

Objections to God's Sovereignty Answered

by Arthur W. Pink

One of the most popular beliefs of the day is that God loves everybody, and the very fact that it is so popular with all classes ought to be enough to arouse the suspicious of those who are subject to the Word of Truth. God's love toward all His creatures is the fundamental and favorite tenet of Universalists, Unitarians, Theosophists, Christian Scientists, Spiritualists, Russellites, etc. No matter how a man may live — in open defiance of Heaven, with no concern whatever for his soul's eternal interests, still less for God's glory, dying, perhaps with an oath on his lips — notwithstanding, God loves him, we are told. So widely has this dogma been proclaimed, and so comforting is it to the heart which is at enmity with God, we have little hope of convincing many of their error. That God loves everybody, is, we may say, quite a modern belief. The writings of the church fathers, the Reformers or the Puritans will (we believe) be searched in vain for any such concept. Perhaps the late D.L. Moody — Captivated by Drummond's "The Greatest Thing in the World" — did more than anyone else in the last century to popularize this concept.

It has been customary to say God loves the sinner though He hates his sin. But that is a meaningless distinction. What is there in a sinner but sin? Is it not true that his "whole head is sick" and his "whole heart faint," and that "from the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness" in him? (Isa. 1:5,6) Is it true that God loves the one who is despising and rejecting His blessed Son? God is Light as well as Love, and therefore His love must be a holy love. To tell the Christ-rejecter that God loves him is to cauterize his conscience as well as to afford him a sense of security in his sins. The fact is, the love of God is a truth for the saints only, and to present it to the enemies of God is to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs. With the exception of John 3:16, not once in the four Gospels do we read of the Lord Jesus, the perfect Teacher, telling sinners that God loves them! In the book of Acts, which records the evangelistic labors and messages of the apostles, God's love is never referred to at all! But when we come to the Epistles, which are addressed to the saints, we have a full presentation of this precious truth — God's love for His own. Let us seek to rightly divide the Word of God and then we shall not be found taking truths which are addressed to believers and mis-applying them to unbelievers. That which sinners need to have brought before them is the ineffable holiness, the exacting wrath of God. Risking the danger of being misunderstood let us say — and we wish we could say it to every evangelist and preacher in the country — there is far too much presenting of Christ to sinners today (by those sound in the faith), and far too little showing sinners their need of Christ, i.e., their absolutely ruined and lost condition, their imminent and awful danger of suffering the wrath to come, the fearful guilt resting upon them in the sight of God: to present Christ to those who have never been shown their need of Him, seems to us to be guilty of casting pearls before swine.

If it be true that God loves every member of the human family, then why did our Lord tell His disciples “He that hath My commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth Me: and he that loveth Me shall be loved of My Father ... If a man love Me, he will keep My words: and My Father will love him.” (John 14:21,23)? Why say “he that loveth Me shall be loved of My Father”? If the Father loves everybody? The same limitation is found in Prov. 8:17: “I love them that love Me.” Again we read, “Thou hatest all workers of iniquity” — not merely the works of iniquity. Here then is a flat repudiation of present teaching that, God hates sin but loves the sinner; Scripture says, “Thou hatest all workers of iniquity” (Psa. 5:5)! “God is angry with the wicked every day.” (Psa. 7:11) “He that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God” — not “shall abide,” but even now — “abideth on him.” (John 3:36) Can God “love” the one on whom His “wrath” abides? Again, is it not evident that the words, “The love of God which is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:39) marks a limitation, both in the sphere and objects of His love? Again, is it not plain from the words “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated” (Rom. 9:13) that God does not love everybody? Again, it is written, “For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth.” (Heb. 12:6) Does not this verse teach that God’s love is restricted to the members of His own family? If He loves all men without exception, then the distinction and limitation here mentioned is quite meaningless. Finally, we would ask, Is it conceivable that God will love the damned in the Lake of Fire? Yet, if He loves them now He will do so then, seeing that His love knows no change — He is “without variableness or shadow of turning”!

