

6. WILL GOD SAVE EVERYONE IN THE END?

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The doctrine of **Ultimate Reconciliation [UR]** or, as it is more popularly called **Universal Salvation [US]**, claims that in the end God is committed to saving every single person ever born since Adam & Eve --- nobody will be eternally lost to either **burn on** in the fires of conscious torment forever. Nor will anybody **burn up** irreversibly by death in **the Lake of Fire**, but they will all **burn through** that fiery judgment to emerge finally reconciled!

Universalism says that God has sworn an oath to win the loving worship of everybody --- **“As I live, says the LORD --- every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Romans 14: 11; Phil. 2: 9-10).**

OBJECTION

Countering this bold **Universalist** claim are those who contend this cosmic confession --- from the now ultimately reconciled --- can only be a begrudging admission, much like a defeated army general having to sign a forced surrender following a crushing defeat.

What kind of a cowering confession through gritted teeth is this? What kind of prostration from forcibly buckled knees out of fear is this? It will be nothing different than the defeated king **Agag** when he bowed at Samuel’s feet before his execution by the prophet (**I Sam. 15:10f**). Cynical obeisance at best.

Not at all, counters **Universalism**. God is not in the business of *forcing* anyone to love Him. Such worship and confession will finally flow from hearts at last reconciled, forgiven, and regenerated by God’s kindness. Through a series of progressive judgments and revelations of the glorious love of God through Jesus Christ, even the most incorrigible of sinners will finally come to see their folly. At last everybody will see sense and will willingly repent and give loving praise and glad obedience to God.

To substantiate this claim **Universalists** point to **Matthew 11: 25** where Jesus says, **“I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth ... “**

The word for “thank” or “praise” (**ἐξομολογέω/exomologeō**) is the very exact word used in **Philippians 2: 11** where **every tongue confesses (**ἐξομολογέω/exomologeō**) that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father**. Just as Jesus’ praise to God was joyously genuine, even so will every sinner saved by grace offer glad thanks to God in the end.

Now, to be honest, it does appear that wherever the word **“confess”** occurs in other contexts, it overtly or covertly carries the note of joy. Even when people are found confessing their sins, there is the note of tearful relief in the knowledge of forgiveness (**Mark 1: 5; James 5: 16; Acts 19: 18**).

The one exception to this usage appears to be where **Judas** is found bargaining with the

authorities to betray Jesus for an agreed sum of money. We read in our English Bibles that **Judas consented and began to look for an opportunity to betray him to them when no crowd was present (Lk 22:6 NRSV, NIV, NASB).**

That word **consented** is the same word “**confess**” (ἐξομολογέω/*exomologeō*). We are left wondering, did Judas hesitantly, coldly agree to his dastardly deed of treachery or (if we allow for all other times where **confession** is made with joy) did **Judas consent** with a feeling of satisfaction as he **began to look for an opportunity to betray** Jesus? (¹)

I cannot imagine that anything less than the joyful confession of every tongue and the willing worship of every bended knee can possibly be less than what our God has decreed He will receive. If I am being honest, I have to agree that **Universalism** appears to have the better argument here.

But this only leads to a deeper conundrum ...

DOES GOD ALWAYS GET WHAT HE WILLS AND DESIRES?

It is necessary for **Universalists** to say that God’s will is invincible --- since it is His expressed will that all mankind be saved with a chorus of “Amens and Hallelujahs” --- then surely in the end He must finally get His predetermined way.

But, and it’s a big BUT, does the Almighty always get what He desires? The question may seem impertinent, rather blasphemous, and what I am about to say may come as a bit of a shock, but the Bible indicates that sometimes even God does not always get what He prefers!

Take for instance, how the religious leaders of Israel frustrated the will of God **by refusing to be baptized by John the Baptist ... they rejected God’s purpose for themselves (Lk 7: 30).** (²)

The similar idea is spoken of in **Acts 13: 46** where Paul **spoke out boldly** against certain Jews who were contradicting his Gospel-preaching, “**Since you reject the word of God you are counting yourselves unworthy of eternal life ...**”

Those folks were withstanding God’s will and desire for them. God was **not** able to save them against their own wills, even though Christ as **the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world** had assuredly died to provide salvation for them. God’s arms were open to them, pleading, yearning, calling. But they refused His universal offer and God was not about to force them --- against their own desires --- into His saving arms.

Then we have the heart-wrenching lament of Jesus, who so poignantly expressed his Father’s heart, “**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen**

¹ My own opinion, for what it’s worth, is that **Judas** betrayed Jesus with initial satisfaction and delight. It was not until afterwards when it all turned sour that the full weight of his treachery hit him and the remorse set in.

