

# Universal Salvation

From the Lenten sermon series: The Servant of the Lord

*Text: Isaiah 49:6; John 12:32*

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*Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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*I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to earth's fatherest bounds. Isaiah 49:6*

*... and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. John 12:32*

A misprint of the text from John in the bulletin gives me a beautiful opportunity to make the point of the message. Jesus does not say, as printed, "I will draw all *my* people to myself;" rather, he says, "I will draw *all* people to myself." I changed the word "men" in the original to "people" in order to use inclusive language, but the point is Jesus is talking about *all*, not "all *my*."

"All my" is what the Church has traditionally taught and it has allowed Christian people to understand the Gospel in an exclusivistic sense - us and no more. The text, however, is not exclusive, but inclusive - Jesus says, according to the witness of the fourth Gospel, "I will draw all to myself."

What are we to do with such a claim? The Church has for years been saying that Jesus will draw his own people, and that the others are out of luck. The Church in its traditional and in its orthodox understanding of the Christian faith, has claimed that there are some who are saved and there are some who are lost. And so, the Church in its understanding, its self-understanding, has been very comfortable with the printed mistake in our bulletin. We've always felt rather cozy about that, but that is not really what Jesus said. He said, "I will draw all people to myself."

Now, if he meant every man and woman, young person and child in the whole world, then he would be speaking about a universal salvation. That is not what the Church has traditionally taught, but that's what that text would seem to point toward. And that's not the only text that seems to point in that direction. I want to talk to you about that issue, not because I have the mystery solved, not because

you have to believe it the way I am believing it in my own continual search for understanding, but simply because I want to open up a facet of the Gospel which is so amazing and wonderful that maybe it's better than we ever dreamed. Wouldn't it really be wonderful if it were true, if we would finally come to discover in the presence of God that when Jesus died and rose again, he died and rose again not for some, but for all? Wouldn't that be great? You wouldn't be disappointed, would you? I mean, you wouldn't say, "Don't know why I worked so hard at it," even though all the time you profess it is all of grace and not of works.

Let's think about it, because it's important for us, in any case, to understand our mission to bring the story to the nations. There is a very strong biblical strain that tends toward universal salvation. There is another whole stream, obviously, that seems to refute it; otherwise the orthodox Church would not have refuted it all these years. But, what we've not done in the orthodox and traditional churches – and I'm talking about the Augustinian stream of the Roman Catholic Church, and the Reformation, Luther, Calvin, the Reformed tradition – what we've not done in those traditions is to be honest with the universalistic text, such as our text for this message. I want you to see this stream; I want you to think about this, raising the question whether or not the grace of God is not broader and the love of God not deeper, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ more wonderful and amazing than we have ever yet dreamed of.

It is a real question which the Church must think about and wrestle with because, historically, we have stumbled over this problem. We have said in the Augustinian and the Calvinistic streams of the Church that salvation is of God. Not that He sets it all out there and you can take it or leave it. We've talked about His electing grace before the foundations of the world. We've talked about being chosen in Christ in eternity. And we have talked about the fact that it is all God's initiative, that what we believe, if we respond, is because, first of all, we have been given the gift of faith.

But then, we have also had to deal with the mystery that someone sitting right next to us, hearing the same message, doesn't respond and doesn't believe. Now, how do you explain that? Well, the good old Calvinists, the strong Augustinians say, Election and Reprobation – God chose that one and abandoned that one (didn't choose that one or reprobated that one or condemned that one, depending on how strong one's stomach is). And so, the mystery was read back into God. And there was nothing that you could say beyond the fact that God chose one and didn't choose another; God chose one, reprobated another. Now, you could say, well, the ones that were chosen didn't deserve to be chosen, and the ones that were lost deserved to be lost. But if I am chosen and I believe and I have the gift of faith and I know that I'm unworthy and it's all of God's gift and my neighbor next to me really isn't so different from me, but doesn't believe, I don't feel too comfortable with the fact that I got chosen and obviously he didn't when I'm no better than he. And just to say that it's a mystery, he lost, I'm saved, doesn't sit real comfortably with me. But that's the traditional answer.