Turning now to John 3:16, it should be evident from the passages just quoted that this verse will not bear the construction usually put upon it, “God so loved the world.” Many suppose that this means the entire human race. But “the entire human race” includes all mankind from Adam till the close of earth’s history; it reaches backward as well as forward! Consider, then, the history of mankind before Christ was born. Unnumbered millions lived and died before the Savior came to the earth, lived here “having no hope and without God in the world,” and therefore passed out into an eternity of woe. If God “loved” them, where is the slightest proof thereof? Scripture declares “Who (God) in times past (from the tower of Babel till after Pentecost) suffered all nations to walk in their own ways.” (Acts 14:16) Scripture declares that “And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient.” (Rom. 1:28) To Israel God said, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth.” (Amos 3:2) In view of these plain passages who will be so foolish as to insist that God in the past loved all mankind! The same applies with equal force to the future. Read through the book of Revelation, noting especially chapters 8 to 19, where we have described the judgments which will be poured out from Heaven on this earth. Read of the fearful woes, the frightful plagues, the vials of God’s wrath, which shall be emptied on the wicked. Finally, read the twentieth chapter of Revelation, the great white throne judgment, and see if you can discover there the slightest trace of love.

But the objector comes back to John 3:16 and says, "World means world." True, but we have shown that "the world" does not mean the whole human family. The fact is that "the world" is used in a general way. When the brethren of Christ said "Show thyself to the world" (John 7:4), did they mean "Shew Thyself to all mankind"? When the Pharisees said "Behold, the world is gone after Him" (John 12:19), did they mean that "all the human family" were flocking after Him? When the apostle wrote, "Your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world" (Rom. 1:8), did he mean that the faith of the saints at Rome was the subject of conversation by every man, woman, and child on earth? When Rev. 13:3 informs us that "all the world wondered after the beast," are we to understand that there will be no exceptions? These, and other passages which might be quoted, show that the term "the world" often has a relative rather than an absolute force.

Now the first thing to note in connection with John 3:16 is that our Lord was there speaking to Nicotinic, a man who believed that God's mercies were confined to his own nation. Christ there announced that God's love in giving His Son had a larger object in view, that it flowed beyond the boundary of Palestine, reaching out to "regions beyond." In other words, this was Christ's announcement that God had a purpose of grace toward Gentiles as well as Jews. "God so loved the world," then, signifies God's love is international in its scope. But does this mean that God loves every individual among the Gentiles? Not necessarily, for as we have seen, the term "world" is general rather than specific, relative rather than absolute. The term "world" in itself is not conclusive. To ascertain who are the objects of God's love, other passages where His love is mentioned must be consulted.

In 2 Peter 2:5 we read of "the world of the ungodly." If then, there is a world of the ungodly, there must also be a world of the godly. It is the latter who are in view in the passages we shall now briefly consider. "For the bread of God is He which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world." (John 6:33) Now mark it well, Christ did not say, "offereth life unto the world," but "giveth." What is the difference between the two terms? This: a thing which is "offered" may be refused, but a thing "given," necessarily implies its acceptance. If it is not accepted, it is not "given," it is simply proffered. Here, then, is a Scripture that positively states Christ giveth life (spiritual, eternal life) "unto the world." Now He does not give eternal life the "world of the ungodly" for they will not have it, they do not want it. Hence, we are obliged to understand the reference in John 6:33 as being to "the world of the godly," i.e., God's own people.

One more: In 2 Cor. 5:19 we read, "To wit that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself." What is meant by this is clearly defined in the words immediately following, "not imputing their trespasses unto them." Here again "the world" cannot mean "the world of the ungodly," for their "trespasses" are "imputed" to them, as the judgment of the Great White Throne will yet show. But 2 Cor. 5:19 plainly teaches there is a "world" which is "reconciled," reconciled unto God because their trespasses are not reckoned to their account, having been borne by their Substitute. Who then are they? Only one

answer is fairly possible — the world of God’s people!

