

The Salvation of All Men

[John Calvin](#)

This sermon is from a Wm. B. Eerdmans' volume which was a reprint of the only sizable collection of John Calvin's sermons translated into the English language since the Sixteenth Century and the only volume ever published in America up to that time (1949). The collection was originally published in a limited edition in 1830 by John Forbes of New York.

For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior: Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. —1 TIMOTHY 2:3-5.

When we despise those whom God would have honored, it is as much as if we should despise Him: so it is, if we make no account of the salvation of those whom God calleth to Himself. For it seemeth thereby that we would stay Him from showing His mercy to poor sinners, who are in the way to ruin. The reason why St. Paul useth this argument, *that God will have all the world to be saved*, is that we may, as much as lieth in us, also seek the salvation of those who seem to be banished from the kingdom of God; especially while they are unbelievers.

We must always observe what the condition of the world was in the days of St. Paul. It was something new and strange to have the gospel published to the world in those days: for it appeared that God had chosen the stock of Abraham, and that the rest of the world would be deprived of all hope of salvation. And indeed we see how Holy Writ setteth forth the adoption of this people: but St. Paul commandeth us to pray for all the world; and not without cause, for he addeth the reason, which is here mentioned: to wit, because *God will have all men to be saved*. As if he should say, my friends, it is reasonable that we should observe what the will of God is, and at what He aimeth; that every one of us may employ himself to serve Him aright.

Therefore, seeing it is the will of God that all men should be partakers of that salvation which He hath sent in the person of His only begotten Son, we must endeavor to draw poor, silly, ignorant creatures to us, that we may all come together to this inheritance of the kingdom of heaven, which hath been promised us. But we must observe that St. Paul speaketh not of every particular man, but of all sorts of men, and of all people.

Therefore, when he saith that God will have all men to be saved, we must not think that he speaketh of them individually, but his meaning is this: that whereas in times past He chose a certain people to Himself, He meaneth now to show mercy to all the world: yea, even to them that seemed to be shut out from the hope of salvation.

He saith in another place, the heathens were without God, and void of all promise; because they were not as yet brought to the fellowship of the Jews. This was a special privilege that God had given to the descendants of Abraham. Therefore St. Paul's meaning is not that God will save every man, but that the promises which were given to but one people are now extended to all the world: for as he saith in this same epistle, the wall was broken down at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. God had separated the Jews from all other nations; but when Jesus Christ appeared for the salvation of the world, then was this difference, which existed between them and the Gentiles, taken away.

Therefore, God will now embrace us all: and this is the entrance into our salvation. For if that had always continued, which God ordained but for a season, then should we be all accursed; and the gospel would not have been preached to us: we should have had no sign or token of the love and goodness of God. But now we have become His children; we are no more strangers to the promises, as were our fathers: for Jesus Christ came to be a Savior to all in general; He offered the grace of God the Father, that all might receive it.

As St. Paul speaketh of all nations, so he likewise speaketh of all conditions; as if he should say, God will save kings and magistrates, as well as others: we must not restrain His fatherly goodness to ourselves alone, nor to any certain number of people. And why so? For He showeth that He will be favorable to all: thus we have St. Paul's meaning. To confirm this matter, he addeth it is God's will that all should come to the knowledge of the truth. We must mark well why St. Paul useth this argument; for we cannot know the will of God, unless it be made known to us; unless we have some sign or token whereby we may perceive it. It is too high a matter for us to know what God's counsel is; but as far as He showeth it to us by effect, so far we comprehend it.

The gospel is called the mighty power of God, and salvation to all them that believe: yea, it is the gate of paradise. It followeth then, if through the will of God the gospel be preached to all the world, there is a token that salvation is common to all. Thus St. Paul proveth that God's will is that all men should be saved. He hath not appointed His apostles to proclaim His name only among the Jews, for we know that the commission was given them to preach to all creatures; to be witnesses of Jesus Christ from Jerusalem to Samaria, and from thence throughout all the world.

Are the apostles sent to publish the truth of God to all people, and to all conditions of men? It followeth then that God presenteth Himself to all the world, that the promise belongeth to both great and small, as well to the Gentiles now, as to the Jews before. But before we go any farther, it is necessary to beat down the folly, or rather the beastliness, of those who abuse this passage of St. Paul; who endeavor to make the

election of God of no effect, and to utterly take it away. They say, if God will have all men to be saved, it follows that He hath not chosen a certain number of mankind, and cast the rest away, but that His will remaineth indifferent.

