

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Thinking and Speaking Biblically About the Death of Christ, Appendix 1:

## Passages that Seem to Say God Wants to Save Everyone

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DARYL WINGERD

(1 Timothy 2:4; Ezekiel 18:23, 30-32; 33:11; 2 Peter 3:9)

### 1 Timothy 2:4

In 1 Timothy 2, Paul says to Timothy that it is desirable for Christians to “lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. 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” (vv. 2-4).

As will be the case with most of the texts I will examine, if 1 Timothy 2:4 is understood in isolation from the clear meaning of Scripture in other places, or even from its immediate context, Paul could easily be understood as saying that God actually *wants* to save every human being who has ever lived, and that He will be disappointed in some way if *anyone* perishes in hell. That is, in fact, what most Christians take to be the certain and obvious meaning of this verse. But may we rightly arrive at this conclusion?

First of all, it is important to note that to “be saved” in this verse is the same as “to come to the knowledge of the truth.” If God truly wants every single person everywhere to be saved, He just as certainly wants every single person everywhere to come to the knowledge of the truth. No one will be saved apart from consciously apprehending and embracing the truth of the gospel. But God Himself chose the time for Christ to come and die (Galatians 4:4-5), after thousands of years of history, after millions of people had already perished in total darkness and ignorance. He came in the first century B. C. and revealed the saving mystery of the gospel “which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men” (Ephesians 2:5).

The Jews before this time were given the gospel in the shadowy, prefigured forms of the Old Testament. And as with Abraham (cf. Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:1-8), anyone who believed the promises of God would be saved. But in God’s providence, only the Jews were given access to these promises (cf. Deuteronomy 4:6-8). This explains why Paul said

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the Jews had a great advantage over the Gentiles (Romans 3:1-2). They were graciously given access to the truth of Scripture while millions of Gentiles around them were perishing, “having no hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). “[God] declares His word to Jacob, His statutes and His judgments to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any nation; and as for His judgments, they have not known them. Praise the Lord!” (Psalm 147:18-19).

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Unlike the commands for Christians in the New Testament to make disciples, (e.g. Matthew 28:19), the Old Testament Jews in general were not told to share the good news of God’s promises with the pagans around them.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, in many instances they were commanded to utterly destroy them. Therefore, until the time of Christ, very few Gentiles had access to the Scriptures. Very few had even the *opportunity* to “come to the knowledge of the truth.” And it seems obvious that God intended it that way. As Paul said in Romans 16:25, the gospel was not merely *undiscovered* for long ages, it was “kept secret” for long ages.

Another example of God’s sovereign determination as to who would hear the good news and who would not is found in Acts 16. In verses 6-10, Paul was forbidden by God to go into Asia and Bithynia with the gospel, being sent instead to Macedonia. This was Paul’s second missionary journey. He had not yet been to Asia or Bithynia with the gospel. We must admit, then, that there were uninformed people in those regions—people who, as a result of the Spirit’s intervention, perished in their ignorance. Would we insist that God *wanted* those people to be saved, even though He restrained Paul from going to them with the gospel before they died? Remember that Jesus Himself *thanked* the Father for concealing the truth from some while revealing it to others—“Even so, Father,” He said, “for so it seemed good in Your sight” (Matthew 11:25-26).

If you hold a biblical view of God’s providence in which He “works all things according to the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:11), yet you maintain the view that God wants all people everywhere to be saved, consider what you are forced to conclude about God Himself. Such a view leads us to conclude that God desires (lit. “wills to occur” in 1 Timothy 2:4) one result—the salvation of all people everywhere—yet He has providentially orchestrated the history of the world in such a way that the salvation of all people could never *actually* occur. God is mysterious, we must admit. His ways are above our ways. But this falls little (if any) short of saying that He is irrational.

Consider this illustration: An aged man writes a letter to his estranged son, saying that he wants to reinstate him into his will. He promises in the letter that he will restore the

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<sup>1</sup> God’s command to Jonah to preach to the Ninevites was clearly a special case, not something that was generally expected of the Jews or commanded in the Law of Moses.

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relationship and give the son his inheritance if he will respond by telephone or in person, *on or before August 15th, 2006*. He assures his son in the letter that any response after that date will be rejected. So far, everything seems logical and rational. But what if you then learned that the father intentionally waited until *August 16th, 2006*, to mail the letter? Would you say that the father's expressed desire to be reconciled to his son was rationally consistent with his intentional actions? Certainly not. How then can we portray a sovereign God as having behaved in virtually the same way while still affirming His rationality? To me it seems that we cannot.