In life manner, the “world” in John 3:16 must, in the final analysis refer to the world of God’s people. Must, we say, for there is no other alternative solution. It cannot mean the whole human race, for one-half of the race was already in hell when Christ came to earth. It is unfair to insist that it means every human being now living, for every other passage in the New Testament where God’s love is mentioned, limits it to His own people — search and see! The objects of God’s love in John 3:16 are precisely the same as the objects of Christ’s love in John 13:1: “Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His time was come, that He should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved His own which were in the world. He loved them unto the end.” We may admit that our interpretation of John 3:16 is no novel one invented by us, but one almost uniformly given by the Reformers and Puritans, and many others since then.

It is strange, yet it is true, that many who acknowledge the sovereign rule of God over material things will cavil and quibble when we insist that God is also sovereign in the spiritual realm. But their quarrel is with God and not with us. We have given Scripture in support of everything advanced in these pages, and if that will not satisfy our readers, it is idle for us to seek to convince them. What we write now is designed for those who do bow to the authority of Holy Writ, and for their benefit we propose to examine several other Scriptures which have purposely been held for this chapter.

Perhaps the one passage which has presented the greatest difficulty to those who have seen that passage after passage in Holy Writ plainly teaches the election of a limited number unto salvation, is 2 Peter 3:9: “Not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”

The first thing to be said upon the above passage is that, like all other Scripture, it must be understood and interpreted in the light of its context. What we have quoted in the preceding paragraph is only part of the verse, and the last part of it at that! Surely it must be allowed by all that the first half of the verse needs to be taken into consideration. In order to establish what these words are supposed by many to mean, viz., that the words “any” and “all” are to be received without any qualification, it must be shown that the context is referring to the whole human race! If this cannot be shown, if there is no premise to justify this, then the conclusion also must be unwarranted. Let us then ponder the first part of the verse.

“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise.”

Note “promise” in the singular number, not “promises.” What promise is in view? The promise of salvation? Where, in all Scripture, has God ever promised to save the whole human race! Where indeed? No, the “promise” here referred to, is not about salvation. What then is it? The context tells us. “Knowing this, first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of His coming?” (vv.

3,4) The context then refers to God's promise to send back His beloved Son. But many long centuries have passed and this promise has not yet been fulfilled. True, but long as the delay may seem to us, the interval is short in the reckoning of God. As the proof of this we are reminded, "But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." (v. 8) In God's reckoning of time, less than two days have yet passed since He promised to send back Christ.

But more, the delay in the Father's sending back His beloved Son is not only due to no "slackness" on His part, but it is also occasioned by His "longsuffering." His longsuffering to whom? The verse we are now considering tells us: "but is longsuffering to usward." And who are the "usward"? — the human race, or God's own people? In the light of the context this is not an open question upon which each of us is free to form an opinion. The Holy Spirit has defined it. The opening verse of the chapter says, "This second Epistle, beloved, I now write unto you." And again, the verse immediately preceding declares, "But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing," etc. (v. 8) The "usward" then are the "beloved" of God. They to whom his Epistle is addressed are "them that have obtained (not "exercised," but "obtained" as God's sovereign gift) like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Savior Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 1:11) Therefore we say there is no room for a doubt, a quibble or an argument — the "usward" are the elect of God.

Let us now quote the verse as a whole: "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; but is long-suffering to usward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." Could anything be clearer? The "any" that God is not willing should perish are the "usward" to who God is "longsuffering," the "beloved" of the previous verses. 2 Peter 3:9 means, then, that God will not send back His Son until "the fulness of the Gentiles be come in." (Rom. 11:25) God will not send back Christ till that "people" whom He is now "taking out of the Gentiles" (Acts 15:14) are gathered in. God will not send back His Son till the Body of Christ is complete, and that will not be till the ones whom He has elected to be saved in this dispensation shall have been brought to Him. Thank God for His "longsuffering to usward." Had Christ come back twenty years ago the writer had been justify behind to perish in his sins. But that could not be, so God graciously delayed the Second Coming. For the same reason He is still delaying His advent. His decreed purpose is that all His elect will come to repentance, and repent they shall. The present interval of grace will not end until the last of the "other sheep" of John 10:16 are safely folded — then will Christ return.

