

Limited Atonement (John 3:16) by *Thomas R. Thompson*

Introduction

Is it possible that the most famous Universal Atonement verse actually teaches a Limited Atonement? Most Christians have memorized John 3:16 from an early age. Most Christians also believe that John 3:16 teaches that Jesus died for the sins of everyone who has lived, or will live. Is it possible that the majority of churches today have the wrong understanding of John 3:16? Is it possible that John 3:16 actually teaches that Jesus died for His elect only? In this essay I will show beyond any reasonable doubt that John 3:16 teaches a Limited Atonement.

The intent of this essay is to expound on John 3:16, while using minimal support from other Books of the Bible. Stronger and clearer support from other Bible verses supporting a Limited Atonement were purposely omitted.

Argument #1 - John 3:16-17 in Context

16 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.

17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

When one is to understand the meaning of words, it is best to let the Bible define its own words. Using an English dictionary might be useful for understanding certain words, but God's definition is the one we must seek after. A misunderstanding of the word 'might' in verse 17 will completely change the meaning of John 3:16. If the word might means, 'has the possibility to', then the common understanding of John 3:16 is intact. If we substitute that definition of might into verse 17 we have, 'For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him has the possibility to be saved.'

On the other hand, if the word might means, 'will in time', it will completely destroy most evangelicals understanding of John 3:16, and thus their doctrine as well. If we substitute that definition into verse 17 we have, 'For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him will in time be saved.'

Let me further clarify my point. If might means 'will in time' then the word world cannot mean, everybody. John 3:17 would then teach that every single person from all times past and all times future will be saved. Any student of the Bible knows that is not the case. But could the word might actually mean, 'will in time'? Lets find out by reading some other verses in the Book of John to see if might could actually mean, 'will in time'.

John 10:17 'Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again.' Was it possible that Jesus would not rise from the dead? Acts 2:24 'Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.'

John 11:4 'When Jesus heard that, he said, This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.'

John 17:12 'While I was with them in the world, I kept them in thy name: those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition that the scripture might be fulfilled.'

John 19:24 'They said therefore among themselves, Let us not rend it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be: that the scripture might be fulfilled, which saith, They parted my raiment among them, and for my vesture they did cast lots. These things therefore the soldiers did.' Was there only a possibility that the scripture would be fulfilled? John 10:34-35 'Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods? If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken:' Acts 1:16 'Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled, which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake before concerning Judas, which was guide to them that took Jesus.' The fulfillment of scripture is most certain. Jesus said in Matthew 5:18 'For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or on tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.' Whatever we may consider certain, fulfillment of scripture is more certain!

It seems to me that by substituting the words 'every single person' for word 'world' in John 3:16 does great damage to Jesus' reputation. For if Jesus was sent to save every single person, his mission was a complete failure! But if world means, a whole host of people, then Jesus' reputation remains impeccable, for that is exactly what He did.

Argument #2 - Whom did God love?

'If the Lord hath such a natural affection to all, as to love them so far as to send his Son to die for them, whence is it that this affection of his doth not receive accomplishment? whence is it that it is hindered, and doth not produce its effects? why doth not the Lord engage his power for the fulfilling of his desire? 'It doth not seem good to his infinite wisdom,' say they, 'so to do.' Then is there an affection in God to that which, in his wisdom, he cannot prosecute. This among the sons of men, the worms of the earth, would be called a brutish affection.' [The Death of Death, John Owen, page 210] In other words, where is the love of God if he died for all, but made no provision to get the Gospel to all. My guess is that millions of people have died having never heard of Jesus nor had the opportunity to believe in him. If God loved them, why did He not make provision to get the Gospel to them? Surely He is able to do so.

Argument #3 - No Reason to die for some

Nothing that includes any imperfection is to be assigned to Almighty God: he is God all-sufficient; he is our rock, and his work is perfect. [The Death of Death, John Owen, page 210] Just from a logical point, it was completely unnecessary for Jesus to die for the sins of those already in Hell. For those in Hell at the time of the crucifixion, if every single sin, including unbelief was atoned for, why are they still in Hell? For that reason, we must reject that John 3:16 teaches a Universal Atonement.

Argument #4 - Men of God from the Past

John Newton 'Neither education, endeavours, nor arguments, can open the eyes of the blind. It is God alone, who at first caused light to shine out of darkness, who can shine into our hearts, to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.' People may attain some natural ideas of spiritual truths by reading books, or hearing sermons, and may thereby become wise in their own conceits; they may learn to imitate the language of an experienced Christian; but they know not what they say, or whereof they affirm, and are as distant from the true meaning of the terms, as a blind man who pronounces the words blue or red, is from the ideas which those words raise in the mind of a person who can distinguish colours by his sight. And from hence we may infer the sovereignty, as well as the efficacy of grace; since it is evident, not only that the objective light, the word of God, is not afforded universally to all men; but that those who enjoy the same outward means have not all the same perceptions.' [The Words of John Newton, Vol 1, The Banner of Truth Trust, pg 285-286]

Charles H. Spurgeon 'Another says, `I want to know about the rest of the people. May I go out and tell them - Jesus Christ died for every one of you? May I say - there is life for every one of you?' No; you may not. You may say - there is life for every man that comes. But if you say there is life for one of those that do not believe, you utter a dangerous lie. If you tell them Jesus Christ was punished for their sins, and yet they will be lost, you tell a willful falsehood. To think that God could punish Christ and then punish them - I wonder at your daring to have the impudence to say so! [Free Will - A Slave, A sermon delivered Sunday morning, December 2, 1855, at New Park Street Chapel, London, England.]

