

## ***IF GOD CAN SAVE EVERYBODY BUT CHOOSES NOT TO, ISN'T GOD UNLOVING?***

### ***REFLECTIONS ON THE LOVE OF GOD***

#### ***1. God loves all men.***

The most fundamental way that God's love is evidenced is in His providential care. Jesus said that God "makes His sun to rise on the evil and the good" (Matt. 5:45) and then uses this as the reason for us to love our enemies. If God did not love His enemies it would be meaningless as an analogy in exhorting us to do so. Elsewhere the Bible says that God "did good and from heaven gave you rains-and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17). Throughout creation there are riches of divine kindness which reflect the love of God to all men (Psalm 145:9).

But the Bible also directly says that God loves the world at large.

John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life."

Although some have argued that the world here is referring to the elect, such an interpretation will not do. All the evidence of the usage of the word "world" in John's Gospel is against the suggestion.

"When we read John's Gospel we discover that the "world" is viewed fundamentally neither as the elect nor non-elect but as a collective organism: sinful, estranged, alienated from God, abiding under His wrath and curse" (Sam Storms). "Its primary connotation is ethical, and ***the point of its employment [in Jn. 3:16] is not to suggest that the world is so big that it takes a great deal of love to embrace it all, but that the world is so bad that it takes a great kind of love to love it at all, and much more to love it as God has loved it when He gave His son for it.***" In other words, John 3:16 is intended to arouse in our hearts "a wondering sense of the marvel and the mystery of the love of God for the sinful world — conceived, here, not quantitatively but qualitatively as, in its very distinguishing characteristic, sinful" (Warfield, 516).

Furthermore, to argue that God does not love unbelievers is to argue against common sense. What other choice did God have but to love unbelievers, for even the elect were at one time unbelievers who were part of the world (cf. Jn. 15:19). Paul stressed that "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: *While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*" (Rom. 5:8; cf. Deut. 7:6-8).

God does not love men *because* Christ died for them, Christ died for them *because* God loved them. The death of Christ was for sinners when they were the world.

"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*" (Gal. 2:20).

"This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:9-10).

"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph. 5:1-2).

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25).

"and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood," (Rev. 1:5)

"We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." (1 Jn. 3:16)

**2. Nevertheless, although God loves all men, He does not love all men in the same way. One aspect of God's love is clearly partial toward the elect for He bestows upon them benefits that He does not give to all.**

D.A. Carson in *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* writes that God has a particular, effective, selecting love toward his elect.

"The elect may be the entire nation of Israel or the church as a body or individuals. **In each case, God sets his affection on his chosen ones in a way in which he does not set his affection on others.** The people of Israel are told, "The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. **But it was because the LORD loved you** and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (Deut. 7:7-8; cf. 4:37). Again: "To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the **LORD set his affection on your forefathers and loved them**, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today" (Deut. 10:14-15).

**The striking thing about these passages is that when Israel is contrasted with the universe or with other nations, the distinguishing feature has nothing of personal or national merit; it is nothing other than the love of God. In the very nature of the case, then, God's love is directed toward Israel in these passages in a way in which it is not directed toward other nations.**

Similarly in the New Testament: Christ "loved the church" (Eph. 5:25). Repeatedly the New Testament texts tell us that the love of God or the love of Christ is directed toward those who constitute the church. . ." (18, 19)

Sam Storms says, "*Like grace, the saving love of God is undeserved.* This is but to say that the love of God for sinners, which issues in their salvation, finds no obstacle in their sin. God loves us while we were yet sinners precisely in order that the glory of His love might be supremely magnified. It was when we were still "powerless" that "Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6).

***Therefore, whenever we talk about the love of God we must be careful to keep the distinctions within God's love clear, yet not compartmentalize them.*** We must not talk about God's love as if each aspect is hermetically sealed off from the other, nor should we make no distinctions at all. In order to understand even remotely how God can love mankind and not save all, these things need to be kept in mind.

### **WHY DOESN'T GOD SAVE EVERYONE?**

***There is nothing except for God's own will and nature that stops him from saving everyone. In other words, what stops God from saving everybody is, in fact, ultimately his own sovereign will NOT to do so.***

"Why wouldn't God want to save everyone if it is within His power to do so?"

