

SERIES ON THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE  
Sermon #11  
Text: 2 Peter 3:1-9  
April 1, 1984

THE DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT  
Or, THE ATONEMENT IN PERSPECTIVE

Pastor L. Dwight Custis

My subject this morning is, THE ATONEMENT IN PERSPECTIVE. Sometimes when I pick a subject I wonder if the subject is really understood. I want to explain just what I mean by this. The atonement, of course, has to do with the saving work of our Lord Jesus Christ, that work which involved His death on the Cross and His resurrection from the tomb, that work by which He saves us from eternal damnation, that work by which He saves all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The word "perspective," in case that might be a new word to you, is a word which means to look at the parts of anything in their relationship to the whole. Now we have been talking about the doctrines of grace. And, in getting a better understanding of the whole doctrine of salvation (because that is what the doctrines of grace are), it is important for us to see that they all fit together. This, of course, is what we see as far as all of the Scriptures are concerned. But in thinking of the atonement in perspective I want us to recognize that there is a marvelous harmony, a divine oneness, to the truth of God as it relates to our salvation. This is, of course, also true with respect to any doctrine that you find in the Word of God. There are no contradictions in the teaching of Scripture. The Bible, as I am sure most of us (perhaps all of us) believe, is one book. Although some forty different writers over a period of some sixteen hundred years were used to give us the Bible, the Holy Spirit directed them all in their writing. He is the Author of Scripture and He has never contradicted Himself. The enemies of Scripture are delighted when they seem to find some contradictions in the Word of God. And I am sure we have all been exposed to these at one time or another.

If they can discredit any part, then of course, there is the possibility that nothing in the Word of God is to be trusted. But the apparent contradictions in the Word of God are due to our failure to understand all that we need to know about any one of these doctrines. It is never due to the fact that there are conflicts between various passages of Scripture. God never contradicts Himself and so His Word is without contradiction.

A man once said to me, when we were talking about the doctrines of grace--he did not accept them; he was opposing them--he said, "The trouble with them is that they all stand together. If you accept one, then it seems like you have to accept all of the rest of them." He gave this as a reason for turning them down. Such an  
Page 2 Doctrines  
of Grace -- #11

attitude is tragic because this is certainly one of the greatest proofs that they are the truth of God. Each doctrine of grace is in perfect harmony with the others. If there are passages which seem to say something different, then we need to examine all that the Word of God has to say about that particular truth, looking to the Lord to give us the light that we need.

#### I. THE APPARENT CONTRADICTIONS IN SCRIPTURE

Now in saying this, I am not overlooking the fact that we have these apparent contradictions in Scripture. When we are talking about the doctrine of the atonement, I have reference to the fact that some passages seem to teach that Jesus Christ died for the purpose of saving all men without exception, but that there are other passages of Scripture which clearly indicate that the Lord died specifically for His elect. We might ask the question, Why did the Lord have His Word written so that we have difficulty with these truths? The doctrine of salvation is not the only doctrine. There are problem passages in the Bible concerning the inspiration of Scripture. It seems that there are some passages that teach that the Scripture is no more than the word of men, at least in some of its parts. There are problem passages that have to do with the Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. Who can possibly comprehend the statement that Luke makes that Jesus, Who had infinite wisdom, "increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52). And there are problem passages that have to do, as we are going to see, with salvation itself. No major doctrine in Scripture is without its problem passages. Now, I want to suggest two reasons why God has given us His Word in this way.

First of all, it is apparent that the Bible has been written as it was written so that we would recognize that we need to be taught by the Holy Spirit. I think everybody who reads the Bible at least begins with the idea that they are going to be able to figure things out for themselves. And yet the more we read of the Word of

God, the more we see that we need, we must have, the ministry of the Holy Spirit teaching us. The Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2:12, "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God." If that were not necessary, then of course, the Holy Spirit would not have been given to us for that purpose. The Lord Jesus Himself said in John 16 verse 13, the first part of the verse, "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth . . ." So we find in Scripture that we are dependent upon the Holy Spirit.

