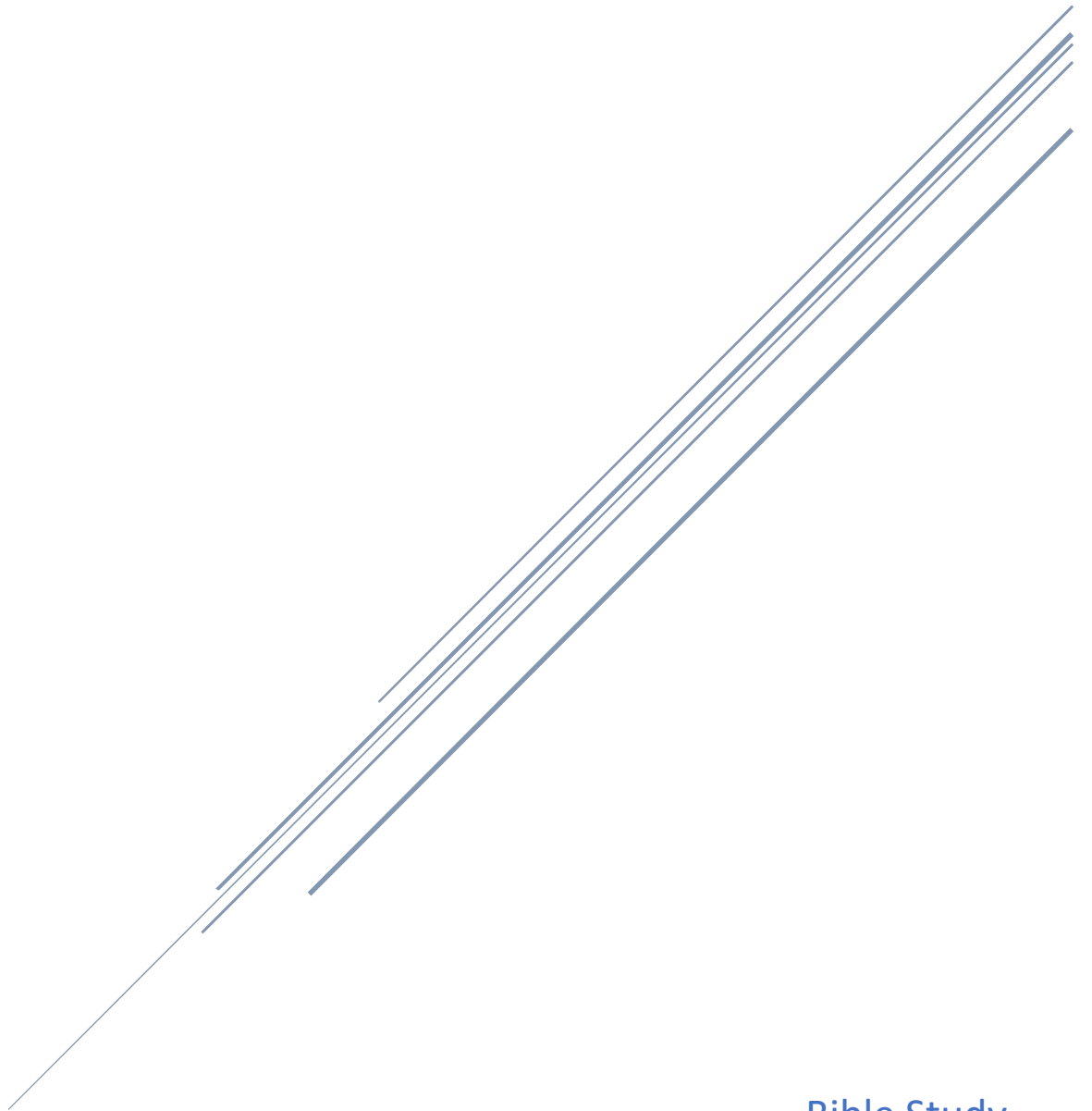


LIMITED ATONEMENT

Issues and more issues



Bible Study
Jim Beale

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

The Death of Christ

We all know the verses about the death of Christ but it might be helpful to hear them placed altogether.

Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. (1Pe 2:24)

This verse combines a lot of references to OT verses. His own self means that in His body on the tree He bore our sins. The OT sacrifices were only types and shadows of the reality of His death. His death is the real sacrifice for sins. There is Deut 21:22, with instruction about the hanging of a man on the tree; that his body was not to remain overnight. Paul references this verse in Gal 3:13,

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed [is] everyone who hangs on a tree"), (Gal 3:13)

Which describes Christ's death as his having become a curse for us. This verse says that Christ bore our sins in his own body as He hung on the tree. This is a key concept – that Christ bore the sins of the people for whom He died. By whose stripes ye were healed brings in Isaiah 53:4-6 which says

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he [was] wounded for our transgressions, [he was] bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace [was] upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isa 53:4-6 KJV)

This OT passage clearly expresses the idea that Christ bore the sins of His people. The LORD hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all. By His stripes we are healed. Here is the exchange that is at the heart of Christianity. My wickedness is placed on Christ and He bears the wrath of God. Then, His righteousness and the blessings of God are given to me.

It turns out that the LORD is Triune – and the Son came and joined Himself to a human nature, lived a perfectly sinless life, and died the death of a criminal though He was perfectly righteous. He bore the sins and died in the place of "Man" – He was the Son of Man who came to live and die. The Father laid the guilt of mankind on His Son and punished Him for it. The chastisement of our peace was upon Him, an infinite, eternal chastisement that would take each of us an eternity to bear – He bore the guilt of our sins in a few hours on the cross.

So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation. (Heb 9:28)

(10) By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once [for all]. (14) For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified. (Heb 10:10,14)

These verses indicate that Christ's death and His life are seen as one and the same and when they come upon a man they make him perfect in the eyes of God. We continue to sin in ourselves – obviously – but

our justification in Christ is perfect. There is nothing that can be added to it because it is the perfect righteousness of Christ which is imputed to us. It begins with Christ's SIN BEARING but it includes all of His righteousness and when we are joined to Him it becomes ours.

"For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. (Mat 26:28)

And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin. (1 John 3:5)

This is the nature of the new covenant, in which Christ's death turns everything inside out. We are declared righteous who are wicked sinners and are given to experience the goodness of God by the mercy of God. This is because the death of Christ completely removes all our guilt.

The Nature of Sin

We saw in the previous study that our sin is infinite. We tend to think of our sin as a selection of finite instances. We stole from work, we did this, we did that. We have individual sins that we can count but there is also an uncountable nature to our sin. That is, given that the law is to love the Lord with all the heart, all the soul, all the mind, and all the strength and that we never, ever perform that law.

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this [is] the first commandment. And the second, like [it, is] this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these. (Mar 12:30-31)

So our sin arises from NOT obeying these commandments, which we never do, and so our sin is continuously a grievous mountain before the Lord. That we can be held guilty for not doing what we should is made clear by the Lord, when He said:

Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do [it] to one of the least of these, you did not do [it] to Me.' And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Mat 25:45-46)

As I said, even if we are sitting alone in a room doing nothing, we are still sinning because we are not obeying the great commandments. And as we noticed, between any two moments of not loving God as we must, there are more times – more and more times – so our sin here is infinite between any two times. The acts of sin which are given in Galatians 5:19-21 adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like are particular instances of sin. However, each such sin is an instance of “not loving the Lord as we ought”, and is in actuality just a single moment of what by omission is a constant problem.

Therefore, our sin is fundamentally equal. That is, my sin is an ugly mass of sin that began at my birth and continues thereafter. Yours is likewise. Your individual sins are different than mine but the individual sins are subsumed to the rest of our sin of omission. So here we can say that my sin is equal to your sin which is equal to that of the worst sinner and the best person, it is all the same – it is an infinite blob.