² They rejected God’s **βουλή** *boulé* which is defined as God’s purpose, will, counsel.

gathers her chicks under her wings, ***but you were not willing***. See, your house is left to you, desolate (Matt. 23: 37). (³)

The Lord desired to gather into His Kingdom all those people, but they frustrated God's desire: So we see that ***God cannot save those who will not do His will!*** Evidently puny mortals can withstand the will of the Almighty!

Let's compare two other Scriptures which make this clear:

The Lord is not slack concerning his promise ... but is longsuffering towards us, ***not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance*** (2 Peter 3: 9). This verse affirms what the Universalist holds dearly. God does not desire that any should perish. That's His will. No question. Now compare this verse;

[They] are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved (2 Thess. 2:10). This affirms the exact opposite --- some indeed do perish and forfeit salvation because of their wilful refusal to love God's truth. We must repeat: ***God cannot save those who refuse to do His will!***

Scripture thus affirms that God does not always get the desires of His heart. It's no different to loving parents who must watch on in sadness when their own children reject their wise and loving counsel. Just so, God wills for the world to repent and to be saved but regrettably, many do defy God's loving purpose for them. (⁴)

Is there any way our limited human minds can reconcile these two apparently opposite propositions? God has declared that ***every tongue will confess and every knee will bow*** before Him but, on the other hand, Scripture is quite clear that even the Almighty can be frustrated by the refusal of sinners to cooperate.

Let me delve a bit deeper into another conundrum that I also have pondered over long and hard ...

ADAM'S LEGACY HAS ALWAYS TROUBLED ME

For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive (I Cor. 15: 22). I have battled for many years with this verse. At first blush it seems to teach that just as all men suffer death from Adam (through no fault of their own), that likewise everybody will benefit from Christ's life (also through no doing of their own).

Is it saying that everyone is finally going to be saved because ***in Christ all shall be made alive?*** Universalists suggest Paul is contrasting universal death with universal life. (⁵)

But note: Paul has just written that ***those who have fallen asleep in Christ ... have hope in Christ ... and so in Christ all shall be made alive ... at His coming*** (Vs. 18f).

³ The two expressions, I desired but you were not willing are the one and same Greek verb θέλω/*thelō*.

⁴ For another example of men who refuse to repent and submit to God's who will be lost see Rev. 16:11

⁵ Along the same lines Universalists appeal to Romans 5: 18-19 : So, then, just as through one transgression came condemnation for all human beings, so also through one act of righteousness came a rectification of life for all human beings; for, just as by the heedlessness of the one man the many were rendered sinners, so also by the obedience of the one the many will be rendered righteous.

The subject is universal resurrection for every single **Christian** at the Coming (Parousia) of Christ --- only those who have died (fallen asleep) in union with Christ **shall be made alive at His coming.**

He is **not** talking about universal reconciliation for every unrepentant sinner! He is giving assurance to the believers that they will be raised to life again precisely because they are in union with Christ. It's life only in Christ.

My dilemma however remains: If in the end God cannot save everyone then it seems Adam has left a greater legacy than Jesus. Adam wins the majority on the broad road. Jesus therefore appears lesser for he can only save but a relative remnant on the narrow way. This does not seem to fit the teaching that **where sin abounded, grace abounded much more (Rom. 5: 20).**

I do not wish to be irreverent, but anything less than **Universal Salvation** appears to believe the exact reverse: Not to believe that God will save everybody in the end is effectively saying that, where grace abounded, sin did much more super-abound! This seems to be a powerful argument for **Universal Salvation.**

However, note that Paul goes on to say, **For if by the one man's offence death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the one, Jesus Christ (Rom. 5: 17).**

This clearly limits the sphere of effective grace only to **those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness**, surely? We have already seen it is God's will that men have a free will and a choice in determining their own eternal destinies. He has not made us robots. It is evidently possible to frustrate the grace of God. It is **whosoever will may come (Jn 3:16)**. So, **the "whosoever wills" implies there are the "whosoever won'ts"!**

Nevertheless, if I am to be honest, I have to say that there is a corner in my heart that still struggles with this. I mean, if not everybody will be finally saved from that **broad road that leads to destruction** and **the many** who are on that road, then Adam's impact on the cosmos appears greater than Christ who saves **the few who are on the narrow road (Matt 7:13-14).**

FATALISM

That said, if **Universal Salvation** is true, then it must show from Scripture that God has made a *fatalistic determination* for all men to be saved . He will have to coerce them in the end to make the predetermined choice that He wants --- against their own free choice which God has granted them to have. But where in Scripture is this agenda set forth? Contra **Calvinism**, the Bible says grace isn't irresistible!