In spite of this, there are going to be things in the Word of God that we will never clearly understand. After Paul had written the book of Romans, or at least gotten to what is the end of the eleventh chapter in our translation, you remember that he made the statement, "How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out." And even David, in comprehending some of the works of God, the omniscience of God and the omnipresence of God, said in Psalm 139, verse 6, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it." So we know what the Word of God says, and we can believe what the Word of God says, but that does not necessarily mean that we will always be able to explain to everybody's satisfaction, or to our own satisfaction, what the Word of God says. So we need to be taught by the Holy Spirit. This is the only way that anyone ever learns the truth of God.

The second reason that God seems to have given us His Word this way is so that we Doctrines of Grace -- #11

Page 3

would search all of Scripture. If He had given us all of the truth that we need to know in one book, say, for example, the book of Romans, then most Christians would never read anything else. But you see, there is no one book of the Bible that tells us everything. Therefore, we need to compare Scripture with Scripture. God has designed that His Word should be that way. When Paul charged Timothy with the ministry that he was to fulfill he said, "Preach the Word." Obviously, when he said that he meant that Timothy was to preach all of the Word. In that same passage in 2 Timothy where he said, "Preach the Word," he also said that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction," and so on. But, if I am to know the doctrine of Scripture, then I must look into all of the Word of God. So we must understand this to know the doctrines of grace. We need to depend upon the Holy Spirit. And we need to look into all of the Word of God.

## II. THE ATONEMENT IN ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE OTHER DOCTRINES OF GRACE

Now I am talking this morning about the atonement in perspective.

This gives me a good opportunity to remind you, and to mention for the benefit of some who may not know what we are talking about when we speak of the doctrines of grace, that these are the doctrines of our salvation. What are they? Well, we have already considered the doctrine of total depravity. Second is the doctrine of unconditional election. Third is the doctrine that we are considering now, the doctrine of limited atonement. Then we will have the doctrine of irresistible grace. Finally, the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. And you will remember that this forms an acrostic on the word TULIP, which at least helps us to remember what these various doctrines are.

Now we have considered two of them and are dealing with the third, but let me just review them briefly because we are looking at the parts of this doctrine of salvation as they relate to the whole doctrine. If we are seeing the truth of salvation correctly, then, when we talk about depravity, or about election, or about the efficacious grace of God, or about the perseverance of the saints, it is going to fit right in with what we are saying with regard to limited atonement. Now total depravity teaches us that man has been so hopelessly ruined by sin that he is at enmity with God. He has been thoroughly corrupted in his inner nature. He is in bondage to sin and to Satan. He is both incapable and unwilling to seek God, or to come to God. He would never, nor could he, seek God on his own. Therefore, it is not surprising that we have the doctrine of election because, if God left salvation up to man, nobody would ever be saved; no one would ever seek God. Man is incapable of turning to God. So the Word of God teaches us that in eternity past God sovereignly chose those whom He intended should be saved. This is never stated any better in the Word of God than it is in 2 Thessalonians 2:13, 14. Let me read these words again to you. "But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." The whole truth of salvation is really summed up in those two verses. The doctrine of election is perfectly consistent with the doctrine of depravity--"there is none that seeketh after God." Paul told us this in Romans chapter 3, verse 11, and he was quoting David in Psalm 14 and Psalm 53. Since man will not choose God, God has chosen certain men.

Now let us pass by the atonement for just a moment, and let me speak of irresistible grace, which we are going to get into eventually, the Lord willing. The doctrine of irresistible grace teaches us that God, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit draws to Christ those whom He has chosen. Our Lord said, "No man can come to me (and that is what we learn in depravity), except the

Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 6:44). Every single one of us here this morning who knows the Lord Jesus Christ has come to Christ, not because we are smarter than other people, nor because we have figured things out and they have not, but we have come to Christ because we have been drawn to Christ. God's grace is effective. He saves those whom He has chosen to save. God is able to do what He has determined to do. We saw this when we considered His attributes. Even though man is in bondage and rebellion and weakness and moral corruption because of sin, when God moves upon his heart, he will come to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Then we have the perseverance of the saints. This means that those who come to Christ are immediately changed and will continue on in the faith until they are changed into the very likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ. God chooses us. God draws us. God keeps us. The Father is the One Who has chosen us; the Lord Jesus Christ is the One Who redeems us; and it is the Holy Spirit Who works to draw us to Christ. So this is what we are concerned about when we are talking about the atonement. When the Lord Jesus Christ went to the Cross and died, He died specifically for those whom the Father had chosen, and those whom the Holy Spirit would draw. So, when we look at the atonement in all of its parts, we see a harmony among them which is unmistakable, and that harmony has to be evidence of their truth. Jesus did not die for any more people than those who are actually being saved.