Lastly, consider the armada of biblical testimony that stands against concluding that God desires something that He then *wills Himself* not to have. The Bible assures us repeatedly that God *does* all that pleases Him. He is *never* disappointed or turned away from having or accomplishing *all* that He desires. As Job said of God, "whatever His soul desires, that He does" (Job 23:13). I realize that Job sometimes spoke foolishly about God, but not in this case. Consider a few other passages, written by different biblical authors, that carry the same clear message:

*Our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases (Psalm 115:3).*

*Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deep places (Psalm 135:6).*

*I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure' (Isaiah 46:9-10).*

*[God] does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'* (Daniel 4:35).

God actually does whatever pleases Him. He does not merely *hope* that His good pleasure will be accomplished, leaving men to decide whether or not He will suffer divine disappointment. If God truly desires the salvation of every single person everywhere, then all men *will* be saved. Nothing, not even the obstinate wills of fallen men, could restrain Him from saving all of them if He desired to do so.

Further, those who are saved are told repeatedly in the New Testament that it was not *their* will, but rather *God's good pleasure and purpose* that saved them. Those who believe were born again, "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). "Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth" (James 1:18). "So then," as Paul concludes in Romans 9:16, "it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy" (ESV). According to Paul in Ephesians 1, those

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who are saved were chosen and predestined for salvation “according to the good pleasure of His will” (v. 5). They were enlightened to the truth of the gospel “according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself” (v. 9). And all of this was planned and accomplished by God “who works all things according to the counsel of His will” (v. 11). There is simply no possibility that Paul is refuting all of this in one single half-sentence in 1 Timothy 2:4.

So what was Paul saying? Two possibilities have been suggested:

## 1. *The “Multiple Wills of God” View*

Some have suggested that in 1 Timothy 2:4 Paul is speaking not of God’s will of *decree*—not of His sovereign purpose as indicated in the above passages—but rather of His will of *personal desire*—His “wish,” as some have described it. In other words, although God has predestined only His elect for salvation, He nevertheless has a personal desire for all men to be saved. Many fine Bible teachers at least reserve this as a possibility, based largely on the fact that we find a similar tension elsewhere in Scripture in God’s providential ordaining of sinful behavior on the part of Pharaoh (Exodus 4-14), Joseph’s brothers (Genesis 45:8; 50:20), David (2 Samuel 24:1ff), and the men who crucified Christ (Acts 4:27-28).

Considering the deep mystery of God’s providence, it might be *theoretically* possible that God could want all men to be saved, yet not choose to save all men. But this view comes perilously close to (if it is not the same as) the irrational portrayal of God illustrated above. It is admittedly more palatable than the popular belief that God wants to save all men, and tried to save all men by sending Christ to die for them, yet is unable to have what He desires because of opposition from man’s “free will.” I would much sooner leave a great deal of mystery in my understanding of God than I would remove the mystery by making man sovereign and God weak. Nevertheless, I believe there is a better interpretation, one that is more in harmony with what we do know about God’s saving intent, and with the immediate context of the passage in question.

## 2. *Universal Language Describing a Less-than-universal Object*

Although I highly respect some of the men who hold to the “multiple wills of God” view, I respectfully disagree. It not only comes close to portraying God as irrational, it also does not place enough weight on the immediate context and detailed exegesis of the passage.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John Piper defends the “multiple wills of God” view in his excellent book, *The Pleasures of God* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 1991, 2000). Strangely, however, Piper admits that the contextual limitation of “all men” to all classes of men may be the right view of 1 Timothy 2:4. In an appendix

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In addition to overlooking, or at least minimizing the importance of the immediate context of 1 Timothy 2:4, the “multiple wills of God” view also does not take enough into account numerous other places in the New Testament where the seemingly universal term “all men” simply *cannot* refer to every single person everywhere.

In Acts 20:26, for example, Paul declared that he was “innocent of the blood of all men.” Why did he say this? Was it because he was certain that he had preached the gospel to every single person everywhere? Certainly not. Was it because he had set in motion an evangelistic strategy that would ensure that every single person who would ever live would hear the gospel and thus vindicate his efforts? If that were his intended meaning, he has since been proven wrong. Many millions since Paul have not heard the gospel. And even if everyone since Paul had heard, many millions *before* him had already perished in ignorance. So when he said “all men,” Paul could not possibly have meant “every single person everywhere and of every age,” as the advocates of universal atonement insist that “all men” *always* means. But what did he mean?