Now, there were those that reacted against that strong Calvinist tradition. They are called Arminians. They are named after Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) who was a professor at Leiden in The Netherlands. Arminius didn't really like that kind of hard, Calvinistic election/reprobation idea, and so he suggested that God foresees how one will respond and then elects. Finally, however, when you boil it down, He puts the choice on the person so that God sets it out and human beings decide if they will come in or not.

Calvinists say, "No." Something this big and this important is not a matter of human will. Human will is dead. We're all dead. It can't be the human choice. Billy Graham preaches the Gospel legitimately - believe and respond and be saved. But the Calvinist knows when he says, "If you have faith, you'll be saved," that one won't have faith until God gives faith and if God gives faith, that puts the problem back with God.

So, we struggle with this matter, some putting the stress here, some there, but the Church never really comes clean and feels very comfortable about it. That is why I invite you to consider the possibility, not a dogmatic, absolute assertion, but the possibility that God's love is broader and His grace is more amazing, and the Gospel is more exciting than anything we have yet dreamed of.

Let's do some biblical study. Abraham was called and God said, "I'll be your God and a God to your seed after you and in you all nations of the earth will be blessed." A universal intent was already there in that particular choice. And we know that God chose Abraham not to the exclusion of the rest of the people, but God chose Abraham and Israel on behalf of the world. God chose them, not because He was satisfied with only a few and the rest were just out of luck, but He called a few, to deal with a few, to reveal Himself to a few, to shower His grace on some, in order that they could be light and bring light to the rest.

In Isaiah, in the servant passages that we have been studying, we also find that same kind of universal tendency breaking out. The Servant of the Lord in the forty-ninth chapter that we read, which is the second of the servant songs, understands himself to be chosen by God, elected by God, and he says, "He made my tongue his sharp sword." His was a ministry of the word. As the poem closes, the servant recognizes that he has not only the commission he understood, first of all, to gather the tribes of Jacob, but he realizes that God has extended his mission. We read, "I will make you a light to the nations, to be my salvation to earth's farthest bounds." The poem opens, "Listen to me, you coasts and islands, pay heed to me you people far away." Now, that's not insignificant, because this is Israel, Israel thinking of itself as having a special insight into the knowledge of the true God, and it did! But it is beginning to see, at least in the voice of Isaiah, that there is a mission beyond Jacob, that there is a mission to bring salvation to earth's farthest bounds.

The servant, of course, was a model for Jesus' ministry, and we've always understood that with the coming of Jesus, the salvation that God worked in Israel

was broadened out and became a universal salvation spreading to all nations. After the resurrection, Jesus gave the great commission, charging the Disciples to go and preach the gospel to all nations. Thus, there was that kind of universal tendency, that breaking out of the narrow bounds of Israel into the broader stream.

But, you say to me, well, that's all true. We've always believed that and that's why we send missionaries, but that doesn't say that every single man, woman, child in the whole earth comes to salvation. And you're right.

But, let's go to the Gospel of John. I begin a little before my text, in the tenth chapter of John. I want you to see that John is building up to the point at which he will present the saviour of the world. Remember chapter ten, the beautiful story, the Parable of Jesus, the Good Shepherd? As he presents himself as the Good Shepherd, he says,

“I know my own sheep and my sheep know me. My father knows me, and I know the father, and I lay down my life for the sheep. But there are other sheep of mine not belonging to this fold whom I must bring in. And they, too, will listen to my voice. There will be one flock and one Shepherd.”

You say, right, that's why we do evangelism because we quote that word of Jesus, “Other sheep have I.” But, now, hear it in these terms. Jesus talking in the context of Israel saying, “I am the Good Shepherd, and I have other sheep and they will hear my voice and there will be one shepherd and one fold.”

