

Is Universal Salvation Explicitly Taught in the New Testament?

Part 1: Keeping Things in Context

By

Gerry Watts

September 2013

For the best part of 18 years I accepted, believed and taught the doctrine of Universal Salvation; also known as Evangelical Universalism; Universal Reconciliation; Universal Restoration or the Restoration of All Things; & the Salvation of All. My view was very similar to the position of the renowned church father, Origen. My archived writings largely still reflect this position. In fact, originally my whole website was built around this theme, which I think, upon reflection, was not the wisest thing to do.

Nevertheless, in late 2012 and early 2013 my biblical studies caused me to seriously rethink and reconsider this position. From about January 2013, I subsequently arrived at the conclusion that I could no longer hold to this viewpoint. One of the main reasons that caused me to make such a major shift in my thinking was seeking to understand the New Testament writings in their original context – both historically and doctrinally. It's surprising how this fundamental principle is often overlooked in biblical studies.

When I was first introduced to Christian Universalism, a fellow brother and friend who had moved to the USA highlighted 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul talked about death being abolished. The initial reasoning was that for death to be finally destroyed or abolished, this would have to include the Second Death of Revelation, so that all mankind would be given life and no longer remain in death. This seemed so logical to me that it was like a revelation. I was then introduced to the writings of Adolf Knoch and the Concordant Publishing Concern. Nevertheless, I made the mistake of not consulting much literature outside of that which taught Universalism. In other words, I didn't research all the interpretive options of the major doctrinal positions.

I still do not accept the more 'traditional' doctrine of Eternal Conscious Torment in a literal fiery Hell, as I do not believe that that is the best way to understand the biblical texts. I aim to show in this series that the view commonly called Annihilationism or Conditional Immortality is the view I presently accept as the most biblically sound position.

In this series I aim to consider all of the relevant key New Testament texts that deal with universalism and final punishment, while also dealing with other related issues, particularly that of the Greek words for eternal and everlasting, and the common distinction that is made between "age-abiding" and "eternal".

One of the first issues to deal with when it comes to Universalism is whether words such as "all" or "the whole world" or "all mankind" or "all nations" mean

absolutely every single person on planet earth. It is not really a matter of the meaning of the original Greek words as much as being the matter of word usage in context. That is to say, even having a literal translation to consult is not enough by itself; it is a matter of interpretation, allowing room for idiom, metaphor and context.

The underlying issue here is whether we are to understand these terms as absolute or relative. A more ultra-literal interpretation would favour the *absolute* meaning, while an interpretation that allows for idiomatic usage tends to view these things as *relative*. It is the overarching context that determines the usage, meaning and interpretation.

There are many instances throughout the New Testament that could be cited to show that in most cases the meaning of these terms are to be understood in a *relative* sense rather than an absolute sense. Take the following examples.

Jesus said that the Queen of Sheba came from 'the ends of the earth' to listen to Solomon's wisdom in Jerusalem (Matthew 12:42). Did he really mean that the Queen of Sheba had literally travelled from the ends of the globe to see Solomon? Of course not. It is an idiom meaning 'a long way'.

Near the beginning of Jesus' ministry he was in the city of Capernaum, and we are told that "the whole city" were gathered at the door of Simon Peter's house to be healed (Mark 1:32-34). Are we to understand that every single person in Capernaum gathered at Peter's door? It is highly unlikely. This is an idiom, meaning "lots of people from the city" -- maybe even the majority.

At the time of the birth of Jesus, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of 'the entire world', or more literally 'the whole inhabited earth' (Luke 2:1). Are we to understand this as meaning that the entire globe was taxed? Of course not. It is evident from the context that this referred to *the world of the Roman Empire*, and it did not include those peoples outside the boundaries of the Empire.

When the apostle Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, we are told that 'the whole city' was in a riotous uproar (Acts 21:30-32). Are we to understand that every single person in the whole city of Jerusalem was in the Temple courts rioting? I think not. Again, this is idiomatic, to be understood in the relative sense of 'many people from the city'.

After Jesus had spoken to the Samaritan woman at the well in Samaria, many of the Samaritans there accepted his word and believed that Jesus was the "saviour of the world" (John 4:42). Did the Samaritans really mean that Jesus would save every person on planet earth, as Universalists claim? I don't think so. As these were Samaritans, who were viewed as enemies of the Jews, this incident revealed that the gospel of the kingdom was showing signs of going further afield than just the Jewish nation. Hence, Jesus being "the Saviour of the world" simply means he is not just the Messiah and Saviour of Israel, but of the whole world – for there is only one Saviour.

