

# BIBLICAL SOTERIOLOGY

## An Overview and Defense of the Reformed Doctrines of Salvation Limited Atonement, part 21

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### OBJECTIONS TO THE DOCTRINE OF LIMITED ATONEMENT (cont.)

1. (previous IIIM Magazine)

2. The Bible directly states that the atonement is general in nature (cont.).

1. (previous)

2. (previous)

3. (previous)

4. (previous)

5. "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 between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony borne at the proper time" ([1 Tim 2:3-6](#)).

Two arguments are made from this passage in favor of the general ransom theory. The first depends on the phrase "desires all men to be saved." Adherents to the general ransom concept believe that this verse directly states the general ransom doctrine that God desires the salvation of every person ever. The error of this argument has been dealt with in detail in the notes on unconditional election.

The second argument made from this passage in favor of the general ransom theory follows from a misinterpretation of the Greek word *pas* ("all" in most English translations) that appears on the phrase "ransom for all" in verse 6. Here, the general ransom theory claims to find a direct statement that Jesus Christ atoned for the sins of every person ever.

As previously stated, the word *pas* must rely on its context for its specific meaning. "All" is not a definite term; it is merely a qualifier answering the question "how much?" or "how many?" On its own, it fails to answer the important question "all what?" When *pas* does not modify an obvious noun, it may be understood either as modifying another noun to be determined by the context, or as modifying the implicit noun "things" (in which case it is roughly equivalent to the English word "everything"). As a case in point for this translation, nearly all appearances of the phrase "all things" in most English versions of the Bible are translations of the solitary Greek word *pas*.

In [1 Timothy 2:1-6](#), *pas* is clearly many different ways. For example, it is used in the phrase "first of all" ([1 Tim 2:1](#)) where it does not modify a noun and where it means "all things." In the next breath, it is used to modify "men" to render the phrase "all men" ([1 Tim 2:1](#)). In the next verse, it is used to modify those "who are in authority" and also "godliness and dignity" ([1 Tim 2:2](#)). Next, it again modifies "men" ([1 Tim 2:4](#)). Finally, it appears alone again in [1 Timothy 2:6](#). This immediate context leaves the reader with a number of meanings for *pas* from which to choose: "everything" or "all things," "all men," "all who are in authority," and "all godliness and dignity." In addition, it is also possible that it means something different from its prior uses.

It is a bit difficult to imagine how Christ might give himself a "ransom for all godliness and dignity," though perhaps someone could make that case. But it is probably reasonable to rule out this interpretation.

The following possible interpretations, however, seem plausible:

1. *Pas* means the same thing as in verse 4. That is, it means all manner of mankind in general (referring to the salvation of the human race through a remnant which includes members of all types of men), and believers specifically (the remnant through which the human race is saved). [See section III.B.2.f. of Answering the Objections to the Doctrine of Unconditional Election for a fuller treatment of [1 Timothy 2:3-4](#).]
2. *Pas*, appearing unqualified as it does, means "all things." That is, it refers to the *kosmos* or "creation." This meaning is consistent with Paul's teaching elsewhere

that Christ is not just redeeming mankind but all creation in cosmic renewal (cf. [Rom 8:19-22](#)). The purpose and result of the crucifixion is the redemption of "all things," that is, of the creation. This is not to say that Christ's death atoned for the whole creation, including rocks, plants, air, etc. , the Bible insists that Christ could only atone for those whom he was like, specifically, human beings:

"Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. For assuredly, He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham. Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" ([Heb 2:14-17](#)).

However, through the remnant of mankind, the atonement results in the restoration of all creation. In some sense, one may speak of this as a "ransom" of creation.

3. "Pas" refers to "men," so that it means "all men." These "all men" are not identified clearly in this passage, but they come to light in [1 Timothy 4:10](#) where Paul explains that when he refers to the "all men" whom Christ saves, he means believers. [See the discussion of [1 Tim 4:10](#) immediately hereafter.]
4. Although it seems to be counterintuitive in this context, it is also possible that someone might take pas to mean "all who are in authority." Since prayers for "all who are in authority" begin this section of Paul's argument, this is not as strange an argument as it otherwise might appear, though it certainly would not be this author's first instinct.

