

Was Anyone Saved at the Cross?

By James White

We say Christ so died that he infallibly secured the salvation of a multitude that no man can number, who through Christ's death not only may be saved, but are saved, must be saved, and cannot by any possibility run the hazard of being anything but saved.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

There was a time when I called myself a "four-point Calvinist." There are a lot of people who use that term, and, almost all the time, the one point of the five that they reject is the terrible, horrible, "L". Limited atonement. There is just something about the term that doesn't sound right. How can Christ's atonement be limited? And that is exactly what I said until I began to seriously think about the whole issue. It is my experience that most of those who reject the specific, or limited atonement of Christ, do not *really* believe in the complete sovereignty of God, or the total depravity of man, or the unconditional election of God. Most objections that are lodged against the doctrine are actually objections to one of the preceding points, not against limited atonement itself. The "break" in my thinking came from reading Edwin Palmer's book, *The Five Points of Calvinism*. [Edwin H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980) pp. 41-55.] In doing a radio program on the truth of God's electing grace, I was challenged by a caller in regards to the death of Christ. "Why would Christ die for the whole world if God did not intend to save everyone?" I looked at my co-host, and he looked at me, and I made a mental note to do more study into that particular question. I grabbed Palmer's book as soon as I returned home, and began to read the chapter on the atoning work of Christ.

I became a full "five-pointer" upon reading the following section:

The question that needs a precise answer is this: Did He or didn't He? Did Christ actually make a substitutionary sacrifice for sins or didn't He? If He did, then it was not for all the world, for then all the world would be saved. (Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, p. 47.)

I was faced with a decision. If I maintained a "universal" atonement, that is, if I said that Christ died substitutionarily in the place of every single man and woman in all the world, then I was forced to either say that 1) everyone will be saved, or 2) the death of Christ is insufficient to save without additional works. I knew that I was not willing to believe that Christ's death could not save outside of human actions. So I had to understand that Christ's death was made in behalf of God's elect, and that it does accomplish its intention, it does save those for whom it is made. At this point I realized that I had "limited" the atonement all along. In fact, if you do not believe in the Reformed doctrine of "limited atonement," you believe in a limited atonement anyway! How so? Unless you are a universalist (that is, unless you believe that everyone will be saved), then you believe that the atonement of Christ, if it is made for all men, is limited in its effect. You believe that Christ can die in someone's place and yet that person may still be lost for eternity. You

limit the power and effect of the atonement. I limit the scope of the atonement, while saying that its power and effect is unlimited! One writer expressed it well when he said,

Let there be no misunderstanding at this point. The Arminian limits the atonement as certainly as does the Calvinist. The Calvinist limits the extent of it in that he says it does not apply to all persons...while the Arminian limits the power of it, for he says that in itself it does not actually save anybody. The Calvinist limits it quantitatively, but not qualitatively; the Arminian limits it qualitatively, but not quantitatively. For the Calvinist it is like a narrow bridge that goes all the way across the stream; for the Arminian it is like a great wide bridge that goes only half-way across. As a matter of fact, the Arminian places more severe limitations on the work of Christ than does the Calvinist. (Lorraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1932) p. 153.)

Therefore, we are not talking about presenting some terrible limitation on the work of Christ when we speak of "limited atonement." In fact, we are actually presenting a far greater view of the work of Christ on Calvary when we say that Christ's death actually accomplishes something in reality rather than only in theory. The atonement, we believe, was a real, actual, substitutionary one, not a possible, theoretical one that is dependent for its efficacy upon the actions of man. And, as one who often shares the gospel with people involved in false religious systems, I will say that the biblical doctrine of the atonement of Christ is a powerful truth that is the only message that has real impact in dealing with the

many heretical teachings about Christ that are present in our world today. Jesus Christ died in behalf of those that the Father had, from eternity, decreed to save. There is absolute unity between the Father and the Son in saving God's people. The Father decrees their salvation, the Son dies in their place, and the Spirit sanctifies them and conforms them to the image of Christ. This is the consistent testimony of Scripture.