The Nature of the Punishment

The death of Christ was for the sins of many people. We sometimes think of the punishment that Christ bore as $N \text{ people} \times \text{the number of sins}(N)$ as if each sin had a specific punishment. We think that if God saved more people, that Christ would have had to bear more.

But if the atonement had taken place during Adam's time, in fact immediately after Adam's sin, such that there was only two people in the world plus Christ, His death would have been to bear the full penalty of the wrath of God against sin. But the wrath of God against their sin would have been the exact same and the death of Christ would have been the full measure of sin because they would have an infinite portion of sin. Eve's sin would have added to Adam's sin and produced the same thing – an infinite mass. The measure of sin of the two was the same as the one because each is infinite. Eve's infinite plus Adam's infinite equals the same infinite. It is an infinite load of sin that Christ bore – if it was one person or ten trillion people, the amount of sin to be borne is infinite. And my infinite doesn't add anything to the already existing infinite – neither does yours.

When we think of our sins as a list of actions that we have done we can easily think that Christ bore the penalty for my particular sins, and there was still room for Him to bear other sins. But when my sin is seen as it really is, as an infinite mass that extends from my birth to my death. There are an infinite number of sins in this mass. Then, your infinite collection of sins and my infinite collection of sins equals just one infinite collection of sins. And this one collection of sins is what Christ bore.

Intended for the Elect

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. (Eph 5:25-27) This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. (Eph 5:32)

Christ clearly gave His life for the church because He loves it and wants to present it to Himself as a glorious church, without spot or blemish. So here it says that He gave Himself for it, that is He gave up His life and died the death of a criminal for the church. That sets our understanding clearly that Christ died specifically to save the elect, to redeem a people unto Himself. This is His great work and of course it makes no sense to suppose that He doesn't have a keen eye on this, that His death will be applied to all the elect in their times.

This is placed in the midst of the "husbands love your wives" section because the Church is the Bride of Christ. John saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven, prepared as a Bride adorned for her husband. (Rev 21:2). This holy city, this new Jerusalem, is the Church – prepared as a Bride for her husband, who is Christ. Jesus said to those who came to him, "He that hath the bride is the bridegroom" (John 3:29) and yet where is the Bride? First, the human nature joined to Him and then His people are brought into union with Him, into union with His death.

Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Mat 20:28)

It was a ransom for many, effectual for many. The question of the sufficiency for all comes into play when we consider the reprobate. We will consider the relation of Christ's death to the reprobate in a later section. Here we note that his life is a ransom for many, it is not clear what this means but this we take it that it at least means that Christ died for more than one person.

Christ died for the ungodly ... Christ died for us. (Rom 5:6,8)

Here we have the interesting combination that Christ died for the ungodly and also for us. The ungodly includes everyone, there is no one who is excluded, for everyone is ungodly. "For us" refers to the Church, the Elect so here we perhaps need to interpret the ungodly as equivalent to "for us" but it isn't clear.

Christ died for our sins (1 Cor 15:3)

Here we have that Christ died for our sins. The 'our' that is mentioned there refers to the elect, that is, the Church. Here we have it simply-stated that Christ died to redeem His people, His elect, the Church.

Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father: (Gal 1:4)

Here we have the connection between the death of Christ and the deliverance from this world. Christ gave himself with the intention to save His people, that he might deliver us from this present evil world. That is, His death was intended to deliver those whom the Father had elected to eternal life.

Found in Christ

The salvation that we have, the forgiveness of our sins is found in Christ. If, as is commonly supposed, our guilt was transferred to Christ and He bore it on the cross why then are the elect born under the wrath of God? We elect, "were by nature the children of wrath, even as others" (Eph 2:3) and there is no difference between the elect and the non-elect at birth – all are born under the wrath of God.

The common understanding of the atonement seems to be that the sins of the elect were transferred to Christ and that He bore the wrath for them and therefore there is no more wrath for the elect. But why then are the elect born under sin?

