

Transcript 191

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions Podcast today. Joining me again is Jeff, the administrator of bibleref.com, and Kevin, the managing editor of Got Questions Ministries. And we're going to be continuing our series on what is Calvinism. And what are the five points of Calvinism? So if you've not already, I'd invite you, to encourage you to watch the first three episodes in the series where we do a what is Calvinism in general, kind of an introduction. And then the first two episodes in the five points, what is total depravity and what is unconditional election?

Shea Houdmann

But today we're going to be covering the question what is limited atonement? For many, limited atonement is the most controversial of the points. And I think that's largely in part because there are at least two, many more in reality, passage in the Bible that seem to directly argue against this particular point of Calvinism. But as you see, as we go through this series, you'll see that the points of Calvinism build on each other, they're all connected, interconnected. So limited atonement, if total depravity and unconditional election are true in the sense that Calvinists view them, then it limited atonement makes sense. But with that said, none of the three of us hold to limited atonement. We understand what it's getting at, and we'll explain some of the nuances of it to you as we discuss today.

Shea Houdmann

But limited atonement in its essence is that Jesus died only for the elect. That his death on the cross paid for the sins of all those whom God has elected to salvation. Meaning Jesus death, Jesus did not die for those who do not receive him as savior. For those who do not, who are not elect, those who do not trust in him. That's some, and Jeff will go into this later because we are having a very interesting conversation before we started about in what sense does it matter and I'll allow Jeff to explain that this whether Jesus died only for the elect or whether Jesus died for the sins of the whole the world, the Bible is still very clear that no one sins are forgiven unless

they trust in Christ. So when you talk about atonement being limited, it's not a question of whether Jesus can save you. It's whether Jesus death was applied to you in advance, or whether Jesus death is applied to you when you trust in Christ as savior. So that's some of the questions we're dealing with. But Kevin, I know you have some scriptures ready at hand for both for and against limit atonement, so why don't you help us jump off into this conversation with those.

Kevin Stone

OK, I'm glad to. And like you said, Shea, I do not hold to limited atonement as presented by the by Calvinism, but there is a certain logic that that goes that goes into it. The Calvinists would say, well, if the atonement was not limited, if God died for everyone, if Jesus died for everyone, then there are people in hell for whom Jesus died. And that doesn't make sense to me. You know, why would there be people in hell suffering that Jesus died for? What's up with that? So that's kind of the logic behind the doctrine of limited atonement. And then there were some scripture passages that Calvinists will point to that do seem to provide for a limited atonement. What's not debatable in all of this, maybe I should say too, is that we are saved by the death of Christ. The blood of Christ is what saves us. Every Christian believes that, and so that's not what that's not the debate and what it's all about.

Kevin Stone

But here are some passages that that are used for in support of limited atonement. This L of the Tulip in Calvinism. Revelation 5 verse nine, they sang a new song, saying you are worthy to take the scroll to open its seals because you were slain and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. So these people, these redeemed, are praising the lamb because of his, his redemption, his atonement, and the fact that they're in heaven. They're praising the lamb for this but notice that they are purchased for God from every tribe and language and people and nations. So not the entire group but just people select people from these tribes and tongues. And so there is a certain selectivity there

certain limiting of the atonement, says the Calvinist. John 10 and verse 11, Jesus says I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. And so it would seem here that Jesus is saying that his sacrifice was made specifically for the sheep, for the elect, for the church, for those who are saved. Did he not die for those who were not his sheep? That would be the extrapolated interpretation that Calvinists put on here. Ephesians 5 verse 25, husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. So again, Christ laid down his life for the church specifically, and that this would seem to indicate a limited atonement. And then First John three and verse 16, this is how we know what love is, Jesus Christ laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. So who's the us here that Paul's talking about? I'm sorry that John is talking about. Well, it's the believers. It's the church. It's the elect. Christ laid down his life for us, for the church. Does that mean that he did not lay down his life for anyone else? That's the question at hand. So those those are a few of the passages that are used in support of limited atonement, one of the doctrines of Calvinism.

Kevin Stone

But there are some other passages that seem to indicate quite the opposite, that Christ's atonement is unlimited. John one verse 29, John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And so there is the sin problem being taken care of. And it seems to be a universal problem of sin being universally taken care of. And this is happening because of the Lamb of God. First Timothy 2 verses 5 and 6, there's one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man, Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people, Paul says. Jesus ransom was for everyone.

Kevin Stone

And then the classic rebuttal to limited atonement is First John 2 verses one and two. My children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the father Jesus Christ the righteous one. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins. And not

only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world. So here the ours he he paid for our sin. That would be the elect, the church. But then John specifically says it's not only that he atoned for our sin, he atoned for the sins of the of the whole world. So these passages seem to say that Christ's sacrifice was indeed unlimited in scope.