They pretend that it is left to the choice of men to save themselves or not; that God letteth us alone, and waiteth to see whether we will come to Him or not; and so receiveth them that come unto Him. But in the mean time, they destroy the ground work of our salvation; for we know that we are so accursed that the inheritance of salvation is far from us: if we say that Jesus Christ hath come to, remedy that, then must we examine the nature of mankind. We are so contrary in our nature, and such enemies to God, that we cannot but resist Him: we are so given to evil and wickedness that we cannot so much as conceive a good thought. How then can it be that we may become partakers of that salvation which is offered in the gospel, unless God draw us to it by His Holy Spirit? Let us now see whether God draw all the world to it or not. No, no, for then had our Lord Jesus Christ said in vain, "No man can come to me, except the Father, which hath sent me' draw him" (John 6:44). So then we must needs conclude that it is a special grace that God bestoweth upon such as pleaseth Him, to draw them, and teach them in such a manner, that they believe the gospel, and receive it with true faith.

And now, why doth God choose one, and leave another? We know that men cannot come to God by their own deserts, neither are those who have been chosen deserving any such thing as to be preferred to their companions, as though there were some worthiness in them. It followeth then that before the world was made (as St. Paul saith in the first to the Ephesians), God chose such as pleased Him: and we know not why this man was chosen in preference to that. And still we must confess that whatsoever God doth is done justly, although we cannot comprehend it. Therefore, let us receive that whereof we are so thoroughly certified in Holy Writ; and not suffer ourselves to be lead astray, under a shadow of vain reason, used by men, who are ignorant of the Word of God.

At the first sight, there appears to be some weight in their argument *God will have all men to be saved*: therefore say they, it is left to the free choice of every man to become enlightened in the faith, and to partake of salvation. If a man will read but three lines, he will easily perceive that St. Paul here speaketh not of every particular man as we have already shown, but that he speaketh of all people, and of all conditions of men. He showeth that the case standeth not as it did before the coming of Christ, when there was but one chosen people, but that God now showeth Himself a Savior to all the world; as it is said, thine inheritance shall be even to the ends of the earth.

Moreover, that no man may abuse himself, or be deceived by the vain and foolish talk of those who pervert Holy Writ, let us examine how the doctrine of these enemies of God, and all godliness, standeth. God will have all men to be saved; that is, as they imagine, every one. If it be the will of God at present, no doubt it was the same from the beginning of the world: for we know that His mind changeth not. So then, if at this day God will have all men to be saved, His mind was so always; and if His mind was so always, what shall we make of what St. Paul saith? that He will that all men come to the

knowledge of the truth. He chose but one people to Himself, as it is said (Acts 14) and left the poor Gentiles to walk in their own ignorance.

There were likewise some countries where He would not suffer St. Paul to preach; as in Bithynia and Phrygia (Acts 16:7). And so we see that God would not have the knowledge of the gospel to come to every one at first. Thus we may easily see the error of those who abuse this text. St. Paul speaketh not in this place of the counsel of God, neither doth He mean to lead us to His everlasting election, which was before the beginning of the world: but only showeth what His will and pleasure is, as far as we ought to know it.

It is true that God changeth not; neither hath He two wills; nor doth He use any counterfeit dealing: and yet the Scripture speaketh unto us in two ways concerning His will. And how can that be? How cometh it to pass that His will is spoken of in two different ways? It is because of our grossness, and want of understanding. Why doth He make Himself to have eyes, to have ears, and to have a nose? Why doth He take upon Him men's affections? Why is it that He saith He is angry, He is sorry? Is it not because we cannot comprehend Him in His incomprehensible majesty? Therefore, it is not absurd that Holy Writ should speak unto us of the will of God after two sorts: not because His will is double, but in order that He may apply Himself to our weakness, knowing that our understanding is gross and heavy.

When the Scripture informeth us that God hath chosen such as pleased Him before the world began, we behold a counsel into which we cannot enter. Why then doth Holy Writ inform us that this election and choice of God is everlasting? It is not without cause; for it is a very profitable doctrine, if it be received as it ought to be. For thereby we are reminded that we are not called to the knowledge of the gospel by reason of our own worthiness. We are no better than others, for we all sprung from the cursed root of Adam; we are all subject to the same condemnation; and we are all shut up under the slavery of sin and death.