Considering the flow of Paul's argument here, particularly [1 Timothy 2:5](#) which speaks of Christ as the only mediator between God and men, it seems best to take *pas* in verse 6 as a reference to "all men." This leaves us with solutions "1" and "3" above as the most likely candidates.

Recall that Paul brings up this idea in the context of praying for "kings and all who are in authority" ([1 Tim 2:2](#)). That is, in this context Paul has already referred to different people groups by referring to their leaders ("kings," etc.). Conceptually, Paul's argument would have been most consistent if he intended *pas* in verse 6 to correspond with this idea and with its use in verse 4, specifically intending *pas* to mean "all types of men," leaving "1" above the best option.

6. **"For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers" ([1 Tim 4:10](#)).**

In this verse, the general ransom theory holds that the statement that God is the "Savior of all men" indicates that he atoned for the entire human race, and that the phrase "especially of believers" shows that he saves those who believe to a greater degree than he saves the populace at large. The argument suggests that God "saved" every person ever by atoning for them, but that he "especially" saves believers because they accept his grace and receive eternal life.

Of course, the most obvious rebuttal to this is the fact that "saved" people don't go to hell. It would be terribly misleading for Paul to call the condemned souls in hell "saved." Moreover, if it is legitimate to use the word "saved" to refer to something other than the state in which one is redeemed from sin and bound for eternity with Christ, it casts a shadow over nearly every other passage in which "saved" is used. After all, if one can be both "saved" and condemned to hell at the same time, being "saved" is not terribly reassuring. In point of fact, this interprets the verse to teach that people who hate Christ, who never demonstrate faith, and who perish in hell are "saved" , it does not just infer that they "might have been saved," but that they *are* "saved."

It seems much more honest use of language to say that God is not the savior of every person ever because not every person ever is "saved." Unbelief and belief do not represent two different degrees of salvation. Belief represents salvation, and unbelief represents damnation.

What then does it mean for God to be the "savior of all men"? Two solutions seem reasonable. First, Paul may again have been referring to "all mankind" as a race (without reference to individuals), or to "all types of men." Both of these meanings are legitimate interpretations of the phrase *pas anthropos* used in [1 Timothy 4:10](#). He may also simply

have meant "a multitude of men," or he may have been speaking specifically of believers and believers alone. Each of these options is worth considering:

1. "All men" means "all mankind:" The same word *anthropos* may be used either for an individual person, or for a particular people group within humanity, or for the human race at large. For example, in the Septuagint's Greek translation of [Genesis 1:26](#), *anthropos* means "mankind," as indicated by the fact that this same verse refers to "mankind" as "them" rather than "him." Many, many examples of this use exist in Scripture.

In the context of [1 Timothy 4:10](#), that God is the savior of "all mankind" means that he is saving the human race as a whole, but without the implication that he is saving every individual. Rather, he is saving some ("especially believers"), through whom the human race will be preserved, much as he previously preserved mankind at large through the preservation of Noah and his family in the ark ([Gen 6ff.](#)).

2. "All men" means "all types of men:" The same word *anthropos* may be used either for an individual person, or for a particular people group within humanity, or for the human race at large. [1 Timothy 4:10](#) teaches that God is the savior of all kinds of people. This may be taken to mean that he saves some people from every tribe and nation (cf. [Rev 5:9](#)), or that he saves men as well as women, rich as well as poor, etc.

That the Bible often speaks of groups of people in general, without intending to speak of every individual in those groups, can be seen in this pair of quotes from Moses:

"For the Lord your God has blessed you in all that you have done; He has known your wanderings through this great wilderness. These forty years the Lord your God has been with you; you have not lacked a thing" ([Deut 2:7](#)).

So the Lord's anger burned against Israel, and He made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until the entire generation of those who had done evil in the sight of the Lord was destroyed" ([Num 32:13](#)).

