

Limited verses Unlimited Atonement
An examination of the proof texts used in the controversy

Did Jesus actually pay the penalty only for those sins of those who would believe in Him, or for the sins of every person who ever lived? Was the redemption merely potential or was it actual? Is the purchase of redemption inseparable from the bestowal of redemption?

The Bible does speak of atonement in both a limited and unlimited sense, and most arguments for or against limited atonement are built upon theological systems. Disregarding all theological frameworks, what does the Bible really say?

The Bible speaks of Christ saving "His people."

Matthew 1:21

"She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save His people from their sins."

Appearing to Joseph in a dream, the angel of the Lord speaks of Jesus in the context of inheriting the Davidic kingdom and redeeming the Jews (Luke 1:31-33; Acts 5:31; 13:23-24). While this passage speaks of saving the Jews, this does not mean that Jesus did not come to save Gentiles as well.

The Bible speaks of Jesus dying for "many."

Matthew 20:28

"...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Matthew 26:28

"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Mark 10:45 (L)

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Romans 5:15-19

But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. The gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification. For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.

While the English and Greek term for "many" is restrictive and does not include the idea of "all", the Hebrew term has an inclusive sense of the group and is equivalent to the concept of "all". This can be easily seen in Romans 5:15-19 where Paul writes with the Semitic inclusive sense to refer to the entire human race. To learn more about this particular issue associated with translating Hebrew to Greek, see the article "Did Jesus Die for "Many" or Did He Die for "All"? The Controversy Of Limited Atonement – Part 3."

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The Bible speaks of dying for the “sheep.”

John 10:11-18

“As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay my life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My father.”

Jewish religious leaders were perplexed, who was Jesus the Christ? Jesus makes one of His “I Am” statements, “I am the good shepherd” who lays down His life for His sheep. Who are the sheep? In John 10:26 Christ defines what a sheep is, “But you do not believe, because you are not of my sheep,” and in speaking to the Jewish religious leaders, he is referring to Jewish Believers. When Jesus speaks of the “other sheep” that are “not of this fold,” He is speaking of Gentile Believers (Gal 3:6-14). While making a figurative comment about Jewish religious leaders, the context is about Jesus’ relationship with Believers and refers to the subjective and limited aspect of atonement.

The Bible speaks of dying for the “church.”

Acts 20:28

“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”

Ephesians 5:25-26

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

Throughout his ministry, Paul emphasized God’s love and esteem for the church and exhorted the church and its leaders to pursue moral purity and to be a witness to the world. The imagery of marriage is often used to illustrate the relationship of Jesus to the church and as an example for human relationships as well. This focus on Jesus’ relationship to the church and Christians refers to the subjective and limited aspect of atonement.

The Bible speaks of dying for the “elect.”

Romans 8:31-35

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ?

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In speaking to Believers about the reality of Christ's love, Paul answers his rhetorical question of verse 31 with a question in verse 32. If no one can oppose, charge or condemn Christians, then no one can separate Christians from the love of God. This view is with a focus on the relationship with Christians, and it reflects the subjective and limited aspect of atonement.

The Bible speaks of Christ "dying for the "world" or "saving the world."

John 1:29

The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

John 3:14-18

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

John 4:40-42

So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they were asking Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. Many more believed because of His word; and they were saying to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world."

In this passage a Gentile identifies Jesus as the "Savior of the world."

John 12:46-47

I have come as Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness. If anyone hears My sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world.

2 Corinthians 5:18-19

Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

1 John 2:2

and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

This verse is very clear about unlimited atonement and that arguments that John was writing exclusively to Jewish Christians are unfounded.

1 John 4:14

We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world.

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While the Greek noun “kosmos” means “world” in the inclusive sense, there are 3 nuances found in the New Testament: a) universe (Acts 17:24; Phil 2:15), b) sphere or place of human life (Matt 4:8; Mark 8:36; Luke 4:5; John 11:9) or c) humanity or object of God’s love. In the anthropological sense, the term “kosmos” refers to the present age, and in contrast, the future redeemed world is never called “kosmos;” instead it is called “kingdom of God” or “new heaven and a new earth.” Despite the weight of all scholarly concordances and lexicons, proponents of limited atonement believe that the Greek term “kosmos” can refer to a limited part of mankind and cite John 12:19; Romans 5:18 and 11:12 as evidence of this interpretation. Nevertheless, in no instance does the meaning of “kosmos” ever limit itself to a class of people such as “the world of the elect.”