'I would rather believe a limited atonement that is efficacious for all men for whom it was intended, than a universal atonement that is not efficacious for anybody, except the will of men be joined with it. [Charles H. Spurgeon, Volume 4, 1858, New Park Street Pulpit, pg 70]

Arthur W. Pink 'But the objector comes back to John 3:16 and says, 'World means world.' True, but we have shown that 'the world' does not mean the whole human family. The fact is that 'the world' is used in a general way. When the brethren of Christ said 'Show thyself to the world' (John 7:4), did they mean 'Shew Thyself to all mankind'? When the Pharisees said 'Behold, the world is gone after Him' (John 12:19), did they mean that 'all the human family' were flocking after Him? When the apostle wrote, 'Your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world' (Rom. 1:8), did he mean that the faith of the saints at Rome was the subject of conversation by every man, woman, and child on earth? When Rev. 13:3 informs us that 'all the world wondered after the beast', are we to understand that there will be no exceptions? These, and other passages which might be quoted, show that the term 'the world' often has a relative rather than an absolute force.

[Objections to God's Sovereignty Answered by Arthur W. Pink, internet sermon]

Application

'I'm convinced. I can't prove this by a Gallup Pole. But I'm convinced in my experience, that one of the reasons that so many people who hear the Gospel are nonchalant about their lostness, and their being on the broad road that leads to destruction is that they have been told umpteen times Christ died for them. Well see logically, if Christ died for them, what do they have to worry about. Nothing! But if that is the very point in question, then they have everything to be concerned about, because until they are in Him, they are lost and under the wrath of God.' [The Doctrines of Grace, Limited Atonement tape TE-BL-009, J. Hufstetler]

A false understand of John 3:16 results in contriving a foolish gospel that men can be saved apart from Jesus, which is no Gospel at all. I have heard this teaching many times on Christian Radio. They speculate that it might be possible to be saved without hearing of Jesus the Saviour. They use Romans 1:20 'For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.'

Donald Lake in the book *Grace Unlimited* spends much energy seeking to refute particular redemption. Then, opting for a universal atonement, discusses it's implication for missions and draws a revealing conclusion:

A valid offer of grace has been made to mankind, but its application is limited by man's response rather than God's arbitrary selection. God knows who would, under ideal circumstances, believe the Gospel, and on the basis of his foreknowledge, applies that Gospel even if the person never hears the Gospel during his lifetime.

It should be clear that these positions severely alter the ends of evangelism and eliminate its uniqueness. According to this view, no longer is the preaching of the Gospel essential to the salvation of men. Ponder the situation and ask, 'Is general atonement the friend of the Gospel, and can it sustain true evangelism?' [Thomas J. Nettles, 'By His Grace and for His Glory', page 404]

I'd like to see chapter and verse for Donald Lake's premise. Thus people would rather believe a person can be saved without hearing of Jesus, than believe a Limited Atonement. This very position to me is an affirmation of a Limited Atonement. When one even considers the possibility of a person being saved apart from hearing the Gospel, they have admitted defeat.

Understanding the Nature of Salvation is the key to unlocking the Bible. If one does not grasp God's plan of redemption, how can anything else be rightly understood. If the foundation is not solid, any structure built on it cannot stand. I agree with Spurgeon when he said '..I will go as far as Martin Luther, in that strong assertion of his, where he says, If any man doth ascribe of salvation, even the very least, to the free will of man, he knoweth nothing of grace, and he hath not learnt Jesus Christ aright. It may seem a harsh sentiment; but he who in his soul believes that man does of his own free will turn to God, cannot have been taught of God, for that is one of the first principles taught us when God begins with us, that we have neither will nor power, but that he gives both; that he is 'Alpha and Omega' in the salvation of men.' [Free Will - A Slave, A sermon delivered Sunday morning, December 2, 1855, at New Park Street Chapel, London, England.]

We live in a time when everybody wants their rights. In reality we have no rights. We have all offended an infinitely Holy God, and rightfully deserve eternal punishment for it. We are deserving of not the least sweet Gospel truth. But thanks be to God for his infinite mercy. Let us 'Give unto the Lord the glory due unto his name' (Psalm 29:2) and humble ourselves before Him. Let us thank him for showing us mercy, and reject any credit the flesh attempts to grab.

Some contend that the Nature of Salvation is not really that important, and not worthy of serious study: All one really needs to know is that Jesus Saves. I believe otherwise. There has always been counterfeit gospels, and their always will be. The soul of a person is of infinite value, and thus the state of it is worthy of diligent study. The eternal destiny of a soul is at stake.

The Gospel of Grace liberates, with the promise of eternal bliss one day. The gospel of works holds a man in bondage at the present, and damns the soul forever after death. With that much to gain or loose, the Nature of Salvation is worthy of our most careful consideration.