SO WHAT ABOUT TITUS 2: 11?

Universalists claim **Titus 2: 11** should read (as **David Hart** translates); **For the grace of God has appeared, giving salvation to all human beings** (Translations such as the **RV, REV, NASB** and **NRSV** agree.) When read this way, a good case for **Universalism** may

be argued. God's grace gives, or brings salvation to every single human being. But is this what Paul really wrote?

Other translations put the emphasis on the universal availability of God's grace which is offered to all men. If we read it this way, it's not universal salvation being given to all, it's the universally given grace which makes possible salvation for all;

The **NIV** so reads; **For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.** The **Diaglott** reads, **For the saving favor of God is manifested for all men.** **Darby** reads, **For the grace of God which carries with it salvation for all men has appeared.** The **KJV** and **NKJV** also take it this way.

So, is it universal grace which offers the gift of salvation that is being made available to everybody, or is it universal salvation that is given to everyone by God's grace regardless of human accountability?

Well, as you might guess, the translators and commentators argue back and forth. Is there any way to resolve the matter? Yes there is! And as always, when the facts of grammar and words are legitimately disputed, the key is found in the context.

In the second chapter of **Titus** the apostle has just been laying out practical ways the Christian church must demonstrate the truth of the Gospel before the world. The Gospel of Christ will revolutionise every kind of person and class in the church by transforming every aspect of their lives as they prepare for the coming Kingdom.

Older men (v. 1), older women, (v.3) young women (v. 4), young men (v. 6) husbands and wives, and slaves (servants and employees) (v. 9), must all live attractive lives that will be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Saviour (v. 10). The church which consists of all types of people must demonstrate the life-transforming power of salvation to the world in which it finds itself;

Some translations actually bring this idea out by saying that God's saving grace has been revealed to every class and kind of person. No man or woman, no matter anyone's marital or employment status, no language group or tribe, no caste or social standing (or lack thereof) is outside the saving grace which God is offering through Christ.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope ... the glorious appearing of the great God and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness, and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own ... (v11f).

Here are two major incentives for Christians to live **upright and godly lives in this present age.** **1).** The saving grace of God will produce godly and joyful living to attract the world to the Faith, and **2).** The glorious return of Christ to be with his people in the everlasting kingdom of God is the all-consuming goal which inspires and draws us onward and upward.

We see then, that the subject of **Titus 2 verse 11** is not directly addressing whether God is going to save everybody at the very end. The whole context is that God's grace must be operational in our lives this side of the *Parousia* otherwise we deny the power of the Gospel before the world and betray our promised destiny as God's special people: The meaning is, **God's grace which brings salvation has appeared to all men**. So ...

It is universal grace which brings the prospect of salvation for all, rather than universal salvation which is the subject under consideration.

THE LAKE OF FIRE

We could go back and forth arguing the pros and cons of every single disputed verse. But I think we can arbitrate the matter reasonably decisively by pressing the **Universalists'** own argument to its inevitable [*ultimate!*] conclusion. Let me explain.

*The fact that some **do** enter **the Lake of Fire** actually proves they are thrown there by the will of God Himself.* God has warned that the unrepentant wicked will be thrown into **the Lake of Fire** even though He desires it otherwise. Remember, we have already said that **God cannot save those who will not do His will!** And, **the "whosoever wills"** implies there are **the "whosoever won'ts"!**

Therefore, **Universalists** want us to believe that those so condemned will somehow acquire the freedom to reverse their previous wilful dismissal of God's grace whilst they are in **Gehenna**.

Do you see the problem? It's this: Dead people are not conscious so how can they come to repentance? Dead people can't feel any pain of remorse to benefit from corrective judgment! Those thrown into **Gehenna** are now **dead**. Having been killed for a second time they are dissolved as persons. The Bible says the dead are not conscious of anything --- they have no thoughts (e.g. Ps. 146: 4).

Again, **Universalism** says, "No problemo! **The Lake of Fire** is only a metaphor." But this is an even BIGGER PROBLEM for **Universal Salvation** (if that were possible!) for ...

The writer of "**The Revelation**" actually explains his own metaphor/symbol twice. He says, **the Lake of Fire is the second death (Rev. 20: 14-15; 21: 8)!** Repeat: The metaphor is explained in concrete terms twice. Thus, **the Lake of Fire** is the literary symbol standing for the reality behind it --- extinction by and in death.