The Intention of the Atonement

Why did Christ come to die? Did He come simply to make salvation possible, or did He come to actually obtain eternal redemption (Hebrews 9:12)? Let's consider some passages from Scripture in answer to this question.

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost (Luke 19:10).

Here the Lord Jesus Himself speaks of the reason for His coming. He came to seek and to save the lost. Few have a problem with His seeking; many have a problem with the idea that He actually accomplished all of His mission. Jesus, however, made it clear that He came to actually save the lost. He did this by His death.

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners---of whom I am the worst (1 Timothy 1:15).

Paul asserts that the purpose of Christ's coming into the world was to actually save sinners. Nothing in Paul's words leads us to the conclusion that is so popular today--that Christ's death simply makes salvation a possibility rather than a reality. Christ came to save. So, did He? And how did He? Was it not by His death? Most certainly. The atoning death of Christ provides forgiveness of sins for all those for whom it is made. That is why Christ came.

Christ's Intercessory Work

But because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them (Hebrews 7:24-26).

The New Testament closely connects the work of Christ as our High Priest and intercessor with His death upon the cross. In this passage from Hebrews, we are told that the Lord Jesus, since He lives forever, has an unchangeable or permanent priesthood. He is not like the old priests who passed away, but is a perfect priest, because He remains forever. Because of this He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him. Why? Because He always lives to make intercession for them.

Now, before considering the relationship of the death of Christ to His intercession, I wish to emphasize the fact that the Bible says that Christ is able to save men completely. He is not limited simply to a secondary role as the great Assistor who makes it possible for man to save himself. Those who draw near to God through Christ will find full and complete salvation in Him. Furthermore, we must remember that Christ intercedes for those who draw near to God. I feel that it is obvious that Christ is not interceding for those who are not approaching God through Him. Christ's intercession is in behalf of the people of God. We shall see how important this is in a moment.

Upon what ground does Christ intercede before the Father? Does He stand before the Father and ask Him to forget His holiness, forget His justice, and simply pass over the sins of men? Of course not. The Son intercedes before the Father on the basis of His death. Christ's intercession is based upon the fact that He has died as the substitute for God's people, and, since He has borne their sins in His body on the tree (1 Peter 2:24), He can present His offering before the Father in their place, and intercede for them on this basis. The Son does not ask the Father to compromise His holiness, or to simply pass over sin. Christ took care of sin at Calvary. As we read in Hebrews 9:11-12:

When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.

When Christ entered into the Holy of Holies, He did so "by his own blood." When He did this, we are told that He had "obtained eternal redemption." This again is not a theoretical statement, but a statement of fact. Christ did not enter into the Holy of Holies to attempt

to gain redemption for His people! He entered in having already accomplished that. So what is He doing? Is His work of intercession another work alongside His sacrificial death? Is His death ineffective without this "other" work? Christ's intercession is not a second work outside of His death. Rather, Christ is presenting before the Father His perfect and complete sacrifice. He is our High Priest, and the sacrifice He offers in our place is the sacrifice of Himself. He is our Advocate, as John said:

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense---Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1-2. [This passage is often used to deny the specific atonement of Christ; yet, when the parallel passage in John 11:51-52 is consulted, it is clear that John means the "world" to be taken in the same sense that is explained for us in Revelation 5:9-11, where Christ's death purchases for God men "from every tribe and language and people and nation," that is, from all the world.]

Christ's atoning death is clearly connected with His advocacy before the Father. Therefore, we can see the following truths:

1) It is impossible that the Son would not intercede for everyone for whom He died. If Christ dies as their Substitute, how could He not present His sacrifice in their stead before the Father? Can we really believe that Christ would die for someone that He did not intend to save?

2) It is impossible that anyone for whom the Son did not die could receive Christ's intercession. If Christ did not die in behalf of a certain individual, how could Christ intercede for that individual, since He would have no grounds upon which to seek the Father's mercy?

3) It is impossible that anyone for whom the Son intercedes could be lost. Can we imagine the Son pleading before the Father, presenting His perfect atonement in behalf of an individual that He wishes to save, and the Father rejecting the Son's intercession? The Father always hears the Son (John 11:42). Would He not hear the Son's pleas in behalf of all that the Son desires to save? Furthermore, if we believe that Christ can intercede for someone that the Father will not save, then we must believe either 1) that there is dissension in the Godhead, the Father desiring one thing, the Son another, or 2) that the Father is incapable of doing what the Son desires Him to do. Both positions are utterly impossible.

