

WHY GOD WON'T SAVE EVERYONE (EVEN THOUGH HE WOULD LIKE TO)

Some Christians believe that God will ultimately save everyone—a belief that is referred to as “universal salvation.”¹ After all, the apostle John wrote that “God is love.”² Could a loving God really condemn some of His beloved creatures to anything other than Heaven?³ Numerous Scriptures say He *will* do so, and regrettably, I believe He *must* do so.

What the Scriptures Say. The New Testament abounds with descriptions of this ultimate judgment and its potentially dire consequences. Jesus spoke of the “narrow gate” that leads to life, contrasting it with the wide way that leads to “destruction.”⁴ He urged His followers not to fear men, who can only kill the body, but rather to fear God, who can destroy the soul.⁵ He described a scene of final judgment, at which some will be condemned because of their hard-heartedness toward their fellow man.⁶ Jesus even suggested that drowning or self-mutilation would be preferable to enduring such condemnation.⁷

The apostle Paul warned repeatedly that those who refuse God’s free gift of salvation and eternal life will face “death.”⁸ James said that anyone who turns a fellow Christian away from sin “will save his soul from death.”⁹ And the Second Letter of Peter speaks of the “day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.”¹⁰ Many New Testament passages warn of

¹ One of the earliest advocates of this position was the 3rd century Christian writer, Origen. For more on Origen, see the article, “Roman Persecution of Christianity,” on this web site.

² 1 John 4:8 (all Biblical quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB) translation)

³ I do not use the word “Hell” because it carries connotations of fire, brimstone, and eternal torture which are not supported by what the New Testament really says about the afterlife. For more on this topic, see the article “What is Hell Really Like?” on this web site.

⁴ Matthew 7:13-14; see also Luke 13:23-28

⁵ Matthew 10:28; see also Luke 12:4-5

⁶ Matthew 25:41-46; see also Mark 16:16, although that verse is not contained in some of the oldest New Testament manuscripts

⁷ Matthew 5:29-30, 18:2-9; Mark 9:42-50

⁸ See Romans 6:15-16, 6:21-23, 7:5, 7:24, 8:6-8, 8:12-13; 2 Corinthians 2:15-16, 4:3-4, 7:10; 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12

⁹ James 5:19-20

¹⁰ 2 Peter 3:7

God's wrath and the doom that awaits those who refuse God's mercy, often contrasting their fate with those who receive salvation and eternal life.¹¹ Many more scriptures foretell God's judgment and/or condemnation.¹²

Paul Was No Fool. In the face of this overwhelming scriptural evidence, those who favor universal salvation point to a few verses that seem to say that God will save *all* people. For example, Jesus said, "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself."¹³ Paul, in Romans 5:18, says, "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."¹⁴ And there is this statement in Paul's letter to the Ephesians: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive."¹⁵ Can these and similar scriptures¹⁶ be reconciled with the abundant verses that predict judgment, wrath, and condemnation? Yes.¹⁷ Let's begin with Romans 5:18, quoted above.

¹¹ See, for example: Luke 3:7-9; John 3:36; Romans 2:1-9, 2:12, 3:5; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 11:32; Ephesians 5:3-6; Philippians 1:27-28; Colossians 3:5-6; 1 Thessalonians 5:9; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-9; 1 Timothy 3:2-6; Jude 1:10-13; Revelation 11:16-18, 14:9-11, 20:12-15, 21:5-8

¹² Matthew 7:1-2, 10:14-15, 11:20-24, 12:33-37, 12:41-42; John 3:16-18, 5:24, 5:28-29, 12:47-48; Acts 17:30-31; Romans 2:16, 3:6, 14:10-12; 1 Corinthians 5:12-13; 2 Timothy 4:1; Hebrews 9:27-28, 10:26-31, 12:23, 13:4; James 2:13, 4:12, 5:9, 5:12; 1 Peter 1:17, 4:3-6, 4:17-18; 2 Peter 2:1-10; Jude 1:4-6.

See also the following Scriptures, where judgment and condemnation are at least implicit: Matthew 3:7-12, 7:15-19, 8:11-12, 13:36-42, 13:47-50, 18:23-35, 22:1-14, 23:13-14, 24:45-51, 25:26-30; Mark 8:34-38, 12:38-40; Luke 3:17, 6:37-38, 10:13-15, 11:31-32, 12:8-10, 12:42-48, 13:1-5, 16:19-31, 19:27, 20:46-47; John 12:25, 15:6; Acts 13:46; Romans 8:1, 11:13-14, 11:21-22; 1 Corinthians 6:2-3; Colossians 3:23-25; 1 Thessalonians 5:2-4; Hebrews 2:1-3; 2 Peter 2:12-22, 3:14-17

¹³ John 12:30-32

¹⁴ Romans 5:18

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:22

¹⁶ See Acts 3:21; Romans 11:32; Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:20; and 1 Timothy 2:6. I do not include in this list 1 Timothy 2:3-4, which says, "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." *Desiring* that all men be saved is far different than *saving* them.