When it pleased God to draw us out of the darkness of unbelief, and give us the light of the gospel, He looked not at any service which we might have performed, or at any virtue we might have possessed: but He called us, having chosen us before. This is the order in which St. Paul maketh mention in Romans 8: that knowing God, we must not take the glory to ourselves. Thus, the calling of the faithful resteth upon this counsel of God; and we see how far the Lord maketh known to us that which He had decreed before we were born. He toucheth us with His Holy Spirit, and we are ingrafted, as it were, into the body of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the true *earnest* of our adoption: this is the pledge given us, to put us out of all doubt that God taketh and holdeth us for His children, when by faith we are made one with Jesus Christ, who is the only begotten Son of God, unto whom belongeth the inheritance of life.

God giveth us such a sure testimony of His will that notwithstanding our ignorance, He putteth us out of doubt of our election; He giveth us a hope, of which we should be entirely void, if Jesus Christ did not call us to be members of His body. Thus we see

how profitable this doctrine of election is to us: it serveth to humble us, knowing that our salvation hangeth not upon our deserts, neither upon the virtue which God might have found in us: but upon the election that was made before we were born, before we could do either good or evil.

When we know that according to this unchangeable election, God hath called us to Himself, we are so much the more put out of doubt of our salvation. Jesus Christ saith, no man taketh from Me that which the Father hath given Me (John 10). What is it that the Father hath given Jesus Christ? They whom He hath chosen, and whom He knoweth to be His. Seeing the case standeth thus, that God hath given us to His Son, to be kept and defended by Him, and that Jesus Christ promiseth that none of us shall be lost, but that He will exercise all the might and power of the Godhead to save and defend us, is not this a comfort surpassing all the treasures of the world? Is not this the true ground upon which all the assurance and certainty of our salvation is settled?

We are as birds upon the boughs, and set forth as a prey to Satan. What assurance then could we have of tomorrow, and of all our life; yea, and after death, were it not that God, who hath called us, will end His work as He hath begun it. How hath He gathered us together in the faith of His gospel? Is it grounded upon us? Nay, entirely to the contrary; it proceedeth from His free election. Therefore; we may be so much the more freed from doubt. We must not strive to know any more of God's counsel than what is revealed in Holy Writ.

The will of God is opened to us, as often as we hear His Word preached, whereby He calleth and exhorteth us all to repentance. After He hath once shown us that we are all damned in His sight, and that there is nothing but condemnation in us, He showeth us that we must renounce ourselves, and get out of this bottomless pit. In that which God exhorteth all men, we may judge that it is His will that all men should be saved: as He saith by the prophet Ezekiel, "Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord God; and not that he should return from his ways and live?" (18:23). "Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (33:11).

How will God have sinners turn themselves? and how shall we know it? Seeing He will have repentance preached to all the world. When it is said that God will have mercy upon sinners, upon such as will come to Him, and ask forgiveness in Christ's name, it is a general doctrine. So then, it is said that God will have all men to be saved, not having respect to what we devise or imagine, that is, as far as our knowledge can comprehend it. When the Scripture speaketh of the love and will of God, let us see if men can have repentance by their own actions, being self taught, or whether it is God that giveth it.

God saith by His prophet, I will that all men turn and live. Can a man by his own works turn himself? No: for if that were in our power, it were more than to make us. It is an undoubted doctrine throughout the whole Scripture that our Lord Jesus Christ giveth Himself the praise of turning us. He saith, "I will put a new spirit within you: and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh" (Ezekiel

11:19). To be short, there is nothing that the faithful ought so much to do as to give God the glory, confessing that it is He alone that can turn us; and that He hath adopted us in such a manner that He must needs draw us by the grace of His Spirit.

Have men such knowledge that they are able to attain this faith, this wonderful wisdom which is contained in the gospel, such as the very angels themselves reverence? Let us mark what God saith to us in His Word: that He will open our eyes, and unstop our ears; because the natural man understandeth no part of the secrets of God; for it is the Holy Ghost that revealeth them to us. It is hardly possible to read a single passage in Holy Writ, without finding some sentence, which informeth us that men are utterly blind by nature until God openeth their eyes. They can in no wise come to Him, until He draw them, and enlighten them by His Holy Spirit.