### III. PROBLEM PASSAGES CONCERNING THE DOCTRINE OF LIMITED ATONEMENT

I want to spend the rest of the time this morning talking about some of the problem passages, some of the passages which seem to teach that Jesus Christ died for all men, that Jesus Christ died with the intention that everybody on the face of the earth could be saved. This, of course, is the prominent teaching that most of us have heard from the time that we have been able to understand anything. It sets the Lord Jesus Christ in opposition to the Father, the Lord trying to accomplish something that was never determined by the Father. So, consequently, we need to look at these passages.

One of them we had in our Scripture reading for today. Will you turn to 2 Peter chapter 3? I want to look at verse 9 with you for just a few moments. Then we will pass on to some other passages of Scripture.

Second Peter three, verse 9, says, "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." Our Scripture reading began at the first part of the chapter, and I realize that you have not had a lot of time to think about this, but I want you to note that the problem that the Apostle Peter was writing about in this passage was the question that the scoffers were raising with

reference to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. You see this in verse 3: "Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of his coming?" Now by that they meant this: "You have been talking about the return of Jesus Doctrines of Grace -- #11 Page 5

Christ; why has He not come?" The Apostle Peter was answering this question. And he said, "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." Now, if you look upon this as a verse which teaches that God is waiting for as many people to be saved as possible, then you have to recognize also that, while He waits, more and more people are going to hell. But, if you read this verse carefully, you will see, especially when you link it with verse 8, that Peter was talking to those whom he called, "Beloved." This is a word that you come across a number of times in the New Testament which means the people of God, the elect of God. This means those, in this instance, who were already saved. And so the Apostle Peter was saying that the Lord was not slack concerning His promise because He is "longsuffering to us-ward." To whom was he referring? With whom is He longsuffering? He is longsuffering with His people. He is longsuffering with His elect--"not willing (and you see it is implied here) that any (of us) should perish, but that all (of us) should come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:8, 9). Why is it that the Lord Jesus Christ has not come yet? He has not come yet because not all of His elect have been saved. When the last person to constitute the elect in His Church has been saved, the Lord Jesus Christ is going to come. Now you see what the verse means and that there is no contradiction with election. If this meant that the Lord is not willing for anybody to perish, then what does this do to the sovereignty of God? What does this do to the election of God? Surely if the Holy Spirit saw fit to do so, He could draw every person on the face of the earth to Christ. But, you see, He "is longsuffering to us-ward," not willing that any of us should perish, but that all of us, all of the elect, should come to repentance.

The two words that seem to give us the most trouble in this doctrine of the atonement are the words "all" and "the world." I want to spend a few moments looking at these words, and then I want to look just briefly at three other passages of Scripture. I only have the time today to touch upon these very briefly, but I trust that you will see enough so that it will clear up the questions that you might have in your own mind.

Turn to John chapter 3. I want you to see in John 3 a use of the word "all" where it does not mean all without exception, or all universally, but all within certain limits. In your reading of the

Bible you are going to find this a number of times, so it is good to be on the lookout for them. The twenty-sixth verse is the verse that I have in mind: John 3:26. Let me read verse 25 with it: "Then there arose a question between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purifying. And they (John's disciples) came unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan (referring to the Lord Jesus), to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him." Now, obviously, this does not mean every person on the face of the earth. Nor did it mean even all the people in that vicinity. But it meant that a multitude of people were coming to the Lord Jesus Christ. There were unbelieving Jews, and, of course, John's disciples were not turning to the Lord, so it cannot mean all without exception. It cannot mean all universally. If we are to take this word "all" as meaning everybody on the face of the earth, then this passage would have a meaning that would be contrary to the circumstances that you have there. So, "all" does not always mean everybody on the face of the earth, and it does not mean that in 2 Peter 3:9.