What we know of God is revealed in the context of a sinful world, a world that has no love or desire for God or Christ and is deserving of punishment. In this context we need to realize that God may order something to happen in His sovereign plan that He has forbidden elsewhere in Scripture (see notes on 1/22/12). That is to say, God's sovereign will may have ordained that something occur to accomplish His purposes though in a different context He has forbidden it. The death of Christ is an example. The death of Christ was no accident. It was what God had predetermined to occur (Acts 4:24-28). Even so, just because God ordained it to happen does not mean that it is morally okay to kill the Messiah. Murder is always contrary to God's will.

In this example, God willed that the sin of man be allowed to run its course (contrary to His moral will which abhors sin and forbids murder) in order that the death of the Son might bring salvation to a dying world. In this sense you could speak of God as having "two wills."

I believe the same principles apply when we think about election in relationship to the love of God. God allows men to follow the desires of their hearts though their end is judgment and uses even this for His glory. Nevertheless, in another sense, it is not His will that sinners perish.

### **Romans 9**

Romans chapter 9 is a major section of Scripture where Paul specifically addresses men's concerns over the morality of God's sovereign choices.

#### **Romans 9:10-13**

10 And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac;

11 for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls,

12 it was said to her, "THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER."

13 Just as it is written, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED."

The phrase "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated" is a Jewish way of expressing absolute preference of one over the other. It should be noted that this passage says nothing of God's love for Esau as described in "1" above. As human beings both Esau and Jacob were equal recipients of God's love expressed in His providential care. Furthermore, both were loved as humanity estranged from God (Jn. 3:16); however, only Jacob is the recipient of God's particular, selecting love (the second aspect of God's love described above).

But what is important to see is WHY God chose one over the other. It was "in order that the purpose of God according to election might stand." In other words, Jacob (the elect) was chosen over Esau in order to fulfill God's predetermined plan. In a sinful world distinctions are made in order to bring God's purposes to pass.

***Romans 9:14-17***

14 What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!

Jacob did nothing to deserve being chosen; he was chosen before he was born or had done anything good or bad. Esau had done nothing that made him any worse than Jacob. The only difference was that Jacob was shown mercy and Esau was not. To give mercy to one when both deserve judgment is not unjust.

Verses 15 and 16 state the principle being described; God's favor is not received because of man's desire or ability to receive it, but because God has mercy on whomever He wants.

15 For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION."

16 So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.

Finding God's favor is not based on "man who wills" (that is, it is not the result of man's will or volition) or "man who runs" (it is not gained by man's active exertion or his efforts to obtain it) but is based solely on the will of God.

17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH."

The "for" in verse 17 means that further explanation will now be offered.

Pharaoh, like Jacob, is an example of selective mercy; but the story of Pharaoh describes a situation where mercy wasn't given.

Pharaoh was not a worse person than people who had received mercy, but for wise and benevolent reasons God chose to withhold mercy from him. God did not make Pharaoh wicked, but He did nothing

to make him good. God placed such a man in power in order to display His power in the miraculous deliverance of Israel from the Egyptians. *By means of the many plagues He visited upon the Egyptians and the defeat of the Egyptian armies in the Red Sea, His name spread to all the earth (Exo. 15:13-16). In this case God's plan foreordained that God would be glorified when mercy was not given.*

The reasons for giving mercy or withholding mercy are alike in a significant way – in both resulted in God's purposes coming to pass.

### **Romans 9:18**

18 "So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires."

Verse 18 gives the same conclusion as verse 16. Even in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart we see that nothing is dependent upon man.

People often have difficulty when it says that GOD hardens someone's heart, but it should be remembered that God hardens hearts in different ways. God *could have* hardened Pharaoh's heart in the same way that He hardened hearts of people in Romans 1:18ff. where He simply allowed men to have what they wanted and suffer the resultant degradation. Or He could have allowed Satan to tempt Pharaoh as he did Job. In any case the hardening can be attributed either to secondary sources or to God since He is ultimately in control of everything (see notes on 1/22/12, especially II Sam 24). Whatever the case, it should be remembered that men are not lost because they are hardened, they are hardened because they are lost (Fruchtenbaum).

So, "Why would God NOT want to save everyone if it is within His power to do so?"