Shea Houdmann

Kevin, there's one more I know you could have mentioned more too, but one that's always stuck in my mind is Second Peter 2:1 where it says, but false prophets also rose among the people just as there will be false teachers among you who secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. So here is talking about these false prophets who are denying the Lord who bought them. And then in the case of these false prophets are headed towards destruction. So here are people headed for destruction that this verse clearly says that Christ bought with the sacrifice on the cross. So yeah, the ones you shared First John 2:2 is always the big one for me as well. But this one in Second Peter 2:1 for me has also been one that really how can Jesus have bought people who are unsaved and are destined for destruction if his atonement was not for everyone.

Jeff Laird

I'm sorry you're waiting for me. I think I kind of nodded off for a second. All kidding aside, the reason that I say that is because as a very practical person, limited atonement to me is that perhaps at the bottom of my theological worry list. Now, as we've talked about, there's issues here that do matter. They connect to things that make a difference. But the the engineering mindset that I have says I'm looking for the practical. How does this really impact? And I think one of the reasons that limited atonement is so controversial is because there's a lot of wiggle room and a lot of vagueness. And I'm a firm believer that the main things are the plain things. If something is not that clearly defined or not repeated often, then it probably doesn't have a whole lot of direct impact.

Jeff Laird

And I was sitting trying to think of an analogy to explain why I I I sort of take that approach. And the approach that I came up with was to think of something like a soup kitchen. You've got a big pot of soup in there. And there's this room and the cook invites people to get soup. And only the people he invites get it. And the people he invites never turn it down. And if they don't get soup, they go hungry. Now there's three options. Either that pot is infinitely deep. And there's just infinite soup in there, no matter how much is taken out or there's exactly enough soup in there for just the people in the room, or there's just enough in there for the people who are actually going to come get a bowl of soup. And when the last person gets it, he's scraping the bottom of it and putting it together. As far as the difference between hungry and not hungry goes, does it really matter which of the three of those is true? No, no, it really doesn't. The only thing that matters is that those who were invited get it. Those who weren't don't even want it, and they don't get it. So in that sense the atonement of Christ we know only applies to those who come to him in faith as a result of whatever election and predestination God uses, and for those who don't, it's not effective. Whether there is leftover grace after that or not doesn't really change that side of it.

Jeff Laird

So where limited atonement really comes in, is in the question of how does it connect to a person's view of these other doctrines of grace. So one of the things that factors in, for example, would be the idea of unconditional election or irresistible grace. In other words, is there actually grace in reserve so that when Christ makes an offer and somebody says no, it's a sincere offer. Like what you believe about irresistible grace is going to affect the way that you believe about limited atonement.

Jeff Laird

The other theological thing for me that matters is the thought that Jesus is sacrifice as I perceive it was not a gradient. In other words, Jesus did not build up a sufficient level of holiness and divinity to cross some line or meet some quota. He was either perfectly sinless or he was not.

He was either divine or he was not. And in that sense, Jesus's sacrifice either is or it isn't. Like if he had sinned at all, if he even had a sin nature, then that sacrifice would not have worked. So in that sense, theologically, I would say that it makes sense that his sacrifice was large enough, infinite enough that it could have covered the sins of every single person. God could have quintupled or multiplied by a billion the number of souls who have ever lived, and it would still have been enough. But it only actually applies to those who come to Christ in faith. So I'm not usually dismissive of theological ideas, and I'm not dismissive of this one. But I do know that when it comes to some of the various doctrines of grace, this is definitely one that I think is it's interesting to talk about, but I have very, very little stake in which side the person comes down on with it.

Shea Houdmann

Jeff I'm, I'm with you there in the sense that so much heat has been spent arguing over this issue and ultimately all sides agree, whether they understand it or not, that Jesus death was of infinite value. That Jesus death is sufficient to pay for the sins of every human being who's ever and will ever live. That is not the question. Where it's saying it's limited does not mean it's limited in value. It's saying it's limited in application, who it's being applied to. Calvinist will say it's only applied to the elect. Armenians would say it's applied to everyone but you have to access it by trusting in Christ. A lot of people make the mistake when they first hear the word limited atonement, saying are you saying that Christ's death had limited values? Like no, like no one is saying that. Even the the strongest Hyper Calvinist will say that Jesus death was infinitely and perfectly and eternally sufficient to pay for the sins of everyone in the history of the entire world. It's the question of Calvinists need limited atonement because they view that when God elects someone to salvation and then with the doctrine of total depravity, he has to regenerate that person to even enable them to believe that why would he in a sense waste Jesus sacrifice by applying to people who are not going to believe. And as Kevin said, that there would be people in in hell paying for their sins whom Christ died and also paid for their sins. So there's

some sort of double payment for sin.