¹⁷ In interpreting the law, judges attempt to avoid or resolve potential conflicts between statutes, whenever possible. This is called the doctrine of *pari materia*, and it recognizes that lawmakers do not intentionally enact conflicting laws. (A somewhat fuller discussion of this doctrine can be found in the article, "What is Hell Really Like?," on this web site.) A similar approach will serve us well in Biblical interpretation, since we can be reasonably certain that the New Testament writers did not intend to contradict themselves, or each other.

In the same letter in which Paul states that through Jesus’ “one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men,”¹⁸ he also says:

But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same *yourself*, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who **WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS**: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.¹⁹

And this:

Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.²⁰

Was Paul so stupid that he would contradict himself within the confines of a single letter? Or do these verses—which talk of judgment, wrath, and death, contrasted with eternal life—indicate that Paul’s meaning in Romans 5:18 is something other than universal salvation? As in any Biblical interpretation, context will help us immensely. Let’s first look at the historical context.

Like Jesus, most of the earliest Christians were Jews. As Christianity began to spread to Gentiles (i.e., non-Jews),²¹ many of these Jewish

¹⁸ Romans 5:18

¹⁹ Romans 2:3-8 (emphasis supplied, as indicated by underlining; the phrase in ALL CAPITALS is part of the original NASB translation, and indicates a quotation from Psalm 62:12 and/or Proverbs 24:12)

²⁰ Romans 6:21-23 (emphasis supplied, as indicated by underlining)

²¹ See, for example, Acts 9:15, 10:1-48, 11:1-18, 13:44-49.

Christians insisted that the Gentile converts must observe the Jewish Old Testament Law,²² apparently believing that salvation would come through both Christ **and the Law**. Paul strongly disagreed, and he wrote Romans (at least in part) to refute the Jewish notion that the Law made them special to God, and that He would save them because of this unique status.²³

Repeatedly in Romans, Paul emphasizes that God no longer distinguishes between Jew and Gentile, and that since the Law cannot save the Jews, *all* must rely on faith for salvation.²⁴ In this context, Paul's reference to "all men" in Romans 5:18 merely highlights his point that Christ did not die merely for the Jews, but for Gentiles as well. In other words, "all men," Jew and Gentile, now have the same chance for salvation through faith in Christ.

Romans 5:17 reinforces this interpretation:

For if by the transgression of the one [Adam], 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.

In Romans 5:17-18, Paul contrasts the outcome of Adam's sin, which contaminated all of mankind, with the effect of Jesus' obedience, which reconciled mankind to God and gives us "life" (i.e., eternal life). But in Romans 5:17, Paul does not say that *everyone* receives eternal life, but only "those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness." Elsewhere in Romans, Paul explains who receives this grace and righteousness—again, not everyone, but instead, those who have faith:

²² The Law, which is primarily derived from the first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), not only included the Ten Commandments, but also rules about hygiene, animal sacrifices, feasts and festivals, Temple practices, permitted and prohibited foods, criminal and civil laws, criminal and civil penalties, property rights, etc. And the Law required all males to be circumcised. See Genesis 17:9-14.

²³ John the Baptist encountered (and denounced) this belief that God would save the Jews because of their status as descendants of Abraham. For example, see Luke 3:8:

"Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham."

See also, Matthew 3:9.

²⁴ See, for example, Romans 1:16, 2:9-11, 2:25-29, 3:9, 3:23, 3:29-30, 9:24, 9:30-32, 10:12.

For we maintain that a man is justified [i.e., made righteous] by faith apart from works of the Law.²⁵

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.²⁶

Thus, the scriptural context of Romans 5:18 confirms what the historical context suggests—Paul was not saying that all people will be saved, but that the possibility of eternal salvation is now open to all people, not merely the Jews. In Paul’s theology, those who repent and turn back to God in faith are the ones who will be saved.²⁷

John Was Not a Fool, Either. John 12:32 is another verse cited in support of universal salvation. In John 12:32, Jesus says, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.” But as with Romans 5:18, the verses surrounding John 12:32 compel the conclusion that Jesus did not really mean that *all* people would be saved. Only a few verses earlier, in John 12:25, Jesus clearly states that some will receive eternal life and some will not: “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal.” And in the verses that follow John 12:32, Jesus warns of the judgment and “darkness” that await those who reject Him.²⁸ So what *is* the meaning of John 12:32? Perhaps Jesus, like Paul, simply meant that salvation was now open to all, and not merely the Jews, or perhaps He was pointing out that He was about to die for all men—even for those who would not ultimately receive eternal life. But either way, He clearly did not have universal salvation in mind.