The Bible speaks of Christ dying “for the lost or ungodly.”

Luke 19:10

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.

Romans 5:6

For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

The terms “lost” and “ungodly” describe the spiritual state of all human beings; however, advocates of limited atonement interpret these passages as the “lost elect” or “ungodly elect,” which the text does not say.

The Bible speaks of Christ “justification for all,” “dying for all,” “ransom for all” or “tasting death for everyone.”

Romans 5:18

So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.

2 Corinthians 5:14-15

For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who love might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.

1 Timothy 2:3-6

This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time.

1 Timothy 4:10

For it is for his we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.

This passage indicates a clear distinction between “all men” and “those who believe.” Atonement can be seen in its objective function and in its limited subjective function.

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Titus 2:9-11

Urge bondslaves to be subject to their own masters in everything, to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith so that they will adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect. For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men,

Hebrews 2:9

But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone.

Hebrews 9:28

"So Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him."

It is difficult to impose a restrictive interpretation to the terms "all," or "everyone" on the text when the Greek language or context does not support that; yet, the theological framework of limited atonement demands that to be so.

The Bible speaks of a group that was given to Him by God the Father.

John 17:6-11

"I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. Now they have come to know that everything You have given Me is from You; for the words which You gave Me I have given to them; and they received them and truly understood that I came forth from You, and they believed that You sent Me. I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours;" and all things that are Mine; and I have been glorified in them. I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are."

John 17 is known as the High Priestly Prayer where Jesus makes requests for Himself (verses 1-5), intercedes for the apostles (verses 6-19) and for future Believers (verses 20-26). In John 17:6-19, Jesus is indeed praying on behalf of the disciples, out of concern and love, for their preservation, protection and sanctification. Advocates of limited atonement argued that since Jesus interceded for a limited group, that Jesus could have died exclusively for Believers as well.

The Bible speaks of the universal offer of salvation.

Matthew 28:18-20

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Acts 2:21

AND IT SHALL BE THAT EVERYONE WHO CALLS UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.

Acts 10:43

Of him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.

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Acts 13:38-39

Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses.

Acts 17:30-31

Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.

Romans 10:8-11

But what does it say? "THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, in your mouth and in your heart" – that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, "WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED."

Throughout the Bible, the universal offer of salvation is made without restriction. Would this general invitation be offered if Christ did not atone for all?

The doctrine of salvation is a difficult and challenging topic of study. The logic of longstanding theological systems can color one's biblical hermeneutics.

For example, If you understand atonement in the limited sense, you cannot reconcile biblical passages that are of the unlimited sense without arbitrarily changing the meaning of words. Does it make hermeneutic sense to always restrict the meaning of the terms "all," "whosoever" or "world," within the context of salvation, to the elect?

Biblical passages such as 1 Timothy 4:10 and 1 Peter 2:1 pose a particular problem. Christ has apparently done something for everyone but to a lesser degree than to a Believer. There appears to be a distinction between for whom Christ died and those who were finally saved.

How is one able to reconcile and harmonize the various biblical passages that refer to atonement in both the limited and unlimited sense? Through careful exegesis and word study does it become apparent that redemption has two facets: an objective and subjective aspect.

Understanding this provides the basis to understand these types of questions:

Did Jesus actually pay the penalty only for those sins of those who would believe in Him, or for the sins of every person who ever lived?

Was the redemption merely potential or was it actual?

Is the purchase of redemption inseparable from the bestowal of redemption?

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Questions like these reflect the confusion between the objective and universal aspect of atonement with the subjective, individual and limited aspect. If you understand atonement in the unlimited sense, you can reconcile biblical passages that are of the restricted sense as referring to a subjective aspect of atonement and the unlimited reference to the objective aspect of atonement. Jesus did die for the sins of every person who ever lived, but the benefits of atonement are limited to those who believe in Jesus Christ.

And the offer of salvation is indeed universal and without restriction just as the Bible says.

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