In the first passage, Moses portrays Israel positively. During their forty years of wandering, God took care of them and blessed everything they did. In the second passage, God's anger burned against this same group for forty years until he finally killed off every last one of them. Both passages speak about Israel during the forty years of wandering, but both characterize Israel very differently. Why?

In [Numbers 32:13](#), Moses wrote about the generation who left Egypt, who sinned and were condemned to wander in the wilderness until they died (except for Caleb and Joshua; [Num 32:11-12](#)). But in [Deuteronomy 2:7](#) Moses wrote about the second generation of Israelites after the Exodus, the children of those who were condemned in [Numbers 32:13](#). But in both cases he spoke of the group as the same group over the same period of time. What was true of the group was not necessarily true of the individual (or even of the majority of individuals!), but it was still legitimate to characterize the group as a whole.

In [1 Timothy 4:10](#), Paul may have intended to say that God is the savior of all tribes and nations, of all people groups. It is legitimate to use the word *anthropos* this way, and legitimate way to speak of people groups as being saved even if many or even most of the people in that group are not saved.

Paul may also have meant to say that God saves all kinds of people, rich or poor, male or female, etc. Having made many distinctions between the types of people to whom Timothy ministered elsewhere in this letter, he may simply have wanted Timothy to remember that God was the savior of "all the types of people represented in Timothy's church." The statement "especially of believers" may have been added in this context to distinguish those who fell away ([1 Tim 4:1ff.](#)), namely unbelievers, from those who did not, namely believers.

3. "All men" means "a multitude of men:" One legitimate use of the word "all" (Greek *pas*) is "very many." Consider, for example, that in the Septuagint's Greek translation of [Job 21:33](#), it is written that "*pas anthropos* will follow after him, and countless ones will go before him", certainly "all men" without exception cannot follow after him if countless go before him! In [Acts 21:28](#), Paul is accused of preaching "to all men everywhere." But clearly the intent of this statement was not that Paul actually preached to every last individual on the planet. Rather, it meant that Paul traveled to many places preaching to many people.

In [1 Timothy 4:10](#), Paul simply meant that God was saving many, many people. He did not mean that God was saving every last person. To clarify his meaning, he added the phrase "especially of believers."

4. "All men" means "believers:" If any of the foregoing explanations is/are true (there can be shades of multiple meanings), the phrase "especially of believers" would most naturally seem to be a qualification of the general and less precise "all men." Thus, "especially of believers" would indicate a more precise identification of the objects of salvation, namely "believers" as opposed to "men" more generally.

Moreover, it is possible that the Greek word *malista*, here translated "especially," actually means something else. In fact, while *malista* can be translated "especially," this translation does not make much sense when one considers what salvation really is (an unbeliever cannot be "saved"). Alternatively, *malista* may also be translated "namely" or "precisely." Either of these meanings would render a translation of this verse as follows: "God is the savior of all men, or, to be more precise, of believers."

This meaning is even more attractive because *malista* is the superlative form of the word *mala*. Although *mala* does not appear in the New Testament, its comparative form *mallon* does. A comparative may be thought of as an emphatic form of a word (e.g. the comparative form of "good" is "better"), whereas a superlative is one step more emphatic than a comparative (e.g. the superlative of "good" is "best"). The word *mallon* may mean "more" or "still more," but it may also mean "rather" or "instead", a meaning Paul used more than any other. It is entirely possible that by *malista* Paul meant an emphatic "rather" or "instead." That is, it is feasible that he thought better of the phrase "savior of all men" because of its potentially misleading nature, and thus changed it to "believers," with this change being noted by *malista* for emphasis.

Even if Paul meant "especially" here rather than "namely" or "rather," signifying perhaps a greater degree of salvation, it simply means that "all men" identifies "mankind" or "all types of men." That is, Paul would not have been saying, "Believers and unbelievers are both saved, but believers are more saved than unbelievers." Rather, he would have been saying, "God saves the people group 'believers' more greatly than he saves the people group(s) 'all men' because he saves every believer as opposed to just some men."