That Christ does not act as High Priest for all men is clearly seen in His "High Priestly Prayer" in John 17. The Lord clearly distinguishes between the "world" and those who are His throughout the prayer, and verse 9 makes our point very strongly:

I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.

When Christ prays to the Father, He does not pray for the "world" but for those that have been given to Him by the Father (John 6:37).

For Whom Did Christ Die?

There are a number of Scriptures that teach us that the scope of Christ's death was limited to the elect. Here are a few of them:

Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28).

The "many" for whom Christ died are the elect of God, just as Isaiah had said long before,

By his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. (Isaiah 53:11)

The Lord Jesus made it clear that His death was for His people when He spoke of the Shepherd and the sheep:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep....just as the Father knows me and I know the Father---and I lay down my life for the sheep (John 10:11, 15).

The good Shepherd lays down His life in behalf of the sheep. Are all men the sheep of Christ? Certainly not, for most men do not know Christ, and Christ says that His sheep know Him (John 10:14). Further, Jesus specifically told the Jews who did not believe in Him, "but you do not believe because you are not my sheep" (John 10:26). Note that in contrast with the idea that we believe and therefore make ourselves Christ's sheep, Jesus says that they do not believe because they are not His sheep! Whether one is of Christ's sheep is the Father's decision (John 6:37, 8:47), not the sheep's!

...just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God....husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:2, 25-27).

Christ gave Himself in behalf of His Church, His Body, and that for the purpose of cleansing her and making her holy. If this was His intention for the Church, why would He give Himself for those who are not of the Church? Would He not wish to make these "others" holy as well? Yet, if Christ died for all men, there are many, many who will remain impure for all eternity. Was Christ's death insufficient to cleanse them? Certainly not. Did He have a different goal in mind in dying for them? [I am not here denying that the death of Christ had effects for all men, indeed, for all of creation. I believe that His death is indeed part of the "summing up of all things" in Christ. But, we are speaking

here solely with the salvific effect of the substitutionary atonement of Christ. One might say that Christ's death has an effect upon those for whom it was not intended as an atoning sacrifice.] No, His sacrificial death in behalf of His Church results in her purification, and this is what He intended for all for whom He died.

He who did not spare His own Son, but gave him up for us all---how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring a charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died---more than that, who was raised to life---is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us (Romans 8:32-34).

The Father gave the Son in our place. Who is the "our" of this passage? The text says that it is "those whom God has chosen," that is, the elect of God. Again, the intercessory work of Christ at the right hand of the Father is presented in perfect harmony with the death of Christ---those for whom Christ died are those for whom He intercedes. And, as this passage shows, if Christ intercedes for someone, who can possibly bring a charge against that person and hope to see them condemned? So we see what we have seen before: Christ dies in someone's place, He intercedes for them, and they are infallibly saved. Christ's work is complete and perfect. He is the powerful Savior, and He never fails to accomplish His purpose.

Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13).

Are all the friends of Christ? Do all own His name? Do all bow before Him and accept Him as Lord? Do all do His commandments (John 15:14)? Then not all are His friends.

While we wait for the blessed hope---the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good (Titus 2:13-14).

Both the substitutionary element of the cross (gave himself for us) and the purpose thereof (to redeem us...to purify) are forcefully presented to Titus. If it was the purpose of Christ to redeem and purify those for whom He died, can this possibly not take place?

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

Christ will save His people from their sins. I ask what Edwin Palmer asked me before: Well, did He? Did He save His people, or did He not?

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20).

This is the common confession of every true believer in Christ. We died with Him, our Substitute, the one who loved us and gave Himself in our behalf.

We have seen, then, that the Word teaches that Christ died for many, for His sheep, for the Church, for the elect of God, for His friends, for a people zealous for good works, for His people, for each and every Christian.