Now turn to Romans, chapter 11. I want you to see a passage that has to do with Page 6

Doctrines of Grace -- #11

the "world." Many of those who believe in a universal redemption make much of the use of the word "world" in Scripture, and yet you will see that this word also is often used in a more limited sense.

Now Romans 11, verse 11--speaking of the people of Israel--"I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy. Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world . . ." He was talking about the Jews in distinction from, in contrast with, the Gentiles. And obviously, when he spoke of the riches of the world he used the word "world" to speak of the Gentile world. If there is any doubt about that, look at the next part of the verse: ". . . and the diminishing of them (the Jews) the riches of the Gentiles . . ." So you see, the word "world" here was used to speak of the Gentiles, and specifically of those Gentiles who are going to profit from salvation.

In the fifteenth verse of the same chapter we read: "For if the casting away of them (the Jews) be the reconciling of the world (he was not including the Jews in this expression when he used the word "world"), what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?" So again the term world is not all-inclusive.

And then I mentioned to you, I think, when I referred to it a Sunday or two ago, the statement in Luke chapter 2, the first verse, where it is said "that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed." Now Caesar Augustus would like to have had dominion over the whole world, but he did

not have it! And so "all the world" means the whole Roman world. So you see, these are illustrations of times when the word "world" is used to refer to the Gentiles, or in some other restricted sense. Consequently, it does not always refer to all people without exception.

Now in this connection, turn to 1 John chapter 2, verse 2. This is one of the passages that is commonly brought up in opposition to the doctrine of limited atonement: "He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."

In speaking of this just a short time ago, I emphasized the fact that people talk about the expression, "the world," but overlook the word "propitiation." That is, those who do not want to believe in definite atonement overlook the fact that the Apostle John said that the Lord Jesus is "the propitiation." If the Lord Jesus Christ is the propitiation for every person on the face of the earth who has ever lived, then we must believe in a universal salvation--that everybody eventually is going to be saved. Propitiation means satisfaction. This would mean that Christ died to satisfy God concerning the sins of all men throughout the whole world in every generation. This would teach a universal salvation.

I know a man who is familiar with Calvinism, and although he would not profess to be a Christian, yet he was one who saw this. He said, "If Jesus Christ died for the sins of all men, then we have to conclude that everybody eventually is going to be saved." But we know that that is not the case. In John 2:2 John was speaking as a Jew, writing an Epistle which most students of First John believe was directed especially to Jewish believers. Thus this verse would mean, "He is the propitiation for our sins (that is, our Jewish sins--that is, those elect of Israel who are being saved): but not for our's only, but also for the sins of the whole

Doctrines of Grace -- #11

Page 7

world." What John was saying was that the death of the Lord Jesus Christ was for people throughout the whole world, not meaning that everybody in the world is going to be saved, nor that God has been satisfied by the death of His Son for the sins of all men, but that God has an elect people throughout the Gentile world for whom Christ died. Christ died for Jews, and He died for Gentiles.

Please turn to 1 Timothy 2, and we will see another passage, beginning with verse 3, that seems to teach a universal salvation: "For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time. Whereunto I am ordained a preacher, and an apostle, (I speak the truth in Christ, and lie not;) a



teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity" (1 Tim. 2:3-7).

Any reader of the New Testament will, as I have said to you before, recognize that the problem that seems to run through all of the New Testament epistles is the question, of preaching the Gospel to Gentiles. This is one reason that Paul was so hated by his Jewish brethren--because he was preaching to the Gentiles. All you had to do among a group of Jews, if you were speaking of man's relationship to God, was to mention Gentiles, and you might start a riot. The Church had to be instructed in the fact that it was the will of God for Gentiles to be saved. Here Paul was saying to Timothy, "I want you to know why I am preaching as I am. It is because I have been ordained a teacher of the Gentiles." And it was in this connection that he said that God will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth, and that Jesus Christ gave Himself a ransom for all. Now, if you believe that the Word of God teaches that the Lord wants all men, without exception, to be saved, but that, as we all know, all are not being saved, then what are you going to do with the truth of the sovereignty of God? Is it possible that our God, Who is absolutely sovereign in all of His work, could desire something, and not get it, could will something, and not get it? What does this verse mean?