We want to notice very explicitly that

For the wages of sin [is] death, but the gift of God [is] eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 6:23)

That clearly says that the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus. The eternal life is in Christ Jesus means that only when an elect person comes into union with Christ are his sins taken away. It is our union with Christ that counts for us, there is no benefit flowing from Christ's death apart from union with Christ.

nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:39)

Therefore, if anyone [is] in Christ, [he is] a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. (2 Cor 5:17)

This means that the death of Christ was not objective, per se, in that the guilt of the elect was not removed objectively because even after the death of Christ they are born under God's wrath. Now what does this mean? It is a strange thing that Christ has done. He bore the sins of the elect, took their guilt away – but this is not freely available apart from Christ but is restricted to those in union with Him.

who has saved us and called [us] with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began, (2 Tim 1:9)

This is the mystery of salvation then. It is in Christ Jesus that we have redemption from our sins:

But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God--and righteousness and sanctification and redemption-- (1 Cor 1:30)

And there is no salvation outside of Christ,

He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 John 5:12)

So here we have the explanation for the idea that we can be by nature children of wrath, just as the others. (Eph 2:3) Even if we are elect, until we are brought into union with Christ, we are under the wrath of God. And so the atonement is only expressed in Christ's person, only the sins of those who come into union with Christ are taken away.

The Non-elect are Savable.

The question is whether all men are savable – well, excluding those few who may have committed the unforgiveable sin – we tend to believe that everyone is savable. Everyone can theoretically believe in Christ because it is done by the power of God, and God can regenerate anyone. Therefore, there is no difference among men – all are the same. The elect don't have a big E over their heads and so we're completely clueless who is elect and who is non-elect. Paul said,

To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all [men], that I might by all means save some. (1 Cor 9:22)

We all need to be born again, but that is the sovereign work of God, in that He regenerates whomever He wishes. And there is no way to know when sharing the gospel with someone if God is going to do a marvelous work, and so we treat that person as we treat any person.

The question is whether the death of Christ bears any relation to the reprobate.

The Well-Meant Offer

John Murray writes,

It would appear that the real point in dispute in connection with the free offer of the gospel is whether it can properly be said that God desires the salvation of all men. The Committee elected by the Twelfth General Assembly in its report to the Thirteenth General Assembly said, "God not only delights in the penitent but is also moved by the riches of his goodness and mercy to desire the repentance and salvation of the impenitent and reprobate" (Minutes, p. 67). It

should have been apparent that the aforesaid Committee, in predicating such “desire” of God, was not dealing with the decretive will of God; it was dealing with the free offer of the gospel to all without distinction and that surely respects, not the decretive or secret will of God, but the revealed will. There is no ground for the supposition that the expression was intended to refer to God’s decretive will.

We have found that God himself expresses an ardent desire for the fulfilment of certain things which he has not decreed in his inscrutable counsel to come to pass. This means that there is a will to the realization of what he has not decretively willed, a pleasure towards that which he has not been pleased to decree. This is indeed mysterious, and why he has not brought to pass, in the exercise of his omnipotent power and grace, what is his ardent pleasure lies hid in the sovereign counsel of his will. We should not entertain, however, any prejudice against the notion that God desires or has pleasure in the accomplishment of what he does not decretively will.
(John Murray)

For Christ, in the gospels (Luke 13:34) wishes that He had gathered the children of Jerusalem together but the leaders of the people would not. Here Christ is wishing for something that is contrary to the decretive will, that the Father did not decree but the Son still expresses a wish that it might come to pass. So likewise Deut 5:29, 32:29; Psalm 81:13; Isa 48:18.

O that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments! then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea: (Isa 48:18)

Such are these verses – Oh that thou!! which expresses a desire for something which was did not take place. The desire of the Lord is here opposed to what He has decreed. We also have the verse,

"Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?" says the Lord GOD, "[and] not that he should turn from his ways and live? (Eze 18:23)

which indicates that God greatly desires that the wicked turn from his way and live. This stretches our minds because God is able to cause them to repent but He does not, yet He also has no pleasure in their death. God desires that the wicked turn from his sins and demands that they do so but He does not enable them to do so.