A few verses earlier, in the beginning of his address to the Ephesians elders, Paul reminded them that he had faithfully declared the gospel “to Jews and also to Greeks” (v. 21). In verse 26, he was likely referring back to that statement. His apparent meaning of “all men” was similar to a Jewish understanding of “the world,” having reference to all men *without racial distinction*, rather than all men *without exception*. Adding validity to this understanding, Luke uses the word “all” in less-than-universal ways three times in the previous chapter:

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entitled, “Are There Two Wills in God?” Piper does conclude that God desires the salvation of all men while only choosing to save some. But before reaching that conclusion, he writes:

*It is possible that careful exegesis of 1 Timothy 2:4 would lead us to believe that God’s willing “all men to be saved” does not refer to every individual person in the world, but rather to all sorts of persons, since the “all men” in verse 1 may well mean groups like kings and all who are in authority” (v. 2). It is also possible that the “you” in 2 Peter 3:9 (the Lord “is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish”) refers not to every person in the world but to “you” professing Christians ... (p. 314).*

Dr. Piper does an admirable job in this appendix of demonstrating that God hates sin even while ordaining its occurrence in accomplishing His sovereign good pleasure. But then, after making the above concessions about the likely results of careful exegesis of two of the passages I am examining in this appendix, he concludes that God has two wills concerning salvation as well.

I have great respect for Dr. Piper. But in this case his conclusion puzzles me. After admitting that two of the three legs that support the doctrine of God’s universal saving desire (1 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9) are likely to be found defective under close examination, he proceeds to sit confidently on that same stool himself. And then he does an excellent job of sawing at least half-way through the *third leg*—Ezekiel 18 (see the Piper quote referred to in footnote #3).

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- He tells us that because of Paul's teaching in Ephesus, "*all who dwelt in Asia* heard the word of the Lord, *both Jews and Greeks*" (Acts 19:10, emphasis added). Not only is the word "all" modified here by the phrase "both Jews and Greeks," a universal understanding of the word would be impossible unless we are to believe that there was not one single person in all the Roman province of Asia (the western part of modern Turkey) who had not yet heard of Christ.
- Referring to the incident where a possessed man attacked and overcame seven Jewish exorcists, Luke writes, "This became known to *all, both Jews and Greeks*, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them *all* and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified" (Acts 19:17; emphasis added). Again the word "all" is modified by "both Jews and Greeks." But even if it were not, no one could rightly presume that Luke intended to say that every single person in this large city had come to know of this event. Even more, he seems to imply that all who heard were now fearing God and therefore magnifying Christ. But no record exists of a universal revival in Ephesus during the first century.
- In Acts 19:27, Demetrius the silversmith refers to the goddess Diana, "whom all Asia and the world worship." Though loyal to his pagan goddess, Demetrius was certainly not of the opinion that every single person in Asia and the whole world worshipped Diana. In fact, the very reason for his making the statement was that "throughout almost all Asia, this Paul has *turned away many people* [from worshipping Diana]" (v. 26). So once again, the word "all" is necessarily restricted by the context.

In 1 Timothy 2:4, Paul is not referring to a Jew-Gentile distinction, as is commonly meant by John's use of "the world." Here, when he says "all men," I believe he is making a *social class* distinction. This becomes evident in verses one and two where Paul instructs Timothy to pray "for all men, [in other words, as Paul explains] for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity."

Revelation 19 is yet another passage where the seemingly universal term "all men" necessarily carries a less-than-universal meaning. In this case, the meaning bears a striking resemblance to what I believe is Paul's meaning in 1 Timothy 2:4. Following John's description of the coming of Christ with his heavenly armies in judgment (vv. 11-16), we read in verses 17-18:

*Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and he cried out with a loud voice, saying to all the birds which fly in midheaven, "Come, assemble for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings and the flesh of commanders and the flesh of mighty men and the*

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*flesh of horses and of those who sit on them and the flesh of all men, both free men and slaves, and small and great” (emphasis added).*

Several times, both before and after John’s reference to “all men,” he describes what he means by that designation. He is obviously referring to all *classes* of men (kings, commanders, slaves, free, small and great), yet he simply says “all men.” And in this case, unless we are willing to think that Christ destroys every single person who has ever lived and gives their flesh to the birds, the term cannot be universal. In 1 Timothy 2:4, Paul makes a similar distinction between classes of men in the preceding verses. Why, then must we take verse 4 as a universal reference to every single member of the human race? The fact is, it is exegetically inconsistent to interpret the verse in that way.