This same sense of meaning is being brought out in 1 John 1:2, where John states that Jesus "*is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the*

sins of the whole world." The Universalist understanding of this text is that "the whole world" means every single human being who has ever lived (or will live). This is highly debatable considering the ancient context. Jesus had originally been sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and the focus of his ministry was in the land of Palestine, particularly the regions of Galilee in the north and Judea in the south. Although there were hints during Jesus' ministry that the gospel was also for the Gentiles, the full outworking of this did not occur until well after Pentecost.

The whole of the book of Acts is detailing the transition that took place in the first century A.D. particularly focusing on the ministry of Paul amongst all the nations of the world. In that context, John's meaning would be that Jesus' sacrifice was not just for Israel, or even Gentile converts to Judaism, but his sacrifice dealt with the sins of the whole world; that is, Christ is the Saviour of all the nations, all the peoples, the whole world, all mankind. This, in and of itself, doesn't mean that God will actually save every human being.

A similar meaning can be attached to John 12:32-33. Jesus said, "*But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.*" Again, the drawing of all mankind to Christ is not to be understood in the absolute sense of every single person being drawn to Christ to be saved. In the context of the time, Jesus was indicating that his death would have far reaching consequences that would include all mankind or all people, and not just Israel.

One of the strongest passages for Universalism is 1 Timothy 4:10, where Paul states that "*God is the saviour of all mankind, especially of believers*". As can be seen in some of my archived articles, I often used to push the point that for God to be the saviour of all mankind this must mean that he would have to save all mankind, in the absolute sense of saving every individual person who has ever lived.

I now realise that this reasoning is incorrect. If the text blatantly said that God would be the saviour of every person, then yes, that would mean that he would have to save everyone; but Paul didn't say that.

I believe emphatically that Paul was declaring the simple truth that God is the Saviour of all peoples, all nations, all Gentiles, the whole world. There is only one God, and through Christ, he is the only Saviour. Therefore, God is the Saviour of all mankind, because the gospel is for everyone who will receive it. Yet he is especially the Saviour of believers because they have already accepted their salvation and, through Christ, are presently reconciled to God.

This was just another way for Paul to say, as he did elsewhere, that the whole world was divided into three groups, namely the Jew, the Gentile and the Assembly of God (1 Corinthians 10:32). In the gospel, God is the Saviour of all mankind; 'all mankind' being Jew and Gentile alike; whereas those who believe the gospel then become a part of the called-out assembly (Greek 'ekklesia') or 'church' of God, composed of believing Jews and Gentiles in the spiritual kingdom of God.

It is God's desire that all people receive the gospel of salvation and come into the knowledge of the truth, for Jesus has become the correspondent ransom for all mankind (1 Timothy 2:3-6; see also 2 Peter 3:9). The Universalist view pushes the point of whether God's will and desire will be realised by God actually saving

everyone and fulfilling his desire. Yet it could also be argued that God doesn't want anyone to sin or commit wicked acts, for this is against his will, but everyone does sin in some measure, and many commit wicked acts.

I often used to push this issue a lot myself, emphasising that God's will would be done so that he would actually save everybody in the end. But is this thinking correct? I have come to realise that this position is unsupported by the rest of the NT teaching, which clearly reveals that not all will actually be saved. In fact, the NT ends by picturing all those outside of Christ as being destroyed in the Second Death, the Lake of Fire – without any sign of them escaping this Death or coming out the other end after a period of 'chastening' or purifying (Revelation 20:11-15; 21:8; 22:15). If someone could show me where the NT explicitly says otherwise, then I would gladly accept it.

As for the issue of whether "all" always means "all" in an absolute sense, I aim to consider this later in the series when I deal with 1 Corinthians 15 in some detail. In my previous archived writings, I accepted the common 'Universalist' interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:22 & 28 – "*for even as in Adam all die, so also in the Christ all shall be made alive*" and "... *That God may be all in all*" – where 'the all' here is viewed as referring to all mankind, i.e. every single human being. I now question this interpretation due to the over-arching context; Paul was clearly focusing on the totality of believers, and never once mentions the rest of humanity. That is, God will be 'all in all' the elect, not all humanity.

Paul in Romans 9-11 is expressing a similar thought. When Paul speaks of 'all Israel' being saved in 11:26 he was evidently referring to all the elect as the true Israel of God (cf. Galatians 6:16). The fact that Paul made it very clear in 9:6, 22-24, & 27 that not all who are descended from Israel are actually Israel in God's sight shows that only the elect remnant are collectively the true Israel of God – hence 'all Israel' would be saved.

I plan to deal with these things as this series progresses. In Part 2 we shall consider the major issue of the Greek adjective *aionios* and whether there is a distinction between that which is 'age-abiding' and more temporary, as opposed to that which is 'eternal'.