Because in a sinful world God's sovereign purposes are best accomplished by allowing some sinners to rebel and sin run its course and having mercy on others.

### **MISCELLANEOUS THINGS TO THINK ABOUT**

1. D.A. Carson in *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* discusses the relationship of God's love and wrath (Isa 13:4. 6. 9; Ezek. 5:11-17, etc.). Wrath, unlike love, is *not* one of the intrinsic attributes of God. God is always love whereas wrath is the response of God when His holiness is affronted. In other words, where there is no sin, there is no wrath; but there is always love.

One way that people try to reconcile the wrath and the love of God is by saying that "God hates sin but loves the sinner." This, however, is completely unbiblical. In the first 50 Psalms God says in different ways that He hates the sinner more than 14 times (Ps. 5:5; 7:1; etc). John 3:36 says, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but *the wrath of God abides on him.*"

Carson says that the problem we have is that we normally think of love and wrath as being mutually exclusive. Love drives wrath away, and wrath love. But this is not true of God. God's wrath is not an emotional, uncontrolled outburst of rage; it is a reasonable response when His holiness is offended.

There is nothing contradictory about God showing wrath and love toward the same person at the same time. All we need to do is look at the cross. God's wrath toward sinners is poured out on Christ because His love is bent on saving them. It must be remembered that in John 3:16 it tells us that *God sent* the Son. That is love. God MUST punish sin to be just; yet He provides the sacrifice to appease His own wrath, because He is love.

2. Theologians often speak about "limited atonement," however, the meaning of these terms are greatly debated. Some say that limited atonement means that Christ died only for the elect in the sense that the extent of Christ's atonement is limited to them. However, others believe that it is better to call limited atonement "limited redemption" since the extent of Christ's death was sufficient for all men (I Jn. 2:2; I Tim. 2:4-6; II Pet 2:1), though it is only applied to the redeemed. I believe the second view fits better with what is said in Scripture. That is, the "limitation" of the atonement isn't in that it can be measured in how far it reaches; rather it is limited in who benefits from it.

Assuming that election is true, Christ's atonement must be limited since only the elect are the ones that can benefit from it. Nevertheless, His sacrifice is insufficiently powerful to cover the sins of all men.

By way of practical application this means that we can proclaim that God loves the world and Christ's death is sufficient for all. We can also agree that Scripture portrays God as inviting, commanding, and calling all men to believe. Yet we realize that none will respond or benefit from the salvation accomplished in Christ unless God intervenes and opens their eyes.

3. A word needs to be said about Romans 9:19-24.

Romans 9:19 You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?"

The objection that God is unjust is only more evidence of the gross sinfulness of man in his irreverence of God. "It supposes that He is under obligation to extend His grace to all. Whereas He is under obligation to none. All are sinners, and have forfeited every claim to His mercy, it is therefore, the prerogative of God to spare one and not the other" (Hodge, 318). It is God's right to do what He wants with what is His, just as a potter has the sovereign right over the clay. Is there anything more absurd than the clay complaining about its shape to its Creator? (cf. Isa. 29:16; Jer. 18:6)

In the verses that follow, Paul builds upon the imagery of the potter to reinforce his point in verse 20.

9:22 What if God, although wishing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?

9:23 And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory,

9:24 even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.

In verses 22-24 humanity is divided into two categories: vessels of wrath and vessels of mercy. The first group is prepared for destruction; the second is prepared for mercy. Although God desires to demonstrate His wrath and make His power known by judging those who are in rebellion against Him (cf.

Ro. 2:5), He endured them with patience (9:22) in order that He might make His glory known to us (vessels of mercy – 9:23). In the previous illustration (9:17) God endured the evil heart of Pharaoh in order to show mercy to those whom He had chosen.

God's ultimate purpose for the believer's life is "to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory." "The word "prepared" underlines that this is all of mercy. We did not make ourselves fit to know God's glory. God did. And He did it out of "the same lump" of clay that others came from who do not see or love the glory of God (Romans 9:21) . . . God's purpose is not to be known as glorious and then exchanged for images (Ro. 1:18 ff.). His purpose is to be known as glorious and treasured as glorious." (sermon by John Piper, Ro 9:23-24 , February 23, 2003 - John Piper. © Desiring God. Website: [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org)).