7. **"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men" ([Tit 2:11](#)).**

Paul wrote to Titus in order to advise the young pastor how to lead the people of God. In this letter, he mentioned different types of people with whom Titus dealt, and advised him how to view and handle each type of person. [Titus 2:2-10](#) contains instruction regarding older men, older women, young women, young men, Titus himself, and bondslaves. In verse 11, Paul clearly reminded Titus that all these diverse portions of the church's population are saved by Christ, telling him that God has saved "all" types of "men" or "people," and thus all types of people are now represented in the church: old, young, male, female, leaders, followers, slave and free. That Paul does not intend to teach a general ransom doctrine becomes ever more clear in the verses immediately following [Titus 2:11](#) because he refers to these "all men" as "us" ([Tit 2:12](#), [14](#)), meaning the church.

8. **"But we do see Him who has been made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God He might taste death for every one" ([Heb 2:9](#)).**

Like several other "problem" verses, this one contains the Greek word *pas* ("all"), here translated "every one," giving the impression that Jesus atoned ("tasted death") for every individual as the general ransom theory holds. The context of the verse is as follows (translations of *pas* appear in bold type):

"Thou hast put **all things** [neuter plural] in subjection under his [man's] feet.' For in subjecting **all things** [neuter plural] to him, He left nothing that is not subject to him. But now we do not yet see **all things** [neuter plural] subjected to him. But we do see Him who has been made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God He might taste death for **every one** [masculine or neuter singular]. For it was fitting for Him, for whom are **all things** [neuter plural], and through whom are **all things** [neuter plural], in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified

are **all** [masculine singular] from one father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren" ([Heb 2:8-11](#)).

Arguments against the general ransom theory can be made on either or both of the following grounds:

1. In its first, second, third, fifth and sixth appearances, "pas" is neuter plural in form, is not attached to any noun, and clearly means "all things." In its fourth appearance, is either neuter or masculine singular, and means, respectively, either "every thing" or "every one." The immediate grammatical context suggests that the fourth occurrence of *pas* should be rendered "every thing" or "all things," instead of "every one." There is no *grammatical* indication that *pas* refers only to people at this fourth appearance.
2. Since only people live eternally as a result of the death of Christ, it makes better theological sense if in its fourth appearance *pas* refers to people rather than to creation as a whole. However, there is no grammatical or contextual indication that "pas" should therefore refer to "every person ever."

The only other phrase in this context containing *pas* and referring specifically to people is the seventh use of *pas*. There, it refers only to Christ and to believers, who are sanctified and who are from the same father as Christ. In this seventh instance, *pas* does not refer to "every person ever."

After this seventh use, the passage goes on to say that the purpose of the incarnation is the salvation of the children of God ([Heb 2:12-18](#)). More specifically, verse 14 teaches that Christ became flesh because those who were already identified as God's children were of flesh, not because "every person ever" was of flesh. Verses 12-13 quote the Old Testament and mention "My brethren," "the congregation," and "the children whom God has given Me," all of which refer to believers and not to "every person ever." Verse 16 states that God helps "the children of Abraham," not "every person ever." Verse 17 states that in order to serve as an effective High Priest, Christ had to be made like the ones over whom he was priest: "His brethren," not "mankind generally." It also teaches that making propitiation (through atonement) for the sins of the people is the duty of the High Priest. Of course, a priest only makes propitiation for those people over whom he is priest, "the

brethren" in this case. Thus, this passage actually teaches limited atonement rather than general ransom.

Therefore, *pas* should be understood to mean "all those who are sanctified by Christ," or "all the children of Abraham." Since not every person ever is a child of Abraham (cf. [Rom 9](#)), and not every person ever is a child of God (cf. [John 8:41-44](#)), *pas* refers to "all believers," not to "every individual."