Then in the eleventh chapter we have the raising of Lazarus and you know what a stir that caused. John used that at this point in the Gospel as the supreme sign - Jesus, the Giver of Life. It caused quite a stir. And the Pharisees got worried. After the raising of Lazarus, they called a caucus. They were disturbed because they could see the popular impact of this miracle. They were worried. Their leader, the old, cynical politician, Caiphus, the High Priest, the very man in all the world who should have been concerned for the salvation of the world, said, “Use your heads. You don't know anything at all.” And then, with his bitter cynicism, he said, “It is more to your interest that one man should die for the people than the whole nation should be destroyed.” Caiphus had the solution. Jesus making waves - rub him out. But then, John, our Evangelist, sneaks in behind Caiphus and writes something on the blackboard. He says, “He did not say this of his own accord, but as the High Priest in office that year he was prophesying ...” Cynical, old Caiphus. God had the last laugh. Caiphus, you didn't understand it, but you were speaking the truth. In truth, one would die for the nation, but now get this. Jesus would die for the nation, but “would die not for the nation alone, but to gather together the scattered children of God.”

Then Jesus came riding into Jerusalem and the religious leadership was really nervous and at the end of the Palm Sunday account we hear the Pharisees again saying, “You see, we can do no good at all. The whole world's going after him!”

The next verse we have Phillip coming up and tapping Jesus on the shoulder and saying, “Jesus, there are some Greeks here at the Festival and they want to see you.” We never read anything more about the Greeks; we don’t know if they ever saw Jesus or not, but John used that little incident as the trigger, because as soon as Phillip said to Jesus, “There are some Greeks here that want to see you,” Jesus said, “Now is the hour.” Jesus said, “This is it!” Jesus knew that he was approaching the climactic moment. The Greeks who sought him were token representatives of the nations that would come. Throughout the Gospel of John you will find Jesus saying, “Not yet. My hour is not yet. Hold on.” Suddenly, something as insignificant as a party of Greeks at festival wanting to see him, and he says, “This is it! This is the Hour.” Then he begins to speak about how the grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die if it were to bear fruit, and he says, “Now is my soul in turmoil. What should I say, ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ But for this hour came I forth. Father, glorify Your name.”

The Gethsemane experience, which John doesn’t record, he relates in this way. Here is the struggle of Jesus, the shrinking from the darkness that was now looming largely for him, knowing that he would pass through all of the depths of hell, that somehow or other all of the darkness and all of the sin and all of the evil of the world would be absorbed into his own person and he said, “What do I say? ‘Get me off the hook?’ No, this is why I came. Glorify Your name.”

Then he went on to say, “And I if I be lifted up, will draw all to myself.” There you have Jesus’ own self-understanding as he stood on the threshold of the cross. And that still doesn’t demonstrate the fact that every man and woman ever born will sometime or other, somehow or other, come into the light of the presence of the grace of God, but it does say that there is a universal stream in the scripture that in the beautiful words of Isaiah sees salvation as spread to earth’s farthest bounds.

Without answering the myriad questions that must come to mind as we begin to “hear” the universal scope of the salvation of our God accomplished through Jesus, The Servant of the Lord, let me begin to address at least some of the questions that must come to mind.

First: *If God’s grace finally triumphs in the case of the whole human family, doesn’t that make light of human rebellion and sin?* Certainly there is a powerful and destructive entanglement of evil with human affairs, personal and corporate.

Doesn’t it matter that there are persons and syndicates of persons involved in drug trafficking that makes them millions of dollars and threatens to destroy the fabric of society and bring ruin and tragedy to countless lives?

Doesn’t it matter if Noriega pays off his military officers and thus stands solidly entrenched in power even though it would seem that he has profited from illegal trafficking in drugs and guns?

Is it a matter of indifference to the God of heaven and earth that there exists terrible suffering, persecution, oppression in the world? Will victim and victimizer be welcomed alike into the Kingdom?

