

060910 For Whom Did Christ Die? 21/32 September 10, 2006GG
For Whom Did Christ Die?

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 21, [Nu 32](#) September 10, 2006GG

For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. ([Ro 5:6](#)) A question that is sure to excite and to polarize any Christian discussion is this. "For whom did Christ die?" The dominant view of our time is that Jesus died potentially for every human being, but that His death accomplishes nothing of significance unless each individual comes to believe that fact and to embrace it in faith, an act of the individual that makes it a reality. Otherwise it is mere theory or potential, not fact at all. A variation of this idea is that Jesus died to put away all the sins of all humanity with a single exception. He did not die for the sin of unbelief. Therefore the only sin that will justly send anyone to hell at the final Day of Judgment is the sin of not believing in Jesus. I find this idea interesting in that Jesus mentioned specifically what the wicked did and did not do in His last Judgment lesson in [Mt 25:31-46](#). I find it equally interesting that in this passage Jesus didn't say a word about belief or unbelief; rather He passed sentence against the wicked based on specific actions they committed or failed to practice. I do not in any way diminish the gravity of unbelief. Nor do I question that unbelief is in fact a sin. Rather I raise the point to refute the claim that Jesus died for all sins with this one exception, and that thus the only sin that will send anyone to hell is this particular sin of unbelief.

The respected Puritan writer/theologian John Owen is credited with the following assessment of the question, "For whom did Christ die?"

The Father imposed His wrath due unto, and the Son underwent punishment for, either:

1. All the sins of all men.
2. 3. All the sins of some men, or
4. 5. Some of the sins of all men.
6. In which case it may be said:
 - a. That if the last be true, all men have some sins to answer for, and so, none are saved.
 - b. c. That if the second be true, then Christ, in their stead suffered for all the sins of all the elect in the whole world, and this is the truth.
 - d. e. But if the first be the case, why are not all men free from the punishment due unto their sins?
 - f. You answer, "*Because of unbelief.*"

I ask, Is this *unbelief* a sin, or is it not? If it be, then Christ suffered the punishment due unto it, or He did not. If He did, why must that hinder them more than their other sins for which He died? If He did not, He did not die for all their sins!"

I suggest that Owen raises a far more sound and Biblical case than the present day and often emotional case that Jesus died for everyone, though the contemporary case in effect acknowledges that His death for everyone actually accomplished nothing in fact. Unless the person for whom Christ supposedly died does something (The "something" will vary depending on the theological school of thought confronted with the question. It will range from simple acceptance or belief of the fact all the way to baptism in water and faithfulness in good works till death.), the person for whom Jesus died will spend eternity in hell despite Jesus' death for him/her. In other words Jesus did as much for the apostle Paul as He did for Nero, so each person's eternal destiny has nothing to do with what Jesus did, but with what one individual does and the other does not do. So who will be praised in eternity for salvation? If this

doctrine is true, not Jesus, for His work didn't actually save anyone; their decision and/or conduct is the actual saving event that is responsible for where they spend eternity.

In an effort to avoid the embarrassment of these deficient views when compared with Scripture, some folks in our time will assert that man must comply with various conditions, but then say that God orchestrates their compliance. I suggest that this view is an unstable compromise that, within a generation or less time, will revert either to its inherent Arminian view (from the salvation by works view of James Arminius) or will fall into full fatalism, making God cause every event that occurs, even sin. It is fascinating that in the first eight verses of the third chapter of Romans Paul confronted and refuted both of these errant views, charging his unnamed critics with a slanderous misrepresentation of the truth that he taught. *Holding faithfully to the truth of Scripture while carefully and consistently avoiding both errant extremes is the high challenge of every Bible student who seeks to follow Scripture, not correct and revise its divinely inspired message.*

I raise another interesting point that Paul presents in this passage. *Christ died for the ungodly.* Invariably in the contemporary and populist views of salvation Jesus is depicted as dying fully for reformed—or reforming—sinners, but not simply for sinners! And those who teach what Paul taught in this verse are invariably accused of being “antinomian,” not because they advocate a sinful lifestyle or because they advocate a low view of either moral integrity or of God’s moral law, but merely because they believe as Paul did (and interestingly Paul was accused of the same straw man antinomian error in Romans the third chapter), the simple fact that Jesus died for sinners! They were chosen sinners. They were elected to be the objects of divine mercy. They receive the law of God written in their hearts in the new birth, an event that to some extent transforms their moral convictions and character from that moment forward. But when Jesus died for them, He did not view them as transformed sinners, as repentant sinners, but as wholly undeserving sinners with only one claim to His divine mercy, that they were the vessels of divine election and mercy in God’s eternal covenant of salvation.

