



A BIBLE STUDY ON JOHN CALVIN

*The French Reformer Who Limited Christ's
Atonement to Only a Chosen Few*

“All Glory Be to God Alone”

(TLH 238; LW 210; LSB 948)

(Luke 2:10–14; John 1:29, 36; Rev. 5:9–14; 1 John 2:2)

“I should like to know how the wicked can eat the flesh of Christ which was not crucified for them, and how they can drink the blood which was not shed to expiate their sins.”

— John Calvin

Martin Luther was not the only person in Europe who decried the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church and began to propagate a “new” set of beliefs. This was the case with Luther as well with those who differed with him on a number of points: Erasmus, Karlstadt, Zwingli and, later, John Calvin, who was known primarily for his “Institutes of the Christian Religion.” Theodore Beza and other associates of Calvin further systematized his theology after his death. Their system is the basis of the “TULIP” outline of Calvinist theology that presents his theological system under five general teachings: (1) total depravity (fallen, sinful people have lost all ability to turn from sin unto salvation); (2) unconditional election (some are elected unto salvation, while others are chosen unto death); (3) limited atonement (Christ’s sacrifice for the elect only); (4) irresistible grace (saving grace for the elect cannot be rejected); and (5) perseverance of the saints (the elect will be preserved unto their death).

One of the major differences between Martin Luther and John Calvin is their answer to the question, “Did Christ die for all of sinful humanity or for only the elect?” The writings of Calvin seem to limit the benefits of Christ’s atoning work on the cross to only those God has elected unto salvation. For Calvin, the “all” in the Bible is understood in a narrowed sense, as “all the elect.”

STANZA ONE

*All glory be to God alone, / Forevermore the highest one, /
Who did our sinful race befriend / And grace and peace to
us extend. / Among us may His gracious will / All hearts
with deep thanksgiving fill.*

In this hymn, Martin Luther wonderfully unpacks the message of the Gloria in Excelsis, the hymn of the angels to the shepherds at Jesus’ birth (LUKE 2:10–14).

1. While the Savior’s birth was announced to a little band of lowly shepherds, the message was for all fallen, helpless children of a fallen, helpless Adam and Eve. One of the clearest revelations of Christ’s grace offered to all is through the voice of John the Baptist, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (JOHN 1:29). What other Scripture passages come to mind that reveal the fruits of Christ’s cross offered to all sinful humanity?

2. Fallen human reason seems to agree that it is a colossal waste to give one’s very lifeblood for those who will not receive the precious gift of redemption by faith. But our thoughts are not the Lord’s thoughts (IS. 55:8–9; ROM. 11:33). There are plenty of instances in salvation history in which the Almighty extended His grace and blessings to those who ultimately refused to receive undeserved gifts in faith. What clear examples come to mind?

3. Martin Luther makes it plain that outside of Christ’s saving grace, we are completely helpless slaves of sin. Our understanding of salvation is clouded and twisted. We do not have the ability to will what is God-pleasing. Review what we confess in the Small Catechism’s Explanation to the Third Article of the Creed: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.”

STANZA TWO

*We praise You, God; Your name we bless / And worship You
in humbleness; / From day to day we glorify / The everlasting
God on high. / Of Your great glory do we sing, / And to Your
throne our thanks we bring.*

Faith cannot but sing the praises of unmerited, saving grace. True trust in Christ and His atoning work on the cross is the Gospel call to all who cannot even begin to save themselves. And even this response of joy is the work of God's grace in us.

4. The Triune God receives all credit for our salvation — even for our response to His abundant, saving grace. We remember the words of Ps. 51:15: “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.”

5. Too often, human reason gets in the way of believing the clear and simple word of the Bible. One argument our old, unbelieving nature always raises is, “If I get the blame for not receiving the unmerited gifts of Christ in faith, then I should get some of the credit for accepting Jesus and His atoning work for me and the entire world.” Why is this approach to salvation an unscriptural and dangerous one? How is it different than the confession, “If I am found in heaven, then Christ is to be given eternal praise. If I am found in hell, then I have only myself to blame?”

6. Faith praises the Lord regardless of appearances or personal circumstances. Luther is reported to have said that if God were to send him to hell, he would continue to praise Christ even from there. In what ways do we praise the Lord for things that are beyond our understanding? Why do the mysteries of creation pale in comparison to the mysteries of redemption and sanctification?

STANZA THREE

Lord God, our King on heaven's throne, / Our Father, the Almighty One. / O Lord, the sole begotten One, / Lord Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, / True God from all eternity, / O Lamb of God, to You we flee.

Again, our hymn brings us back to the center of our eternal praise and worship: the undeserved salvation of all people through the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ on Calvary — a gift appropriated by the empty hand of faith.

7. So much of the unbelieving world's “spirituality” can be found in its attempt to find eternal peace in contemplating the beauty of nature. Why is this attempt to bring healing to our soul by experiencing a beautiful sunset a dead end? Where would God the Father and God the Holy Spirit have us look to find true healing (JOHN 14:6)?

8. The Book of Revelation gives us a picture of the eternal praise of the saints around the throne of God. The inspired evangelist John points us to the Lamb who was slain as he describes the throne of God (REV. 5:6). Why do we flee to Christ, even when threatened by the holiness of God Almighty (ISAIAH 6)?

STANZA FOUR

You take the whole world's sin away; / Have mercy on us, Lord, we pray. / You take the whole world's sin away; / O

Lord, receive our prayer this day. / From God's right hand Your mercy send, / To all the world Your grace extend.

For Luther and those who follow him, the plain sense of “the whole world” is just that — the whole world. While Calvin and his followers might have wanted to spare Christ the indignity of sacrificing Himself for those who would not accept the saving gifts of the cross by faith, the inspired prophets and apostles clearly reveal that Christ died for all. His hands on the cross were stretched out to the entire undeserving world. His last words remain, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Who are the “them” in Jesus' prayerful plea?

9. Why does the belief that Christ died only for the elect rob us of all comfort and muzzle our Gospel outreach to others? Why is it critical that we distinguish between the universal atonement of Christ and the receiving of the undeserved gifts of the cross by faith? What happens when we get these two truths mixed up?

10. We sing in this stanza, “From God's right hand Your mercy send, / To all the world Your grace extend.” Why is our petition focused on God's right hand? What kind of grace is extended to all the world apart from Christ?

STANZA FIVE

You only are the Holy One / And over all are Lord alone. / O Jesus Christ, we glorify / You and the Spirit, Lord Most High; / With Him You evermore shall be / One in the Father's majesty.

Doxology of the Triune God is the final goal of all creation, and this is also centered in Jesus' redeeming work for a lost and dying world. Scripture is clear that God's eternal plan of salvation wills all to be saved (1 TIM. 2:4; EZEK. 18:23; 2 PETER 3:9). God-created trust in Christ's word of promise receives that saving righteousness that is outside ourselves — the perfect righteousness of Christ.

11. For those who follow Calvin and believe that only the elect unto salvation can and will be saved, where is any assurance that an individual is actually one of the chosen few? What happens when we start looking for assurance that we are elect in our own holiness and good works? Whose holiness and good works should we constantly be keeping our eyes on?

12. The doctrine of election is revealed in the Bible for the believer's comfort, the strengthening of the believer's faith. Christ desires that His little flock be strengthened in their faith when He tells them: “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (JOHN 10:28). Why is Calvin's mistaken belief that some are elected unto heaven and some are elected unto eternal damnation such a threat to true Christian faith in Christ and His Gospel and the sustaining efficacy of the Word of God?