In expounding the sovereignty of God the Spirit in Salvation we have shown that His power is irresistible, that, by His gracious operations upon; and within them He "compels" God's elect to come to Christ. The sovereignty of the Holy Spirit is set forth not only in John 3:8 where we are told "The wind bloweth where it pleaseth ... so is every one that is born of the Spirit," but is affirmed in other passages as well. In 1 Cor. 12:11 we read, "But all these

worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as He will." And again, we read in Acts 16:6,7: "Now when they had gone throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia, and were forbidden of the Holy Spirit to preach the Word in Asia. After they were come to Mysia, they assayed to go to Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not." Thus we see how the Holy Spirit interposes His imperial will in opposition to the determination of the apostles.

But, it is objected against the assertion that the will and power of the Holy Spirit are irresistible, that there are two passages, one in the Old Testament and the other in the New, which appear to militate against such a conclusion. God said of old "My Spirit shall not always strive with man" (Gen. 6:3), and to the Jews Stephen declared, "Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Spirit: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted?" (Acts 7:51,52) If then the Jews "resisted" the Holy Spirit, how can we say His power is irresistible? The answer is found in Neh. 9:30, "Many years didst thou forbear them, and testifiest against them by Thy Spirit, in Thy prophets: yet would they not give ear." It was the external operations of the Spirit which Israel "resisted." It was the Spirit speaking by and through the prophets to which they "would not give ear." It was not anything which the Holy Spirit wrought in them that they "resisted" but the motives presented to them by the inspired messages of the prophets. Perhaps it will help the reader to catch our thought better if we compare Matt. 11:20-24: "Then began He to upbraid the cities wherein most of His mighty works were done, because they repented not. Woe unto thee Chorazin," etc. Our Lord here pronounces woe upon these cities for their failure to repent because of the "mighty works" (miracles) which He had done in their sight, and not because of any internal operations of His grace! The same is true of Gen. 6:3. By comparing 1 Peter 3:18-20 it will be seen that it was by and through Noah that God's Spirit "strove" with the antediluvians. The distinction noted above was ably summarized by Andrew Fuller (another writer long deceased from whom our moderns might learn much) thus: "There are two kinds of influences by which God works on the minds of men. First, that which is common, and which is effected by the ordinary use of motives presented to the mind for consideration: Secondly, that which is special and supernatural. The one contains nothing mysterious, anymore than the influence of our words and actions on each other; the other is such a mystery that we know nothing of it but by its effects. The former ought to be effectual; the latter is so." The work of the Holy Spirit upon or towards men is always "resisted" by them; His work within is always successful. What saith the Scriptures? This: "He which hath begun a good work IN you, will finish it." (Phil. 1:6)

The next question to be considered is: Why preach the Gospel to every creature? If God the Father has predestined only a limited number to be saved, if God the Son died to effect the salvation of only those given to Him by the Father, and if God the Spirit is seeking to quicken none save God's elect, then what is the use of giving the Gospel to the world at large, and where is the propriety of telling sinners that "Whosoever believeth in Christ shall not

perish but have everlasting life”?

First, it is of great importance that we should be clear upon the nature of the Gospel itself. The Gospel is God’s good news concerning Christ and not concerning sinners: “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the Gospel of God ... concerning His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Rom. 1:1,3) God would have proclaimed far and wide the amazing fact that His own blessed Son “became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” A universal testimony must be borne to the matchless worth of the person and work of Christ. Note the word “witness” in Matt. 24:14. The Gospel is God’s “witness” unto the perfections of His Son. Mark the words of the apostle: “For we are unto God a sweet savor of Christ, them that are saved, and in them that perish”! (2 Cor. 2:15)

Concerning the character and contents of the Gospel, the utmost confusion prevails today. The Gospel is not an “offer” to be bandied around by evangelical peddlers. The Gospel is no mere invitation, but a proclamation concerning Christ; true whether men believe it or not. No man is asked to believe that Christ died for him in particular. The Gospel, in brief, is this: Christ died for sinners, you are a sinner, believe in Christ, and you shall be saved. In the Gospel, God simply announced the terms which men may be saved (namely, repentance and faith) and, indiscriminately, all are commanded to fulfill them.