As a sub-point, it should be noted that the position might be held that not everyone who is sanctified is saved. While this is true regarding some types of sanctification (cf. [1 Cor 7:14](#)), it cannot be true with the type of sanctification mentioned in this passage. Here, the text clearly states that those who are sanctified are on their way to glory ([Heb 2:10](#)), that they are the brethren of Christ ([Heb 2:12](#), [17](#)) and children of God ([Heb 2:13-14](#)), and that they are the descendants of Abraham ([Heb 2:16](#); cf. [Gal 3:29](#)). All these things being true, "those who are sanctified" must be "those who are saved."

9. **"But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves" ([2 Pet 2:1](#)).**

The issues in this passage are whether or not Christ atoned for the sins of the "false teachers," and whether or not the false teachers are saved. If Christ did atone for the sins of people who eventually perish, then Christ's death was not necessarily effective, and not all for whom he atoned necessarily receive eternal life. In this event, the verse supports a general ransom. Those who hold to the general ransom theory believe that the phrase "the Master who bought them" teaches that Christ did atone for the sins of the false teachers, and also that they are ultimately damned.

In refuting this argument, one might take the position that the false teachers are saved individuals who rebel against God tremendously. Their lifestyle may offer such a negative witness that anyone who observes them must see them as apostate. This negative witness is seen as a visible denial of "the Master who bought them" despite the fact that the sinners themselves would not make such a denial. In fact, since blasphemy against Christ is not

the unforgivable sin, it is conceivable that the false teachers might actually verbally deny Christ and still be saved (Peter himself did this three times; [Matt 26:34-75](#)). Jesus taught that this particular form of blasphemy would be forgiven (meaning there will be those who blaspheme Christ and live eternally). The destruction of the individuals about whom Peter wrote in verse 3 might then be seen as physical destruction, not eternal. Seen this way, the passage warns against temporal, physical judgment from God against rebellious children as a result of their gross disobedience. However, this interpretation seems highly unlikely in that it describes, in the following verses, people who are evidently reprobate.

There are several stronger possibilities for refuting the general ransom theory at this point:

1. The false teachers may not really be saved, but just profess to be saved. If they simply profess faith, they are still part of the visible church. Professing to have been bought by Christ, they are instead heading for eternal destruction. They really "deny" the Master that they only claim has "bought" them. John teaches similarly:

"They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us" ([1 John 2:19](#)).

In John's language, those who go out are not really Christians, but this fact only becomes evident through their actions. John uses the same term *ex hemon* for those who truly are "of us," as well as for those who have merely claimed to be "of us" but who have gone out "from us" (thereby proving their unbelief).

Peter have used the same type of argument here, applying the word "bought" both to those who are really saved and those who merely claim to be saved. They would not actually have been "bought" any more than those in John's epistle were really "of us." Their heresies and destruction prove that they were not really "bought," just as those who went out "from us" (*ex hemon*) proved they never really were "of us" (*ex hemon*).

2. It might also be argued that the false prophets were not saved, and had never been "bought" by the "Master." The "them" in the phrase "who bought them" might refer to

"the people" among whom the false prophets arose, and also, by analogy, to the church to which Peter wrote.

Some argue that the word *laos*, here translated "people," is singular and therefore cannot be the noun to which the plural "them" refers. But *laos* is plural in concept, if not in form, and Greek grammar freely treats it as either plural or singular, e.g.:

"And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins" ([Matt 1:21](#)).

In the passage above, as well as in [Matthew 15:8](#), [Hebrews 2:17-18](#), and other places, the same plural pronoun here translated "them" refers unquestionably to the singular noun *laos*. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that "them" in this passage refers to "the people."