An important and obvious question, and the answer is unequivocal. Certainly it matters. Certainly God cares. The whole Scripture cries out for justice, for righteousness. The whole Scripture testifies to God's siding with the oppressed against oppressor, the weak against the strong. Where, then, will evil be overcome? Where, then, will all the horror and hurt of the human story be removed?

The answer is the cross.

Why did Jesus shrink from it?

*"What shall I say, 'Father, save me from this hour?' But for this hour came I forth. Father, glorify your name!"*

I have no gift of description, no capacity for understanding that could possibly bring to expression the horror of the hell that Jesus endured on the cross as he absorbed like a sponge the sin of the world.

You ask further: Do we get off scot-free?

I answer, yes and no.

Yes. Jesus took the rap for you and me. God made him to be sin for us ... that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. He bore our sins in his body on the tree ... There is now therefore no condemnation ...

No, if you mean can I raise hell all my life and waltz blithely into heaven. This is where I increasingly see the necessity of a serious encounter with God at our death.

As C. S. Lewis writes,

Our souls demand purgatory, don't they? Would it not break the heart if God said to us, "It is true, my son, that your breath smells and your eyes drip with mud and slime, but we are charitable here and no one will upbraid you with these things, nor draw away from you. Enter into the joy."? Should we not reply, "With submission, Sir, and if there is no objection, I'd *rather* be cleaned first." "It may hurt, you know," "Even so, Sir." (*Letter to Malcomb*)

Judgment is real. Nobody gets away with anything. God is not mocked. Either now or at my death, I will see, I will know, I will recognize, I will own who I am, what I have done. And sooner or later I will see and comprehend and be

overwhelmed by what Jesus has done for me, what the grace of God has accomplished on my behalf.

*Every knee will bow. Every tongue will confess.*

And then I will sing,

O, to grace how great a debtor ...  
love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.

One further question: *Why the urgent call to discipleship, the call to follow Jesus, to take up the cross, to die to self and bear fruit?*

Why not just relax and let the process develop? Nobody will finally burn anyway.

The answer: We share the good news not so that persons will not be damned eternally; rather, we share good news so persons will not be damned as they live in the hell of their guilt and fear and entanglement in evil.

Further: *How can we be still when the news is so good?* How can we remain silent before the amazement of God's grace? How can we be blasé in the presence of such love?

We've not done the job very well in the Church. The news we've shared has not been all that good. We've been smug and self-righteous ... Think of the Sunday School chorus,

One door and only one  
and yet the sides are true,  
I'm on the inside,  
on which side are you?

We've drawn a line. We've been certain we were on the right side. We've invited others to come over and join us and be like us. Our message to the world has been a moralizing message filled with oughts and shoulds - the tyranny of the ought has wiped out the sound of good news. Our message has been characterized more by condemnation and threat with a liberal dose of fear than the sheer joy of a grace beyond our fondest dreams.

But it doesn't really work.

It still works some places with some people, but it usually backfires and finally will never bring the world to God.

Why get so excited about our mission to bring salvation to earth's farthest bounds?

Because the news is so good, so amazing, so unbelievably wonderful! God saves!

*God* saves - God does not simply set it out and make it possible, waiting to see if there are any takers. No, *God* saves. And *God saves*. The grace of God in Jesus Christ will triumph - to earth's farthest bounds. All God's children will finally come home.

Why us?

Because - we've been given the wonderful news, we've been let in on the secret.

And all around us are people hurting, broken, hopeless, knowing no light or joy or peace.

It is ours to share the joy, spread the news, love the world. Jesus has been lifted up - on the cross where he took our judgment, into heaven where he reigns, and is drawing the whole world home to the Father - and he invites us into that highest of all vocations: to bring salvation to earth's farthest bounds until all God's scattered children join hands in the presence of Jesus, singing,

*Beautiful Savior, Lord of the nations,  
Son of God and Son of Man!  
Glory and honor, praise, adoration,  
Now and forevermore be Thine!  
Amen*