If God Desires All Men to Be Saved, Why Aren't They?
Scripture: 1 Timothy 2
Code: BQ021513

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 borne at the proper time. And for this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying) as a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. (2:3–7)

This powerful and dramatic passage answers the question “Why pray for the lost?” It is one of the most definitive statements in all of Scripture of the saving purpose of God. It contains several reasons for evangelistic prayer.

Evangelistic Prayer is Morally Right

This points back to the commandment to pray for the lost in verses 1–2. *Kalon* (**good**) refers to what is intrinsically,morally good. God defines prayer for the lost as the noble and spiritually proper thing to do, and our consciences agree. The lost suffer the agony of sin, shame, and meaninglessness in this life, and the eternal hell of unrelenting agony in the life to come. Knowing that, it is the most excellent task to pray for their salvation.

Some might argue that Jesus said in John 17:9, “I do not ask on behalf of the world.” But there Christ was praying as Great High Priest for God’s elect. Because He is sovereign, omniscient Deity, His prayer was specific in a way ours cannot be. It was a prayer exclusively for the salvation of those whom He loved and chose before the foundation of the world to be partakers of every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3–4). “The world” was specifically excluded from the saving design of this prayer.

Our prayers, however, are not the prayers of a high priest; we pray as ambassadors of Christ, whose task it is to beseech men and women on His behalf to be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:20). We are therefore commanded to offer our **entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings … on behalf of all men.** Our earnest desire ought to be for the salvation of all sinners (cf.. Rom. 9:3; 10:1). We are not to try to limit evangelism to the elect only.

There are two reasons for this. First, God’s decree of election is secret. We do not know who the elect are and have no way of knowing *until* they respond to the gospel. Second, the scope of God’s evangelistic purposes is broader than election. “Many are called, but few are chosen” (Matt. 22:14).

Even Jesus' high priestly prayer *does* embrace the world in this important regard. Our Lord prayed for unity among the elect so that the truth of the gospel would be made clear to the world: "that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me. … that the world may know that Thou didst send Me" (John 17:21, 23). God's call to all sinners is a bona fide and sincere invitation to salvation: " 'As I live!' declares the Lord God, 'I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?' " (Ezek. 33:11).

Evangelistic Prayer is Consistent with God's Desire

Obviously, in some inscrutable sense, God's *desire* for the world's salvation is different from His eternal saving *purpose.* We can understand this to some degree from a human perspective; after all, our purposes frequently differ from our desires. We may *desire,* for example, to spend a day at leisure, yet a higher *purpose* compels us to go to work instead. Similarly, God's saving purposes transcend His desires. (There is a crucial difference, of course: We might be compelled by circumstances beyond our control to choose what we do not desire. But God's choices are determined by nothing other than His own sovereign, eternal purpose).

God genuinely **desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.** Yet in "the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph. 3:11), He chose only the elect "out of the world" (John 17:6), and passed over the rest, leaving them to the damning consequences of their sin (cf.. Rom. 1:18–32). The culpability for their damnation rests entirely on them because of their sin and rejection of God. God is not to blame for their unbelief.

Since **God desires all men to be saved,** we are not required to ascertain that a person is elect before praying for that person's salvation. God alone knows who all the elect are (2 Tim. 2:19). We may pray **on behalf of all men** with full assurance that such prayers are **good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior.** After all, "the Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and great in loving-kindness. The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works" (Ps. 145:8–9).

Apodektos (**acceptable**), is from *apodechomai,* which means "to receive gladly," "to accept with satisfaction," or "to heartily welcome." The Lord eagerly accepts prayer for the lost because it is consistent with His desire for their salvation.

Such prayer is also consistent with His nature as **Savior.** The phrase **God our Savior** appears five other times in the Pastoral Epistles (1:1; 4:10; Titus 1:3; 2:10; 3:4), as well as in Jude 25. God is not only creator, sustainer, king, and judge, but also savior. His saving character is manifested through His Son, Jesus Christ (2:5–6; 2 Tim. 1:10; Titus 1:4; 2:13; 3:6). God is the "Savior of all men" in a temporal sense, but "especially of believers" in an eternal sense (1 Tim. 4:10b).

That truth of God's saving nature is also taught in the Old Testament (cf.. 2 Sam. 22:3; Ps. 106:21; Isa. 43:3, 11). The idea that the God of the Old Testament is a vengeful, wrathful ogre mollified by the gentle, loving, New Testament Christ is not at all accurate.

When God **desires all men to be saved,** He is being consistent with who He is. In Isaiah 45:22 God said, "Turn to Me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth." Isaiah 55:1 invites "every one who thirsts" to "come to the waters" of salvation. Again, in Ezekiel 18:23, 32 God states very clearly that He does not desire that the wicked should perish, but that they would sincerely repent (cf.. Ezek. 33:11). In the New Testament, Peter writes, "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

No true biblical theology can teach that God takes pleasure in the damnation of the wicked. Yet though it does not please Him, God will receive glory even in the damnation of unbelievers (cf.. Rom. 9:22–23). How His electing grace and predestined purpose can stand beside His love for the world and desire that the gospel be preached to all people, still holding them responsible for their own rejection and condemnation, is a mystery of the divine mind. The Scriptures teach God's love for the world, His displeasure in judging sinners, His desire for all to hear the gospel and be saved. They also teach that every sinner is incapable yet responsible to believe and will be damned if he does not. Crowning the Scripture's teaching on this matter is the great truth that God has elected who will believe and saved them before the world began. What mystery!

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33–36)

To come to the knowledge of the truth is to be saved. *Epignosis* (**knowledge**) is used three other times in the Pastoral Epistles (2 Tim. 2:25; 3:7; Titus 1:1). In all four occurrences, it refers to the true knowledge that brings about salvation. Far from desiring their damnation, God desires the lost to come to a saving knowledge of the truth.

Some have argued that this passage teaches universalism. If God desires the salvation of **all men,** they argue, then all will be saved, or God won't get what He wants. Others argue that what God will-s comes to pass, because **all men** means all classes of men, not every individual. Neither of those positions is necessary, however. We must distinguish between God's will of decree (His eternal purpose), and His will expressed as desire. **Desire** is not from *boulomai,* which would be more likely to express God's will of decree, but from *thelo,* which can refer to God's will of desire. This is precisely the distinction theologians often make between God's secret will and His revealed will.

God desires many things that He does not decree. It was never God's *desire* that sin exist, yet the undeniable existence of sin proves that even sin fulfills His eternal purposes (Isa. 46:10)—though in no sense is He the author of sin (James 1:13).

Jesus lamented over Jerusalem, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Matt. 23:37). John Murray and Ned B. Stonehouse wrote, "We have found that God himself expresses an ardent desire for the fulfillment of certain things which he has not decreed in his inscrutable counsel to come to pass" (*The Free Offer of the Gospel* [Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presb. & Ref., 1979], 26). God desires all men to be saved. It is their willful rejection of Him that sends them to hell. The biblical truths of election and predestination do not cancel man's moral responsibility.

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