3. The Greek word *agorazo*, here translated "bought," may not refer to atonement. It is a word that means, "to purchase in the market place," and it might refer here to the Father giving all things into the Son's hands as a result of the Son's obedience to the Father (cf. [John 13:3](#)). So, it might be argued that Christ "bought" the entire creation, not just individuals. The creation being now his, he condemns some individuals and pardons others. Being "bought" may be a reference to Christ's lordship over the earth, a master/slave comparison, rather than to his ransoming of sinners.
4. It is also possible to argue that the Greek word *agorazo*, here translated "bought," does not refer to atonement even if it does mean "redeem" in this passage. It may refer to temporal redemption from immediate destruction. In the sense that God bears patiently with the entire sinful creation while he brings his children to salvation, all mankind escapes immediate destruction. Because the false teachers are not instantly destroyed, they are temporally and temporarily "redeemed" from destruction. However, their destruction will come in time, just as will the destruction of the angels in prison who await the judgment day (verse 4). The false teachers, therefore, would be grouped with these demons, for whom the Bible specifically says Christ did not die ([Heb 2:16](#)).

10. **"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 Pet 3:9).**

The general ransom theory often asserts that this verse states God's desire for "every person ever" to come to repentance. The most obvious clue that this is probably not the best interpretation is the word "you." Peter wrote to a sinful, rebellious church, but it was still a church. Thus, Peter gave his audience the benefit of the doubt by assuming they really were believers, even though their actions might have suggested otherwise. Here the Greek word *pas* is again the word translated "all." Its meaning is clear from the context: *pas* modifies "you," meaning "all of you." Peter told these sinful believers that God was not willing that they should perish (reassuring them of their salvation), but wanted them to repent. As further evidence of this, the remainder of the letter is directed toward encouraging the church toward godly living.

11. **"Jesus Christ the righteous ... is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world" (1 John 2:1-2).**

The general ransom theory holds that this verse teaches that Jesus atoned for every person in the world. There are a couple different ways to refute this interpretation.

First, the Greek word *kosmos*, here translated "world," need not mean "every person in the world." Literally, it means "the whole order of things" or "the creation" (compare the English "cosmos"). However, Jesus only propitiated on behalf of man, so *kosmos* cannot be interpreted literally as "creation" here, and must indicate man in some way. But this does not mean that it must refer to "every individual." Since *kosmos* is being used figuratively, the context must dictate its actual meaning.

The argument that the proper figurative meaning of *kosmos* is "every individual" fails because the context does not reveal or support this meaning. One cannot assume based on other figurative appearances of the word as "the people who inhabit the world" that it must have this particular figurative meaning here. In fact, John uses the word *kosmos* a multitude of times in this letter, and the definition "every individual" would make absolutely no sense in a large portion of them.

One argument in favor of limited atonement interprets "world" as "both Jews and Gentiles," or more generally "every people group." This does not mean that "every Jew and Gentile ever" has had his sins propitiated by Christ, but that all nations, Jew and Gentile alike, have now been brought into God's covenant. The issue of the need to reconcile Jews and Gentiles in the first century church is well-documented in Scripture (cf. Gal.), and it was one with which John must have been intimately aware, having spent the early part of his ministry evangelizing Jews ([Gal 2:9](#)), and the latter part ministering among Gentiles (according to tradition). John would have wanted any Jews in his audience to understand the Gentiles inclusion, as well as he would probably have used this phrase regularly in describing the scope of the atonement in his own ministry to the Jews. In this very personal letter, John wrote that Christ died not only for his sins and his readers' sins (perhaps primarily Jews), but also for the sins of the whole world (the Jews and the Gentiles). Christ does not limit salvation to Jews only, he extends it to the Gentiles as well. This does not mean that he atones for "every person ever" in the world, only that he is the only savior in the world, and that anyone who is saved, whether Jew or Gentile, is saved through Christ.

A closely related argument is that John here wanted his readers to know that Jesus was the only savior available in the whole world. This approach does not depend on Jewish-Gentile relations for a basis, but rather interprets this verse as teaching something similar to [Acts 4:12](#):

And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.

By this reading, John was simply reasserting the uniqueness of Christ as savior. His mention of "propitiation" was not intended to be all inclusive of everyone in the world, but rather to indicate that Jesus was the propitiation for everyone in the world who was or would be saved.