## Ezekiel 18:23, 30-32; 33:11

A portion of Ezekiel 18 is often seen as an Old Testament parallel to 1 Timothy 2:4. It is thought by many to provide irrefutable proof that God is emotionally repulsed by the thought of any single human being perishing in hell, and that He is therefore trying earnestly to save as many of them as He can. But consider the intent of this text:

*“Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?” says the Lord God, “and not that he should turn from his ways and live?” . . . “Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways,” says the Lord God. “Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord God. “Therefore turn and live!” (vv. 23, 30-32; Ezekiel 33:11 roughly repeats the phrase of 18:32, saying, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked.”).*

First of all, notice that the Lord is not addressing mankind in general or even individual Israelites. He is addressing one particular “individual” — the personification of the nation of Israel. This is evident in the repeated use of singular personal pronouns (i.e., “he” and “you”). Even where He speaks of the Israelites collectively (using the plural pronoun “yourselves”) He follows by instructing *them*, as a national unit, to get “a new heart [singular] and a new spirit [singular].” And He concludes by asking, “For why should *you* die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of one [i.e., one nation] who dies.” Clearly the Lord is speaking here of the national, corporate, political, and cultural death of the Israelite nation by divine judgment.

Reading the chapter as a whole, we learn that the Lord was rebuking the *current* generation of Israelites because of their false understanding of their moral relationship with *former* generations. The way they saw it, the Lord’s threats of judgment on *their*

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generation were being unfairly leveled at them because of the sins of *their fathers*. But the Lord sets them straight by declaring the equality of His justice toward every generation, using individual fathers and sons as His metaphor.

In the passage, the Lord says, “The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself” (v. 20). The words “soul,” “son,” and “father,” should not be taken as references to individual Israelites, let alone individual human beings from any other nation. The references to “the father” point to *former* generations of Israel, and references to “the son” point to the current generation. In other words, Ezekiel’s generation (the son) was justly being threatened with God’s judgment because of their own (or, his own) national sinfulness, not because of the sins of former generations (the father).

Looking at the Old Testament as a whole, the doctrines of God’s distinguishing love and election limit the national meaning of Ezekiel 18 to Israel only (as opposed to all nations in general). Consider Isaiah 43:3-4, for example, where the Lord says to Israel,

*“I gave Egypt for your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in your place. Since you were precious in my sight, you have been honored, and I have loved you; therefore I will give men for you, and people for your life.”*

Though the historical details are scarce, it appears that God, in order to spare Israel from the threat of an invading army, providentially entangled Israel’s attackers in a war with the nations of northeast Africa. The Lord was pleased to sacrifice these other nations in order to preserve the life of His own people. And in Psalm 135 we read that it was the Lord who “defeated many nations and slew mighty kings . . . and gave their land as a heritage, a heritage to Israel His people” (vv. 10-12). So even concerning His preservation of nations we cannot rightly say that God never desires or wills their demise. The fact is, He causes some to perish in order to save His own.

Also consider Isaiah 46:9-11, where the Lord decrees the certain destruction of Babylon, saying, “My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My *good pleasure* (from the same Hebrew root word for “pleasure” as in Ezekiel 18:23, 32, emphasis added). Certainly no one would say that the Lord was repulsed at the thought of destroying Babylon. Lastly, consider 1 Samuel 2:25 where we read of Eli’s wicked sons. Eli rebuked his sons for their evil, “But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for the Lord *desired* to put them to death” (emphasis added). Regarding this passage and its bearing on Ezekiel 18 and 33, John Piper writes,



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... the word for “desired” in the clause, “the Lord desired to put them to death,” is the same Hebrew word (*hapez*) used in Ezekiel 18:23, 32, and 33:11, where God asserts that he does not desire the death of the wicked. God desired to put the sons of Eli to death, but he does not desire the death of the wicked. This is a strong warning to us not to take one assertion, like Ezekiel 18:23 and assume we know the precise meaning without letting other Scriptures, such as 1 Samuel 2:25, have a say. The upshot of putting the two together is that in one sense, God may desire the death of the wicked and in another sense, he may not.<sup>3</sup>

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Needless to say, these additional passages introduce a certain degree of doubt as to the supposedly obvious meaning of Ezekiel 18. Even if Ezekiel 18 were a general reference to *individual* wicked people (which definitely seems to be an interpretive stretch), it would assure us of nothing more than the fact that God is not a sadist (one who perversely delights to inflict pain). In no sense whatsoever does it mean that God is unwilling or reluctant, or that He has not determined in His *sovereign good pleasure*, to destroy many sinners who justly deserve to be destroyed, while mercifully saving many others.