Here the word "all" is consistent with the other passages which we have examined. Paul meant, not all men without exception, but all kinds of men! He meant not only Jews, but also Gentiles--that when God chose men from the foundation of the earth, He not only chose people within the nation of Israel, but He chose people among the nations of the earth. And it is not His will that only Jews would be saved, as we see here, but that He "will have all men," Gentiles as well as Jews, "to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth."

Let me read it this way now, thinking of the limited sense in which the word "all" is used: "Who will have all (kinds of) men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for all (kinds of men), to be testified in due time" (1 Tim. 2:4-7). And that is exactly what is happening, is it not? You see, there is no contradiction in Scripture. There is no need to explain the sovereignty of God because God is sovereignly doing what He wills to be done. From the Gentile world, as well as from the people of Israel, He is gathering out His elect. God is fully accomplishing all that He ordained before the foundation of the earth. Praise His holy Name!

Page 8  
of Grace -- #11

Doctrines

You have the same truth in 2 Corinthians 5. Will you turn to this passage? Let me read chapter 5, verses 14 and 15: "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." Did Christ actually die for all men? How can we explain this?

Paul was writing about "those who live," indicating that they who live are those for whom the Lord Jesus Christ died. You see, these are statements of definite atonement. Paul was speaking of believers. So when Paul said that "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, you have to realize that he was using that term to refer, not to all people without exception throughout the whole world, but that he was referring to His elect people throughout the world. When Christ died, God was providing reconciliation for His chosen people throughout the whole world, "not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation." And this is the reason for the preaching of the Gospel. We are to go into all the world to preach the Gospel to every creature. This is our command. These are our orders from the Lord. And it is because God has provided a reconciliation in Christ for people throughout the world. And as the message of salvation is proclaimed to the people of the world, the Spirit of God uses that message to draw to Christ those whom the Father has chosen and those for whom our Lord Jesus Christ has died. Thus, the doctrines of grace do not discourage evangelism. They guarantee that evangelism will not be in vain. So, you see, it all fits together.

But the one passage that seems to cause the most trouble is one I want to deal with this morning in the time that remains. You all know I am talking about 2 Peter 2, verse 1: "But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction."

The phrase that gives us the trouble is the phrase, "even denying the Lord that bought them." This passage seems to state that the Lord bought these false teachers. If it could be proved that the Lord bought the false teachers, if the Lord died for the false teachers, then we are wrong in saying that definite atonement is the teaching of the Word of God. Those who believe in a universal redemption like to turn to this passage of Scripture, believing that it is unanswerable. But there is an answer. I believe that when the Apostle Peter said, "even denying the Lord that bought them," he was talking about the people, not about the false teachers. Notice that in the latter part of the verse he said, "and bring upon themselves swift destruction." Now it was like this: The Apostle Peter was saying that those false teachers denied that the Lord has actually purchased those believers among whom they had come. And in doing this they were bringing swift destruction "upon themselves"! Therefore, Peter was not saying that the Lord had bought the false teachers.

So much more could be said about these passages, but this should, I trust, help us to see that there is no contradiction in Scripture, that Christ did indeed die for the specific purpose and intent of saving His chosen ones. As Paul said to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." He purchased the Church with His Doctrines of Grace -- #11

Page 9

own blood. Christ came to do the will of the Father. It was the Father's will that the elect should be saved. It was for them that the Lord Jesus Christ died. They are being saved. His sheep do hear His voice, and they do come unto Him. All that the Father has given to His Son will come to His Son, and they shall never be cast out. When we are gathered in heaven, Christ "shall see the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied" (Isa. 53:11a). How could He be satisfied if He died to save all men, but only some are eventually saved? Our sovereign God, our sovereign Lord Jesus Christ, and the sovereign Holy Spirit, cannot possibly fail to accomplish the work that was ordained by the Godhead before the foundation of the world. To Him belongs all of the glory and the praise that He is accomplishing in time exactly what He predetermined should be accomplished in eternity past.