

Understanding Theology in 15 Minutes A Day for 40 Days

Day 28

Did Jesus Die for Everyone?

If the death of Jesus Christ is the only basis for one's salvation, this question must be asked: Did he die for everyone or not for everyone? Specifically, did Jesus die for all people, even people who will never believe and be saved? Or did Jesus die only for those whom God knew would eventually believe and be saved (the elect)? Arminians and Calvinists answer differently.

Unlimited Atonement

Arminians believe Jesus died for all people—the elect and the non-elect, those who will be saved and those who will never be saved. *Unlimited* (or general) atonement, the view that God sent Jesus to die for all, is consistent with Arminian theology because it stresses God's love for *all* people (John 3:16) and his desire for *all* people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9).

Obviously, the fact that he died for all does not save all people automatically; the Bible is clear that, in judgment, many sinners will be separated from God eternally. However, it does make all people *potentially* savable. The decision is left up to each individual to believe, or not to believe, in Jesus as their Savior. Only when the individual believes is the potential salvation that Jesus provided actualized for that individual.

Numerous biblical texts seem to support this view. Upon seeing Jesus, John the Baptist exclaimed, *"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* (John 1:29). Just after Paul says that God desires all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4), he adds, *"[Christ] gave himself as a ransom for all people" (v. 6)*. And, a bit later in the same letter: *"We have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe" (4:10)*. *"[Jesus Christ] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2)*.

One theological argument for unlimited atonement is this: If Jesus did not die for all, how can the gospel be legitimately offered to all? (See John 3:14–18; Acts 17:30; Romans 10:13.) If Jesus didn't die for everyone, salvation cannot be offered to everyone.

Limited Atonement

Most Calvinists believe Jesus died only for the elect, meaning those who eventually will believe in Jesus and be saved. This view is called *limited* (or particular) atonement—limited to the elect, not limited in value or sufficiency.

There are also biblical texts that appear to support this view. Jesus said, “*The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (**Matthew 20:28**) and “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for *many* for the forgiveness of sins” (**Matthew 26:28**). More specifically, he, the good shepherd, said, “*I lay down my life for the sheep*” (**John 10:15**). *Sheep* refers to those who would follow him—the elect. Similarly, Paul wrote, “*Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*” (**Ephesians 5:25**). The church is made up of the elect.

Theologically, Calvinists argue against unlimited atonement in several ways. **First**, if Jesus died for all people, then why aren’t all people saved? Why doesn’t this view result in universalism? **Second**, if Jesus died for all people but not all are saved as a result, doesn’t this mean Jesus failed in his work on the cross? Isn’t some of the value of his death wasted on those who do not believe? **Third**, if Jesus died for all people and yet those who do not believe are sent to hell as punishment for their sins, doesn’t that amount to two punishments for the same sin? Even we humans have laws against double jeopardy. Doesn’t this imply that God is unjust?

A “Third View”

In this case, a mediating position that seems to make the most sense comes from recognizing that God was doing more through the death of Jesus than providing the basis of salvation. There is truth in both of the first two positions, so the third view can be stated like this: Jesus did indeed die for all people, but especially for the elect.

This seems to be exactly Paul’s point in saying Jesus “*is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe*” (**1 Timothy 4:10**). John makes the same point: “*[Jesus] is the atoning sacrifice for [believers’] our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world*” (**1 John 2:2**).

An important question to consider here is “How did the apostle John use the term *world*, in this text and in others (e.g., **John 3:16**; **1 John 5:19**)?” A word study indicates that not only is he talking about all people in the world, but he is also including the additional idea that all

people are bad. In John's usage, *world* often has a morally negative connotation, referring to all people who are in rebellion against God (e.g., **1 John 2:15–17; 3:13; 5:4–5**). This is clearly seen in **1 John 5:19**, “*The whole world [same phrase as in 2:2] is under the control of the evil one.*” This supports the notion that Jesus really did die for all people—all *evil* people—and emphasizes God's love for all.

In Paul's words, “*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*” (**Romans 5:8**). It's even more amazing to consider that, knowing those who would reject and even hate Christ to the very end of their life, he still died specifically for them. One divine purpose in the atonement is *to magnify God's amazing love for all people*.

Jesus died for *all*. *All* are invited to Christ, and *all* who come and believe will be saved. We truly can say to anyone, “Jesus died for *you*.” So another purpose in the atonement was *to provide a basis for the universal offer of the gospel and the provisional salvation of all*.

But it also seems to be true that knowing who the elect are, Jesus died for them in a special way in order to secure their salvation, thus the texts cited above regarding Jesus dying for the “many,” the “sheep,” and his “church.” Though God loves all people, he has a more intense love for his own. This was true of his Old Testament people, Israel (**see Deuteronomy 10:15**). He loved Egyptians and Canaanites, but he loved Israel in a more focused way. Now that love is also focused on the church (**see Ephesians 5:25**). So yet another purpose in the atonement was *to secure the salvation of the elect*.

Another way to state this mediating position is this: The atonement was *sufficient* for all and *efficient* for the elect. It was sufficient for all in that Jesus' death for all renders all people potentially savable if they will only believe. It was efficient for the elect in that the elect will believe, thus turning their salvation from potential to actual.

INTERESTING FACT

Dr. Bruce Ware, professor of theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, calls this mediating view *Un/limited atonement*. This term captures the validity within both the limited and unlimited atonement views.