

“Basic Truth” series, #8

Understanding the Death of Christ (Part 1)¹

By Daryl Wingerd

Faith and Grace in Relation to the Death of Christ

As important as faith is in salvation, when a person believes and is justified, it is not faith that saves him—not even partially. Faith cannot appease God’s wrath. Only the blood of the perfect sacrifice can accomplish that. Nor does faith prompt God to save. A person is granted the ability and inclination to believe, through regeneration, precisely because God has chosen him for salvation (cf. Phil. 1:29; 2 Thess 2:13). As Paul said in Romans 9:16, “it does not depend on the man who wills [meaning the one who exercises faith] or the man who runs [meaning the one who exerts religious effort], but on God who has mercy” (NASB).

God’s saving grace is rightly understood as His spontaneous and unmerited favor. In other words, nothing human prompts grace. Nothing human merits grace. Nothing human activates grace or makes it effective. God’s grace, rightly understood, is not His *offer* of salvation. God’s grace *is* salvation, determined, accomplished, and applied.

When Paul wrote, “By grace you have been saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8), he was reminding the Ephesians that God had **determined** to save them through election, **accomplished** their salvation through Christ, and **applied** salvation to them through the work of the Holy Spirit (that is, through regeneration, which enabled and inclined them to believe).

The Danger of Expanding God’s Saving Intent

Interestingly, mistaken views of both grace and faith creep in when well-meaning people promote an expanded view of God’s saving intent in sending Christ. The Bible teaches us that Jesus came with the specific intent to save His people (cf. Matthew 1:21). It was the sins of His people that He bore on the cross (cf. Acts 20:28; Romans 8:32-33; Ephesians 5:25; 1 Peter 2:24). This biblical truth has been given the label, “limited atonement” (also called “definite atonement” or “particular redemption”). In contrast to the biblical view, however, many have chosen to believe and teach that Jesus came with the universal purpose of trying to save everyone. They believe that when Jesus died, He paid the debt for all the sins of all men in His attempt to save every one of them.

Such a belief, though extremely popular today, greatly devalues Christ’s sacrifice. Those who believe in a universal atonement must

admit that according to their belief, Jesus did not actually save anybody when He died. In other words, they cannot honestly say He died as a substitute. At best, the universal atonement limits Jesus to the status of being a *potential* substitute—one that made everyone savable. In this system of theology, something additional is required to make Christ’s sacrifice effective. This can be easily proved by asking a few questions:

I would ask, “Did Jesus pay the debt for all the sins of all people when He died on the cross?” If your answer is, “Yes,” then I would ask, “Are all people saved?” If you believe the Bible, you would certainly admit that they are not. You might even acknowledge that many people—people for whom you believe Christ died—are now suffering in hell.” I would continue by asking, “What would have been necessary, in addition to Christ’s death on the cross, to actually save those who are now in hell—people who Christ supposedly wanted to save and did all He could to save—people whom He made savable by His death, yet who nevertheless perished?” Your answer would undoubtedly be, “Faith.”

According to this way of thinking, Christ’s death, though *intended* for these people, and *potentially saving* for them, actually accomplished *nothing* on their behalf. Faith would have been necessary in order to make Christ’s sacrifice effective for them. In other words, although Jesus *wanted* to save them, and although He died *trying* to save them, He *could not* save them apart from their cooperation. No matter how vigorously it might be denied, the doctrine of universal atonement renders Christ’s sacrifice *alone* as ineffective.

The doctrine of universal atonement, though popular today, was not acceptable for one of the greatest evangelists ever. Consider Charles Spurgeon’s comments about the idea that Christ died for everyone:

He died for them all, they say, and yet so ineffectual was His dying for them, that though He died for them they are damned afterward. Now, such an atonement I despise—I reject it. . . . 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.”²

In the next issue of *Basic Truth*, we will examine some of the Scriptures that affirm both the *specific* intent, as well as the *complete* effectiveness of Christ’s death.

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² Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Sermons*, Vol. 4, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 218-219.