It is sad indeed that the trumpet sound from most modern pulpits strongly implies that Jesus’ death is only beneficial to reformed sinners, to repentant sinners, to believing sinners, or to otherwise improving sinners, and that such mercy is directly contingent on their personal action, mental or moral. One must wonder; how much comfort might this doctrine have been to a vicious and persecuting Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus when divine grace struck him to the ground? For that matter, how much comfort can such a message be to you and me since Paul specifically indicated that he is a pattern of salvation to all future believers in God? ([1Ti 1:16](#)) The decisive impetus in these systems of teaching is that the final decision is yours, not God’s, and your action or lack thereof will determine whether you spend eternity with God in heaven or in hell separated from God.

The decisive issue in Scripture is God’s decision, not yours or mine! And Paul in this verse sounds the clarion sound of God’s truth, “*Christ died for the ungodly.*” We cannot justify any other view from Scripture, nor can we add layers of conditions or qualifiers onto this description with any degree of Biblical authority. Paul did not say that Christ died for all ungodly; he did not advocate universalism. But he distinctly wrote by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit for all the family of God to read from that day forward, *Christ died for the ungodly.* “

Someone who hears this doctrine for the first time will invariably accuse its advocates of teaching a “new doctrine.” Is this doctrine of Jesus dying for sinners a new doctrine? Is the idea that sinners are saved by God alone and not by a cooperative venture between Jesus and sinners really a new doctrine? I could offer quotes across the centuries to prove otherwise. Here I will offer only one. We all recognize the name Augustus Toplady, the author of the beautiful hymn “Rock of Ages.” Although a lifelong Anglican, Toplady consistently respected and fellowshipped with non-Anglican preachers who held to the same views of God’s saving grace that he held. Here I quote from Toplady who in this instance is quoting (with his full agreement) the Baptist preacher John Ryland. The quote will lead off with an

introductory paragraph from George Ella, one of many Toplady biographers.

Ryland shared with Toplady and John Gill the glorious doctrine of election and justification from eternity, meaning that election and justification are not time-bound graces, secured by the response of a believer but eternal actions of God quite irrespective of time. Toplady records how Ryland told him on July 11, 1769:

The souls of the elect were saved upon trust for four thousand years. The Father gave credit to Christ, and glorified his saints, on the footing of a sacrifice not then offered up, and of a righteousness not then wrought. Christ also, in the days of his flesh, went on credit with his Father every time he said to a sinner, ‘Thy sins are forgiven thee,’ previous to his offering himself on the cross.⁴⁶

Here Toplady cites Ryland approvingly regarding the divine prerogative of salvation prior to the cross, not based on people keeping the Law—an act that Scripture says they never did ([Ec 7:20](#))—or some other man-centered action, but rather on a “trust” and “credit” arrangement between the Father and the Son, based on the merit of Jesus’ death alone *even before Calvary!* On Page 33 of this book Ella states, “Toplady, argues on a number of occasions that God draws his elect from all sorts and conditions of men, whether they be Arminians, Stoics, or whatever.” Is this a “new doctrine”? Hardly, not only did Toplady believe it in the eighteenth century, he presented it as the fundamental and proper view of the Anglican Church of that time, though he often complains against the church’s growing laxity in doctrine, morals, and intellect. He further frequently fellowshipped with Baptists and other “Dissenters” who shared his theological beliefs regarding this important doctrine of salvation.

When we study regeneration or the new birth, we shall fully explore the moral and spiritual change that God effects when He bestows eternal life on one of His chosen vessels. The doctrines of grace do not teach or even imply that subsequent to salvation a person is as engaged in sin as before or as morally reprobate as before the new birth. Legalists incessantly try to quantify how much moral or spiritual change occurs after regeneration, something that they cannot do from Scripture. However, Scripture clearly affirms that the new birth alters a person’s moral and spiritual nature and character. Believers in the Bible doctrines of grace not only believe that God’s grace is altogether exclusive in salvation; they believe that the same grace of God that saves also teaches those whom He saves ([Tit 2:11-15](#)). May we be found faithful, still believing what Paul taught by the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Elder Joe Holder