## 2 Peter 3:9

In 2 Peter 3:9, Peter’s readers are told that God has not forgotten or neglected them, “but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.” The question regarding this text is simple: All of whom? Is Peter referring to mankind in general—every single person everywhere? Or does he have a restricted group of people in view?

First of all, Peter’s intended readers, the objects of the pronoun “you,” cannot be every single person everywhere. As would be the case with any personal letter, the pronoun refers to the person or people to whom the author was writing. In this case that audience is “those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours,” in other words, Christians (cf. 1:1). Peter repeatedly calls his readers “beloved” (vv. 1, 8, 14, and 17), a common way in the New Testament of addressing fellow believers. So when he refers to God’s promise “toward you” in verse 9, it would seem obvious that the “you” designates the same group—the “beloved.”

The word “you” may be taken as a reference to a specific local group or to the universal body of God’s elect. Both are “the beloved.” But in no case may it be rightly concluded that Peter is writing to all people everywhere. Peter simply assures those who are, or will be Christians that God is longsuffering toward *them*. And it takes only a common

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 326.

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understanding of grammar to see that as he goes on, he is saying that the Lord is “not wishing for any [of them] to perish, but for all [of them] to come to repentance.”

In 2 Peter 3:9, Peter assures his readers that the Lord *will* return as promised, contrary to the taunts of the false teachers against whom the book is written. But in assuring them that the Lord will return as promised, he also assures them that He will not return until the Christians in question all come to repentance. This could be a reference to

- Peter’s immediate readers who may have been tempted, or even temporarily entangled in the lies of the false teachers, or
- those Christians specifically, but with implied reference to the full number of God’s elect, all of whom will eventually be saved.

Either one of these designations for the word “all” fits with verse 15 where Peter says, “the longsuffering of the Lord *is* salvation” (emphasis added). The fact is, it is never God’s will that *believers* perish. Unless every single person everywhere will actually be saved as the result of the Lord’s patience, Peter cannot have intended to refer to every single person everywhere. The fact is, unbelievers *do* perish. For them, the patience of the Lord *is not* salvation.

The limitation of this passage to Christians only, particularly those who may have strayed temporarily from the truth, is both thematically justified by the general purpose of the letter (a stern warning to avoid false teachers) and grammatically justified by Peter’s use of personal pronouns to refer to his readers as the objects of God’s saving patience. It is also strengthened by Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:12-14:

*What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones [a reference to all believers, not children only; cf. v. 6] should perish.*

Another important factor in the interpretation of 2 Peter 3:9 is the fact that in the same letter, Peter says that God is not only preserving the righteous for salvation but also reserving “the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment” (2:9). Since Peter was clearly speaking of evil men who were either living when he wrote, or who would live in the future (in other words, men who would still have the *opportunity* to repent) it seems strange that he would speak of God reserving them for punishment if His actual desire were that each and every one of them would repent and be saved. Jude describes similar evil men (once again, men who were alive when he wrote), concluding as Peter

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did that judgment was reserved for them (Jude 12-13). Jude even adds the fact that these were men “who long ago were marked out for this condemnation” (v.4).

Lastly, if it were God’s universal desire for everyone to come to repentance, why would He not simply *grant* spiritual life and repentance to all people and draw them all to Himself? It is certainly within His power and authority to do so (cf. Matthew 11:27; John 5:21; John 17:1-3). In fact, as I said earlier with reference to 1 Timothy 2:4, it is only by the determination of *His* will and the exertion of *His* power that anyone *can* repent and be saved (cf. John 6:44-45, Romans 9:16; Philippians 1:29, 2 Timothy 2:26; etc.).

The three passages I have examined in this appendix are commonly thought of as strong defenses of the doctrine of universal atonement, and even more the doctrine of God’s universal saving desire—the idea that God wants to save everybody. As you can see, however, these three passages provide, at best, an uncertain foundation for such doctrinal conclusions.

In the next appendix, I will examine several passages which seem to say Christ died for all people everywhere (2 Peter 2:1; 1 Timothy 4:10; 2 Corinthians 5:19; Hebrews 2:9, and 1 John 2:2).

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