Perfected and Sanctified

One could quite obviously fill entire volumes with a study of the atonement of Christ. [The reader is strongly encouraged to make the effort to read completely a work that stands as a classic in the field: John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* from *Banner of Truth*, for a full discussion of the issues surrounding the atonement of Christ.] It is not our purpose to do so here. Instead, we shall close our brief survey of Scripture with these words from Hebrews 10:10-14:

And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifice, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

While we have seen many logical reasons for believing in limited atonement, and we have seen many references to Christ's death in behalf of His people, this one passage, above all others, to me, makes the doctrine a must. Listen closely to what we are told. First, what is the effect of the one time sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ? What does verse 10 tell us? "We have been made holy," or, another translation would be, "We have been sanctified." The Greek language uses the perfect tense here, indicating a past, and completed, action. The death of Christ actually makes us holy. Do we believe this? Did the death of Christ actually sanctify those for whom it was made? Or did it simply make it possible for them to become holy? Again, these are questions that cannot be easily dismissed. The writer goes on to describe how this priest, Jesus, sat down at the right hand of God, unlike the old priests who had to keep performing sacrifices over and over and over again. His work, on the contrary, is perfect and complete. He can rest, for by His one sacrifice He has made perfect those who are experiencing the sanctifying work of the Spirit in their lives. He made them perfect, complete. The term refers to a completion, a finishing. Again, do we believe that Christ's death does this? And, if we see the plain teaching of Scripture, are we willing to alter our beliefs, and our methods of proclaiming the gospel, to fit the truth?

What of Faith?

One common belief needs to be addressed in passing. Many who believe in a "universal" or non-specific atonement, assert that while Christ died for all, His atonement is only effective for those who believe. We shall discuss the fact that faith itself is the gift of God, given only to the elect of God, in the next chapter. But for now, we defer to the great Puritan writer, John Owen, in answering this question:

To which I may add this dilemma to our Universalists:---God imposed his wrath due unto, and Christ underwent the pains of hell for, either all the sins of all men, or all the sins of some men, or some sins of all men. If the last, some sins of all men, then have all men some sins to answer for, and so shall no man be saved; for if God enter into judgment with us, though it were with all mankind for one sin, no flesh should be justified in his sight: "If the LORD should mark iniquities, who should stand?" Ps. cxxx. 3....If the second, that is it which we affirm, that Christ in their stead and room suffered for all the sins of all the elect in the world. If the first, why, then are not all freed from the punishment of all their sins? You will say, "Because of their unbelief; they will not believe." But this unbelief, is it a sin, or not? If not, why should they be punished for it? If it be, then Christ underwent the punishment due to it, or not. If so, then why must that hinder them more than their other sins for which he died from partaking of the fruit of his death? If he did not, then he did not die for all their sins. Let them choose which part they will. (John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1985) pp. 61-62.)

Conclusion

Some object to the doctrine of limited atonement on very pragmatic grounds. "The doctrine destroys evangelism, because you cannot tell people that Christ died for them, because you don't know!" Yet, we ask, is there an advantage in presenting to men an atonement that is theoretical, a Savior whose work is incomplete, and a gospel that is but a possibility? What kind of proclamation will God honor with His Spirit: one that is tailored to seek "success," or one that is bound to the truth of the Word of God? When the Apostles preached the Gospel, they did not say, "Christ died for all men everywhere, and it is up to you to make His work effective." They taught that Christ died for sinners, and that it was the duty of every man to repent and believe. They knew that only God's grace could bring about repentance and faith in the human heart. And far from that being a *hindrance* to their evangelistic work, it was the power behind it! They proclaimed a *powerful* Savior, whose work is all sufficient, and who saves men totally and completely! They knew that God was about bringing men to Himself, and, since He is the sovereign of the universe, there is no power on earth that will stay His hand! Now there is a solid basis for evangelism! And what could be more of a comfort to the heart that is racked with guilt than to know that Christ has died for sinners, and that His work is not just theoretical, but is real?

The Church needs to challenge the world again with the daring proclamation of a gospel that is offensive---offensive because it speaks of God saving those whom He will, offensive because it proclaims a sovereign Savior who redeems His people.

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