This is why **the metaphor cannot refer to a deathless death!** It's impossible in Bible terms to continue to consciously exist in death. Look. We are not at liberty to reimagine that at the very end of Scripture death no longer means destruction or corruption or dissolution as it has throughout the entire corpus of Scripture. How can we suddenly believe death is a living existence under painful conditions --- unless we want to write our own ending to the Bible!

As there is a second and higher life, so there is also a second and deeper death. And as after that life there is no more death (Rev. 21:4), so after that death there is no more life. (⁶)

Richard Francis Weymouth (one of the best accredited NT Greek scholars and translator of the much-used *New Testament in Modern Speech*) denied the **burn on** belief emphatically --- and by implication the **burn through** interpretation when he wrote;

My mind fails to conceive of a grosser misrepresentation of language, than when five or six of the strongest words which the Greek tongue possesses signifying *destroy* or *destruction* are explained to mean 'maintaining an everlasting but wretched existence.' To translate *black* as *white is nothing to this*. (⁷)

The Expositor's Bible Commentary agrees;

There is no shred of evidence in the NT that hell ever brings about genuine repentance. (⁸) And this, regarding the final destiny of those cast into **the Lake of Fire; When taken seriously this final note evaporates all theories of universalism or apokatastasis.** (⁹)

Oh, I wish I could find in the Bible something about a third resurrection out from the death of **the Lake of Fire**. **Universalists** think they can. But sadly, I can't. I only read about **the First Resurrection** and **the Second Resurrection**. And, as a matter of fact, **the Lake of Fire** is the last description of the final punishment of the wicked in the Bible. It appears to be the last word on the question. So ...

We must never let our theology be determined by sentimentalism. My wonderful uncle gave every indication of dying outside of Christ. I do not know the final state of his heart. But I am convinced my uncle and every single human being will at the last acknowledge that **the Judge of all the earth will do right (Gen. 18: 25)**.

As **David Hart** so eloquently observes,

In his final divine judgment on his creatures, God will judge himself ... and one must hold that by that judgment God will truly *disclose* himself (¹⁰)

Back of it all, back of our world, is the inviolate character of our great and exceedingly good God. In the meantime, I must as faithfully and as lovingly as I can present His saving grace in Jesus Christ as best as I can. I must hold out with equal emphasis, both the amazing love of God and His declared justice; I must preach both promise and warning, blessed hope and dreadful loss, perfect love and inexorable justice.

⁶ Alford, H. as quoted in *The Fire That Consumes: The Biblical Case For Conditional Immortality* by Edward William Fudge, Revised Edition, The Paternoster Press, 1994, p195 (Italics original).

⁷ Quoted by J.H. Pettingell in *The Unspeakable Gift*, p 322

⁸ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Revised Edition) Vol. 9, Tremper Longman 111 & David E. Garland*, General Editors, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, USA, 2006, p 587 (Bold

⁹ *Op Cit. Vol. 13* p775 (Bold emphasis mine).

¹⁰ **David Bentley Hart** in *That ALL Shall be Saved: Heaven, Hell & Universal Salvation*, Yale Uni Books, 2019 p. 73

The cross of Jesus Christ proves this perfect harmony is behind all of God's dealings with His creation: The Psalmist long ago said that **righteousness and peace will kiss each other** (Ps. 85: 11)! **"Behold, the goodness and the severity of God"** (Rom 11:22).

So, I am left with my own meditations. And I am perfectly well aware that these brief articles have only been able to scratch the surface and have left many stones unturned. But I close with this relevant story which I hope conveys my heart (and that of every believer).

"I SPOKE TO HIM WITH TEARS"

It's reported that when **Dwight Moody**, the well-known American evangelist was in England, that he had a private meeting with an equally well-known atheist. Some of his Christian friends after the meeting asked **Moody** if he had been able to candidly speak to the atheist about Jesus and the Gospel.

Moody answered **"Yes"**. They then asked if he had spoken to the atheist about hell.

"Yes" came the answer again. They responded, **"But he never listens to us when we tell him about hell!"** **Moody** replied, **"I spoke to him with tears."**

It's not good enough to hold our doctrine about the final destiny of the "lost" in a detached, cerebral way. I am convinced that if we Christians meditated upon and prayed for God's heart for His world, and if we daily pondered the destiny of what it will be like to be outside of Christ and his glorious life, that our hearts might truly melt with compassion.

Who knows, but Jesus' tears for a lost world might even flow down our cheeks as we join our hearts with our Saviour's for His lost world.