How does the sufficiency of Christ’s death afford ample ground for general invitations, if the design was confined to the elect people? If the benefits of his death were never intended for the non-elect, is it not just as inconsistent to invite them to partake of them as if there were a want of sufficiency??

1. It is a fact that the Scriptures rest the general invitation of the gospel upon the atonement of Christ—2 Cor. v. 19, 21; Matt. xxii. 4; John iii. 16.

2. If there were not a sufficiency in the atonement for the salvation of sinners, and yet they were invited to be reconciled to God, they must be invited to what is naturally impossible. The message of the gospel would in this case be as if the servants who went forth to bid the guests had said, “Come,” though, in fact, nothing was made ready.

3. If there be an objective fullness in the atonement of Christ sufficient for any number of sinners, were they to believe in Him, there is no other impossibility in the way of any man’s salvation to whom the gospel comes than what arises from the state of his own mind. The intention of God not to remove the

impossibility, and so not to save him, is only a resolution to withhold, not only that which he was not obliged to give, but that which is never represented as necessary to the consistency of exhortations and invitations to a compliance. I do not deny that there is a difficulty; but it belongs to the general subject of reconciling the purposes of God and the agency of man; whereas, in the other case, God is represented as inviting sinners to partake of that which does not exist, and which therefore is naturally impossible. The one, while it ascribes the salvation of the believer, in every stage of it, to mere grace, renders the unbeliever inexcusable, which the other, I conceive, does not.

The Death for All

We have the classic verse,

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

which opens to us the intention of God the Father in sending the Son. It only requires us to interpret the word 'world' to arrive at a clear meaning. In principle, there is no extent on the word 'world'; it is quite general, it is the most general possible.

The key to the passage lies in the significance of the term "world." It is not here a term of extension so much as a term of intensity. Its primary connotation is ethical, and the point of its employment 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. The whole debate as to whether the love here celebrated distributes itself to each and every man that enters into the composition of the world, or terminates on the elect alone chosen out of the world, lies thus outside the immediate scope of the passage and does not supply any key to its interpretation.

The passage was not intended to teach, and certainly does not teach, that God loves all men alike and visits each and every one alike with the same manifestations of His love: and as little was it intended to teach or does it teach that His love is confined to a few especially chosen individuals selected out of the world. [Warfield, Benjamin B.. The Saviour of the World (pp. 120-122).]

This question as to the distribution of the love is not really part of the verse. It only refers to whosoever believes in Christ but the love of God cannot be restricted to those people. For God so loved the world, but whoever believes is a subset of the world. Therefore the world includes those who are not saved.

For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: And [that] he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again. (2 Cor 5:14-15 KJV)

Here we have the specific case of Christ dying for all yet only some of those coming to life. "They which live" is a subset of "all" – not all come to life, but according to this, Christ died for all. When we understand that Christ died for all, we need to consider that Christ died specifically for the Church, whom He will save. The others are merely there because all people are automatically there. His death for one includes all by virtue of the sin relation – my sin is equal to your sin and all is the same blob of sin.

To be sure, we understand not that Christ died for all so that the efficacy of His death reaches commonly to all people. Accordingly, Christ's death is not received by reprobates, unbelievers, and impenitents, but that does not mean that His death was not available for them. We can say though that the death of Christ in itself it is sufficient for redeeming the whole human race.

"Look to Me, and be saved, All you ends of the earth! For I [am] God, and [there is] no other. (Isa 45:22)

Here again we encounter the universal saving volition of God. It is to all the ends of the earth that He calls out. Truly there is one God and one way of salvation and God here calls it out. It is not as if God calls to His elect in every nation. The context indicates that God is the Creator who calls men praying to a god who cannot save. There is no restriction here on the people. Then they are told to look to God. Here we have the commandment which expresses the pleasure of the Lord, namely that people turn to Him. This has not been decreed by God but that does not stop the Lord from calling all men to Himself.