Seeing that God alone turneth men from their wickedness, experience teacheth us, and so doth the Holy Scripture that He giveth not His grace to all men. It is said, "The Lord hath not given you an heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, unto this day" (Deut. 29:4). It is plainly shown that God doth not cast forth His grace without direction, but that it is only for those whom He hath chosen, for those that are of the body of His church, and of His flock. Thus we see what St. Paul meaneth when he saith, *God will have all men to be saved*: that is, He will have some of all nations, and all conditions.

It is said that He offereth His gospel to all, which is the means of drawing us to salvation. And doth this profit all men? No; of this our own eyes are witnesses. For when we hear the truth of God, if we rebel against it, it proves a great condemnation to us. Yet so it is, that there are many who do not profit by the gospel, but rather become worse, even those to whom it is preached; therefore, they are not all saved. God must go farther in order to bring us to salvation; He must not only appoint men, and send them to teach us faithfully, but He must operate upon our hearts. He must touch us to the quick, He must draw us to Him, He must make His work profitable to us, and cause it to take root in our hearts.

It is evident that we have to consider the will of God in two ways: not that it is double of itself (as we before observed), but we must consider it as adapted to our weakness. He formeth His speech to us in His Word, according to our capacity. If God should speak according to His majesty, His speech would be beyond our comprehension; it would utterly confound us! For if our eyes be not able to abide the brightness of the sun, would our minds be able to comprehend the infinite majesty of God? These silly men who would destroy God's election ought not to abuse this passage; nor say that we make God to have two wills; for therein do they impudently misrepresent us. We say, as far as we can perceive, God would have all men to be saved, whensoever, and how oft soever, He appointeth His gospel to be preached to us.

As we said before, the gate of paradise is opened to us, when we are called to be partakers of that redemption which was purchased for us by our Lord Jesus Christ. And this is the will of God, as far as we can comprehend it: that when He exhorteth us to

repentance, He is ready to receive us, if we will come to Him. Although we have answered the doubts which might have been raised- upon this subject, we will bring a similitude to make this doctrine more easy. (I call a similitude that agreement and similarity which God maketh between the children of Israel and us.) God saith that He chose the children of Abraham for His inheritance, and dedicated them to Himself: He loved them, and took them for His own household (Deut. 7).

This is true; for He made His covenant with all those that were circumcised. Was circumcision a vain figure, and of no importance? Nay, it was a sure and undoubted sign that God had chosen that people for His own, accounting all for His flock that came of that race. And yet, was there not a special grace for some of that people?

Surely there was, as St. Paul setteth forth, "For they are not all Israel which are of Israel: neither because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children" (Romans 9:6, 7), for God deprived some of this benefit that His grace and goodness might seem greater to those whom He called to Himself. Behold, therefore, the will of God which was made manifest to the children of Israel is at this day made manifest to us.

It is said in Amos 4:7, "God caused it to rain upon one city, and caused it not to rain upon another city." So the Lord sendeth His gospel wheresoever it pleaseth Him: His grace is poured out upon all the world; yet it cannot be but He worketh otherwise with those whom He draweth to Himself, for all of us have our ears stopped, and our eyes hoodwinked. We are deaf and blind, unless He prepareth us to receive His Word. When the gospel is preached to us, it is as much as if God reached out His hand (as He saith in Isa. 65:2) and said to us, come unto Me. It is a matter which ought to touch us to the heart when we perceive that God cometh to seek us. He doth not wait till we come to Him, but He showeth us that He is ready to receive us, although we were His deadly enemies. He wipeth away all our faults, and maketh us partakers of that salvation, which was purchased for us by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thus we see how worthy the gospel is to be esteemed, and what a treasure it is! As St. Paul saith to the Romans. "It is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth:" it is the kingdom of heaven; and God openeth the door, that we, being taken out of the bottomless pit wherein we were sunk by nature, may enter into His glory. We must remember that it is not enough for us to receive the Word that is preached to us by the mouth of man, but after we have heard it, God must speak to us inwardly by His Holy Spirit; for this is the only means to bring us to the knowledge of the truth. Therefore, when God hath dealt so mercifully with us, as to give us the light of faith, let us hold it fast, and pray Him to continue it, and bring His work to perfection.