As with Romans 5:18 and John 12:32, each of the verses commonly cited in support of universal salvation can be juxtaposed with verses from the same book that speak of God’s judgment, wrath, or condemnation—a strong indication that universal salvation was not the author’s original intent:

²⁵ Romans 3:28

²⁶ Romans 5:1-2

²⁷ For a more detailed discussion of what God really wants from us, see the article, “For God So Loved . . . Well, Wait a Minute,” on this web site.

²⁸ See John 12:35 and 12:46-48.

Universal Salvation

John 12:32

Acts 3:21²⁹

Romans 5:18, 11:32

1 Corinthians 15:22

Ephesians 1:10³⁰

Colossians 1:20

1 Timothy 2:6

Contrary verses in the same book

John 3:18, 3:36, 5:24, 5:28-29, 12:25, 12:35, 12:46-48, 15:6

Acts 13:46, 17:30-31

Romans 2:1-9, 2:12, 2:16, 3:5-6, 6:15-16, 6:21-23, 7:5, 8:6-8, 8:12-13, 11:21-22, 14:10-12

1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 5:12-13, 11:32

Ephesians 5:3-6

Colossians 3:5-6, 3:23-25

1 Timothy 3:6

Indeed, the advocates of universal salvation must ignore so many contrary Scriptures that they begin to look like wishful thinkers.

Why God Won't Save Everyone. But why should this be so? The Bible says that Jesus Christ died for all of mankind,³¹ so God is apparently able to save anyone—or everyone. And I have no doubt that God “desires all men to be saved.”³² If God *wants* to save everyone, and is *able* to save everyone, then why wouldn't He just do so? I believe it's because some of us won't allow Him that option.

Now I am not so arrogant that I think I know who won't be saved, nor am I trying to advise God about whom He should or should not allow into Heaven. But I am convinced that anyone who gets in will be required to leave certain baggage at the door: hatred, bitterness, jealousy, and grudges, for example. Heaven, to truly be Heaven, must be a place of love, kindness, and forgiveness—a place where people no longer inflict emotional pain on each other.³³ A desire to hurt someone, or to see someone hurt, can have no place in Heaven. God will not introduce cancer into a healthy body.

Thus, each of us may face this dilemma at the Judgment Day: forgive and love those we detest the most, or find ourselves excluded from Eternity.

²⁹ Acts 3:21, taken from Peter's speech on Pentecost, merely speaks of “restoration of all things,” which does not necessarily refer to salvation, much less universal salvation.

³⁰ As with Acts 3:21, Ephesians 1:10 is a weak verse in support of universal salvation, since it merely refers to “the summing up of all things in Christ.”

³¹ See, for example, 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 live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.” And 1 Timothy 2:6 says that Jesus “gave Himself as a ransom for all.”

³² 1 Timothy 2:4

³³ For a discussion of why this is so, see the article, “Sharing Heaven,” on this web site.

I am confident that we must enter Heaven on God's terms, or not enter it at all. Faced with such a choice, would anyone really cling to their hatred or bitterness, and forego Heaven? Scriptures suggest that many will.

Sincere forgiveness is tough. Unselfish love is even tougher. Can the religious bigot or the racist embrace those they now hate? Will the crime victim be willing to share Heaven with the offender? How about the cuckolded husband or the rejected wife who must forgive their former spouse?

Most importantly, can **you** forgive those who have wounded, angered, or offended you most deeply? We dare not dismiss this question by assuming that God would never let our enemies into Heaven. He may surprise us. Jesus insisted that we love our enemies.³⁴ He even forgave those who cruelly put Him to death.³⁵ God can be remarkably forgiving, and He requires that we do likewise:

“For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.”³⁶

Are you able to forgive your enemies? The answer to this question is likely to have eternal consequences. Jesus warned us:

“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”³⁷

We must enter Heaven through God's “narrow gate” of love and sincere forgiveness. Many will find that way too difficult.³⁸ I hope that you will not.

³⁴ See Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27, 6:35.

³⁵ See Luke 23:34.

³⁶ Matthew 6:14-15; see also Matthew 6:12, 18:21, 18:35; Mark 11:25-26; Luke 11:4, 17:3-4.

³⁷ Matthew 7:13-14

³⁸ I do not foreclose the possibility that God will save some—perhaps many—non-Christians. However, I believe that sincere Christians have a tremendous advantage in this regard because we have been practicing forgiveness in this life, and like anything, we get better at forgiving the more we practice it.