There is another argument, which dovetails with these first two, that defeats the general ransom interpretation perhaps best of all: "propitiation" does not here refer to impetration but to application. As detailed earlier, "impetration" refers to the obtaining of the benefits of the atonement at the cross, while "application" refers to the applying of these benefits to individual believers by the Holy Spirit throughout history. General ransom and limited atonement agree that application is limited to believers; they disagree only as to the extent of the impetration. If the passage deals with application rather than with impetration, then it is a non-issue for the debate between general ransom and limited atonement. Unlimited

application of propitiation constitutes universalism, which both general ransom and limited atonement deny.

The case that "propitiation" here refers to application rather than to impetration is based on the fuller teaching of [1 John 1:7-2:2](#)

"If we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin... If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness... My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." ([1 John 1:7, 9; 2:1-2](#))

In these verses, John wrote of the cleansing and forgiveness that are available to believers who fall into sin. Believers confess their sin, and Jesus cleanses them and forgives them of this sin. John hopes his instructions will help his believing audience sin less, but he knows it won't prevent all sin. So, he encourages them that if any of them do sin, they have an advocate with the Father, namely Jesus Christ. Jesus is not just a potential advocate here, he already is their advocate, meaning they are already believers and that Christ is already advocating on their behalf. In this role as advocate, Jesus stands before the Father and pleads the benefits purchased at the impetration on behalf of sinful believers (theologians call this work of Christ his "session"). This is a continual application of the benefits of the atonement to believers, not the one-for-all-time impetration over which general ransom and limited atonement disagree. In this context, "propitiation" refers to the ongoing application of the propitiation in heaven, not to the one-time impetration of the propitiation at the cross. The "world" in this context cannot refer to any but believers, and it remains only to determine which meaning (Jews and Gentiles, available worldwide, all people groups, etc.) is the most appropriate to the historical context.

Additionally, it is worth noting that where John does specifically mention the impetration, he limits it to benefiting believers. In support of his instruction that believers love one another, John argues in [1 John 3:16](#) that Christians should be willing to lay down their lives for other Christians because Jesus laid down his life for them. John does not say that Christians should lay down their lives for the world, or even for a single person who is unsaved for that matter. His argument is that since Christ did, his readers should. If John believed that

Christ died for the whole world in the sense of a general ransom, then it would seem that John would have encouraged Christians to lay down their lives for anyone, not just for believers.

He makes this same kind of argument with regard to the imputation of the propitiation in [1 John 4:9-11](#)

"By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

This time John is talking about believers generally loving the brethren, rather than specifically dying for them, although this extreme form of love is certainly the prime example of it in this passage. It should also be remembered that John contrasts the saved and the unsaved throughout this letter, he is acutely aware of the distinction between them, so that his statements regarding believers ought not to be assumed to apply to unbelievers as well. Further, when he uses personal pronouns like "we," he is talking about himself, his associates, and his readers, and assuming that they are all Christians. In fact, he writes in [1 John 2:19](#) that those who prove themselves to be unsaved are not really part of "us." That is, even if there are unsaved people in the church that receives this letter, the "we" statements don't refer to them because they are not really part of "we."

In any event, in [1 John 4:9-11](#) John wrote that God sent Christ to be the propitiation for "our" sins in order that "we" might live, not for the sins of the "world" in order that "all" might live. The fact that God sends Christ is proof that God loves those for whom he sends Christ. John then states that God's love for "us" obligates believers to love one another. He does not state that God's love for the world obligates his readers to love the world. While it is true that God commands his children to love every individual in the world, it is noteworthy that John does not support this obligation by suggesting that such love parallels Christ's love for every individual in the world, or on the basis of Christ's death on their behalf. Nowhere does he teach that Christians are obligated to die for unbelievers. The love of which John speaks in this letter must be different from the love God commands Christians to demonstrate to everyone in the world because John, in this epistle, argues only that the love of which he speaks should be demonstrated to the believers. He is calling believers to have a greater love for the brethren than they have for others, and he

argues for this on the basis of God's greater love for the brethren. If God loved all sinners equally — elect and reprobate alike — then John's arguments in [11 John 3:16](#) and 4:9-11 would be far too restrictive.