Let us not lift ourselves proudly above other men, as though we were more worthy than they are, for we know that it is our God that hath chosen us, and setteth us apart from others, by His mere goodness and free mercy. We must know, moreover, that men are very faulty, when God offereth them His Word, and they receive it not. This is spoken that unbelievers and rebels might have their mouths stopped, that they might not blaspheme the name of God, as though He had been wanting on His part; and to the

end that all the faithful should, in humbleness of heart, glorify God for His grace and mercy toward them: for we see how He calleth all those to whom His Word is preached, to salvation.

If men reply by saying they cannot come to God, we cannot stand to plead here, for we shall always find ourselves in fault. If a man say, it resteth only in the hands of God, and if He would give me repentance, could He not do it! If I remain stiff-necked in my hardness and malice, what can I do in this case, seeing God will not give me repentance to turn to Him? This is not in any wise to be allowed; for God calleth us sufficiently to Him, and we cannot accuse Him of cruelty; even if we had not His Word, we must needs confess that He is just, although we know not the cause that moved Him to deprive us of it.

When we are called to come to God, and know that He is ready to receive us, if we do not come, can we deny that we are unthankful? Let us not separate salvation from the knowledge of the truth; for God doth not mean to lie, nor deceive men, when He saith, when they come to the knowledge of the truth they shall be saved. *God will have all men to be saved; but how? If they will come to the knowledge of the truth.* Every man would be saved, but no man will draw nigh to God. The Scripture informeth us that if we desire salvation, we must attend to the means which God hath appointed; that is, we must receive His Word with obedience and faith.

The Scripture saith this is everlasting life: to wit, to know God the Father, and to receive Christ as our only Savior. Therefore let us learn, as it is here set forth, not to doubt of the certainty of our salvation; for the kingdom of God is within us. If we wish God to receive us, we must receive the doctrine given us by St. Paul. How are we called to the hope of salvation? By the influence of the grace of God, which maketh known to us His love and favor. Thus we may see what St. Paul's meaning is when he saith, God will have His grace made known to all the world, and His gospel preached to all creatures. Therefore, we must endeavor, as much as possible, to persuade those who are strangers to the faith, and seem to be utterly deprived of the goodness of God, to accept of salvation.

Jesus Christ is not only a Savior of few, but He offereth Himself to all. As often as the gospel is preached to us, we ought to consider that God calleth us to Him: and if we attend to this call, it shall not be in vain, neither shall it be lost labor. But can we come to Him without any assistance, except what we derive from our own nature? Alas, we cannot! "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Romans 8:7). When God dealeth so graciously with us as to touch our hearts with His Holy Spirit, then He causeth His gospel to work profitably to our salvation; then He maketh a display of the virtue spoken of by St. Paul.

Again, we must remember when the gospel is preached to us, that it is to make us more void of excuse. Seeing God hath already shown us that He was ready to receive us to mercy, if we would come unto Him, our condemnation will no doubt be increased, if we be so wicked as to draw back, when He calleth so mildly and lovingly. Notwithstanding,

(as we are here exhorted), let us not leave off praying for all men in general; for St. Paul showeth that God will have all men to be saved; that is to say, men of all people and nations.

Although we see a great diversity among men, yet we must not forget that God hath made us all in His own image and likeness, and that we are the workmanship of His hand; therefore He extends His goodness to those who are afar off, of which we have had sufficient proof: for when He drew us unto Him, were we not His enemies? How then cometh it to pass that we are now of the household of faith, the children of God, and members of our Lord Jesus Christ? Is it not because He hath gathered us to Himself? And is He not the Savior of the whole world, as well as of us? Did Jesus Christ come to be the mediator of two or three men only? No, no; but He is the *mediator between God and men*.

Therefore, we may be so much the more assured that God taketh and holdeth us for His children, if we endeavor to bring those to Him who are afar off. Let us comfort ourselves, and take courage in this our calling: although there be at this day a great forlornness, though we seem to be miserable creatures, utterly cast away and condemned, yet we must labor as much as possible to draw those to salvation who seem to be afar off. And above all things, let us pray to God for them, waiting patiently till it please Him to show His good will toward them, as He hath shown it to us.

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