn't deny that fact that the parent will make sure to rescue the child if he sees the child reaching for the burner.

Conclusion

I have simply given a brief sketch of what can be said about these verses. If you are still troubled, many godly and intelligent Christians have written in-depth analyses of these verses. I would refer you to John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* or John Gill's *The Cause of God and Truth*.

SEE ALSO:

The Extent of the Atonement: Who Did Christ Die For?

The Death of Death in the Death of Christ by John Owen (HTML version)

The Death of Death in the Death of Christ by John Owen (modernized text, PDF version)

The Death of Death in the Death of Christ by John Owen (EPUB, MOBI & PDF versions)

The Cause of God and Truth by John Gill (HTML version)

The Cause of God and Truth by John Gill (PDF version)

The Cause of God and Truth by John Gill (MOBI & EPUB versions)

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