And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world. (1 John 2:2)

In 1 John 2:2, it is at least doubtful whether the express phrase, "whole world," can be restrained to the world of elect as including other than Jews. For it is indisputable, that the Apostle extends the propitiation of Christ beyond those whom he speaks of as "we," in the first verse. The interpretation described obviously proceeds on the assumption that these are only Jewish believers. Can this be substantiated? Is this catholic epistle addressed only to Jews? This is more than doubtful. It would seem then, that the Apostle's scope is to console and encourage sinning believers with the thought that since Christ made expiation for every man, there is no danger that He will not be found a propitiation for them who, having already believed, now sincerely turn to him from recent sins.

Conclusion

We are saved by the death of Christ but how interesting is that death! In a few hours on the cross, he bore the guilt for His people whom He desires to save. And the manner in which this was done is marvelous.

We looked at our sin and realized that it can be expressed as the failure to obey the great commandments; we must love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and we must love our neighbor as ourselves. This we never do and so our sin is a continuous stream of sin lasting our entire lives. The actual sins we commit are subsumed under the continuous lack of love and so each of our guilt is the same – infinite.

We looked at the death of Christ and determined that the sin of additional people did not increase the penalty nor the punishment due to Christ. The Father turned His back on His Son and He bore the wrath of God in that moment. But the punishment is the same when Christ bears the sin of multiple people as when He merely bears the guilt of one. So there is no distinction at the cross whether Christ bore the sin of one man or every man. The punishment that He bore was exactly the same whether He bore the sin of one man or every man.

Further, the benefit of Christ's death is not objective. Though Christ died for our sins objectively, yet the blessing of forgiveness of sins is only found when someone comes into union with Christ. We must be "in Christ" because there is no imputation of His righteousness apart from union with Him. Forgiveness of sins is bound up with the righteousness of Christ. There is no benefit of His death apart from His life, His perfect righteousness.

When we preach the gospel, if the person to whom we are talking is non-elect, that doesn't change the presentation of the gospel. We don't know whether they are elect or not. So our gospel is not changed when we declare to them that if they join themselves to Christ, their sins will be forgiven. When we offer them salvation if they come to Christ, we are lying if Christ did not bear their sins. In the simple understanding of limited atonement, we cannot be about the business of the gospel. We cannot offer someone anything until we know they are elect or the gospel tends to not go forth where this view of the atonement is popular.

The main purpose of the atonement is to reconcile God's people to Himself. This is His primary purpose in setting forth Christ as an atonement.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. (Eph 5:25-27)

Christ has died His death in order to save a people for Himself, to present to Himself as His Bride.

Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity." (2Ti 2:19)

This doesn't prevent us from detecting in God a love which goes beyond what we can comprehend. God is graciously given to expressions of love which are for the reprobate to turn from his sins and live. We are shown that God himself expresses an ardent desire for the fulfilment of certain things which he has not decreed in his inscrutable counsel to come to pass, and by this we understand that God is far greater than we can comprehend, that He desires the salvation of those He has not decreed to save.

And so we arrive at our explanation of the atonement that considers all the Biblical material. The idea of limited atonement are based on the misunderstanding of our sin, that it is finite, and that Christ could bear some people's sin and not others. This idea undermines evangelism because it makes the atonement to be dependent on person and so it is important to determine whether a person was elect before declaring to them the forgiveness of sins by Christ's death. This is no good.

So we adopt a position which avoids all the difficulties. That our sin is infinite. Christ died to save the church but his death also applies equally to the reprobate, who reject Him for no fault of His. But it is important that there be no lack in the grace of God to save the non-elect, though it is not His intention. Yet Scripture has five or six places where the desire of God is contrary to the intention of God and this blows our minds, it is the unexpected goodness of God. And we rest in that for ourselves.