Second, repentance and remission of sins are to be preached in the name of the Lord Jesus “unto all the nations” (Luke 24:47), because God’s elect are “scattered abroad” (John 11:52) among all nations, and it is by the preaching and hearing of the Gospel that they are called out of the world. The Gospel is the means which God uses in the saving of His own chosen ones. By nature God’s elect are children of wrath “even as others”; they are lost sinners needing a Savior, and apart from Christ there is no solution for them. Hence, the Gospel must be believed by them before they can rejoice in the knowledge of sins forgiven. The Gospel is God’s winnowing: it separates the chaff from the wheat, and gathers the latter into His garner.

Third, it is to be noted that God has other purposes in the preaching of the Gospel than the salvation of His own elect. The world exists for the elect’s sake yet others have the benefit of it. So the Word is preached for the elect’s sake yet others have the benefit of an external call. The sun shines though blind men see it not. The rain falls upon rocky mountains and waste deserts as well as on the fruitful valleys; so also, God suffers the Gospel to fall on the ears of the non-elect. The power of the Gospel is one of God’s agencies for holding in check the wickedness of the world. Many who are never saved by it are reformed, their lusts are bridled, and they are restrained from becoming worse. Moreover, the preaching of the Gospel to the non-elect is made an admirable test of their characters. It exhibits the inveteracy of their sin; it demonstrates that their hearts are enmity against God; it justified the declaration of Christ that “men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.” (John 3:19)

Finally, it is sufficient for us to know that we are bidden to preach the Gospel to every creature. It is not for us to reason about the consistency between this and the fact that “few are chosen.” It is for us to obey. It is a simple matter to ask questions relating to the ways of God which no finite mind can fully fathom. We, too, might turn and remind the objector that our Lord declared, “Verily, I say unto you, All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme. But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Spirit hath never forgiveness” (Mark 3:28,29), and there can be no doubt whatever but that certain of the Jews were guilty of this very sin (see Matt. 12:24, etc.) and hence their destruction was inevitable. Yet, notwithstanding, scarcely two months later, He commanded His disciples to preach the Gospel to every creature. When the objector can show us the consistency of these two things — the fact that certain of the Jews had committed the sin for which there is never forgiveness, and the fact that to them the Gospel was to be preached — we will undertake to furnish a more satisfactory solution than the one given above to the harmony between a universal proclamation of the Gospel and a limitation of its saving power to those only that God has predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.

Once more, we say, it is not for us to reason about the Gospel; it is our business to preach it. When God ordered Abraham to offer up his son as a burnt offering, he might have objected that this command was inconsistent with His promise, “In Isaac shall thy seed be called.” But instead of arguing he obeyed, and justify God to harmonize His promise and His precept. Jeremiah might have argued that God had bade him to do that which was altogether unreasonable when He said, “Therefore thou shalt speak all these words unto them; but they will not hearken to thee; thou shalt also call unto them; but they will not answer thee” (Jer. 7:27), but instead, the prophet obeyed. Ezekiel too, might have complained that the Lord was asking of him a hard thing when He said, “Son of man, get thee unto the house of Israel, and speak with my words unto them. For thou art not sent to a people of a strange speech and of an hard language, but to the house of Israel; Not to many people of a strange speech and of a hard language, whose words thou canst not understand. Surely, had I sent thee to them, they would have hearkened unto thee. But the house of Israel will not hearken unto thee; for they will not hearken unto me; for all the house of Israel are impudent and hard-hearted.” (Ezek. 3:4-7)

*“But, O my soul, if truth so bright
Should dazzle and confound thy sight,
Yet, still His written Word obey,
And wait the great decision day.” — Watts*

It has been well said, “The Gospel has lost none of its ancient power. It is, as

much today as when it was first preached, 'the power of God unto salvation.' It needs no pity, no help, and no handmaid. It can overcome all obstacles, and break down all barriers. No human device need be tried to prepare the sinner to receive it, for if God has sent it no power can hinder it; and if He has not sent it, no power can make it effectual." — (Dr. Bullinger)

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