It is important to observe that it doesn't specifically say that God created evil men in order to destroy them. Rather, Paul only says that evil men are prepared by God for destruction. In other words, Paul avoids making God the Creator of sinful men. "When God passed over Esau and chose Jacob before they were born, there was no decree that an innocent Esau would be judged. Rather what God decreed was to pass Esau by, to withhold his electing love, and to give him up to wickedness. And as Esau acted in wickedness, he was accountable for that wickedness and deserved the indignation and judgment of God." (sermon by John Piper, Ro 9:6-12 , December 8, 2002 - John Piper. © Desiring God. Website: [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org)). In the same way, God did not make Pharaoh evil, but as a punishment for his sin did not extend mercy which brought more of his evil nature out and proved that he was fit to be judged (Ro. 9:17; 2:5). That is all that can be done with people who are not given mercy.

It is clear that those prepared for mercy have been predestined to receive mercy in order to display the riches of God's grace. Those prepared for wrath are prepared to receive what they justly deserve (destruction). However, for logical consistency it must be admitted that if God has predestined some but not all to election, it follows that some are *not* predestined to election. Since all salvation is based upon the eternal election of God and not all men are elect from eternity, does that not mean that from eternity there are non-elect who most certainly will not be saved? Has not God chosen from eternity not to elect some people? If so, then we have an eternal choice of non-election. The inference is clear and necessary, yet some shrink from drawing it.

The point that Paul is making is that no man can claim that God is unjust, for everyone is deserving of judgment. Likewise, no one can claim that they deserve grace, for they do not. When accusations are made that the sovereignty of God nullifies human responsibility, Paul responds offensively by stating that God has the right to do what he wants. In other words, instead of going on the defensive, he shows that the standard by which God must be judged is God Himself! He is the Potter. He has the right to judge sinful men or He has the right to withhold judgment and even use their sin to make known His glory to us. Even though Paul doesn't reason as we may think he logically should, he can accomplish the same purpose by showing that God is fair.

Note: The punishment of the wicked is not an arbitrary act of God imposed upon men for no other reason than to make them miserable, it is a response of a holy God against sin and is the means of

showing His displeasure of it (Hodge, 319). God does not enjoy the suffering of the wicked for He is by nature merciful and endures the wicked with longsuffering (9:22). At the same time, if He uses the wicked to display His glory and holy anger toward sin as He did with Pharaoh, He is free to do so.

“God chose not to choose all because he wanted to put on eternal display both the justice of his wrath and the glory of his mercy. Had he chosen none, his mercy would not have been seen. Had he chosen all, his wrath would not have been seen. In choosing some, but not all, both are seen, and therein is God most greatly glorified (and only in the case of the latter are we truly satisfied).” (Sam Storms, Divine Election: How and Why does God Choose? - Nov 6, 2006; Series: Divine Election)

### **Conclusion:**

When we talk about the love of God we see that it is used in the Bible in different ways. We have seen how it is used of God’s care over creation, for humanity as a whole (both the saved and the unsaved), and of the specific love of the elect. We must be careful not to oversimplify or compartmentalize the different aspects of God’s love. It is the same love of God displayed in different ways.

Secondly, it is not mandatory to conclude that God desires that the wicked perish BECAUSE He has mercy on some. As John Piper says, “It is not psychologically or biblically adequate to say God wills the perdition of his enemies. ‘He wills all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth’ (1 Tim. 2:4).’ ‘I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God; so turn, and live’ (Ezek. 18:32). ‘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.’ (2 Peter 3:9) ***The historic distinction between God's will of command and will of decree is not a philosophic creation to justify determinism in the face of opposing evidence. It is the necessary outgrowth of sustained exegetic labor that tries to take all Scripture seriously.***” (<http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/articles/how-does-a-sovereign-god-love>)

It is our tendency to think of our love for others and then make analogies to God, but such comparisons are always deceptive. We are sinners looking at sinners, lacking wisdom, holiness, and a pure understanding of justice. To accuse God of being unloving because He doesn’t do what we consider as loving is suggesting that our love for sinners is greater than His, a thought which Romans 5:7-8 points out is blatantly wrong.

The bottom line is that God is God. I am but a man. The Potter has absolute rights over the clay. Mine is to bow before his unimpeachable character and believe that the Judge of all the earth has ever and will always do right.