Shea Houdmann

So you see that there is a certain, I don't know if logic is the right term behind why Calvinist believe in limited atonement. But the problem is it's not what Scripture teaches, or at least it's there's enough evidence to the contrary to allow us to definitely not be dogmatic on this point.

So we can all agree that Jesus death was infinitely sufficient to pay for the sins of the entire world. That's exactly what First John 2:2 says. And no one Calvinists, Armenians, Molest everyone. No one is teaching universalism, at least on the perspective of what we're discussing.

So we all agree that the effects of Christ's death is limited in the sense that not everyone is going to be saved, even though Jesus death was sufficient to accomplish that. The question is is God limiting it by only applying it to the elect? Or do we limit it by some people choose to trust in Christ, other people choose to reject Christ? So who's limiting the atonement? Is it God, or is it us?

Kevin Stone

The atonement is sufficient for everyone, but it is only efficient or effectual for those who accept it by faith. And we see a couple of places in the Old Testament in the history of Israel that would seem to support this or illustrate it at least. One is the the Passover. That Passover sacrifice, when the lamb was slain on that very first Passover, the night that Israel left Egypt. That sacrifice was good for protecting that whole household from the angel of death that came through that night. But the blood had to be applied to the the door posts and the lentil. And so there was, that was an action of faith that blood had to be applied. So sacrifice was sufficient, but it was only efficient if it was actually applied.

Kevin Stone

But one passage that I really I always think about in relation to this subject is from Numbers chapter 21, the Israelites under Moses are complaining that there's no water, they're out wandering in the desert. They're thirsty. They're, we're gonna die. They hear. That's the like, the

constant chorus that Moses is always hearing. But here in Numbers 21 starting in verse six, in response to the peoples murmuring and complaining, the Lord sent venomous snakes among them. They bit the people. Many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, we sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us. So Moses prayed for the people. The Lord said to Moses, make a snake, put it up on a pole. Anyone who is bitten can look at it and live. So Moses made a bronze snake, put it on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived. So God provided a means to cure the snake bite. But people had to look in faith to that bronze serpent. And Jesus tells us, we learned later in in the New Testament that this this was actually an illustration, a, a prefiguring of Christ's sacrifice as he was lifted up from the earth and people who looked to him in faith are saved. But notice here in this passage in Numbers that Moses prayed for all of the people. He didn't just pray for some of them. But he prayed for the entire nation that they would be saved. The serpent was not placed on a pole so that only a select few could see it. It was placed in a very prominent position in a public place where everyone had the opportunity to see this bronze serpent. Serpent on the pole was thus available to everyone in Israel. It was sufficient for all, but it was only efficient. It was only effectual. To those who had faith to actually look to the snake and trust in God.

Jeff Laird

Like the analogy that's in there, I hadn't necessarily thought of that in terms of limited atonement, but it does make sense that God is providing something, and the question of who does or doesn't actually take advantage of it doesn't really change the value or the the quantity of what's there. Another thing that comes up for me with this limited atonement idea is sometimes people will make that concept that there's if, if there is some part of Jesus sacrifice that's not being applied or not being used, that that is somehow a waste or it's inefficient. And why would God, you know, provide a sacrifice or or or make available a payment and then never actually do something with it. And you know, some of Jesus's parables He talks about the idea

that the person who owns something has the right to kind of do with it as he pleases. He he tells a parable of a man who pays people at the end of the day and he chooses to pay everybody the same amount, even though some of them worked less well. That's his prerogative to do with as he chooses. When Peter criticizes two people in the New Testament Church for lying about what they donated, he didn't say that the problem was that they didn't donate everything. He basically said it was yours, you could do whatever you wanted with it. The problem is that you lied about it. So the idea that God is somehow obligated to use everything at his disposal, I don't think necessarily works.

Jeff Laird

And I also see a lot of places in Scripture where God does things specifically to make the point that human beings have no excuse. He does many things, many things for what to me seems like to be for no other reason than just to prove, look, no human being is ever going to be able to stand in front of God and say, yeah but. Revelation is full of that. There's going to come a point in time where God is going to do amazing miracles and tremendous signs and wonders in the world, and he's going to do that knowing that people are still going to refuse to believe. And then Christ is going to come back and then he's going to rule the planet perfectly for 1000 years. And people will still choose to rebel against him. And you look at that and you go, what's the point? Like, why? Why do that? And I think it's because that's God's way of putting something in front of us that to our human minds, is a way of saying there is nothing, you don't have logic, emotion, legalism, a technicality, a loophole. Nothing. I am proving for your sake, beyond a shadow of a doubt that you have no excuse for rejection.

Jeff Laird

So I think the idea that Christ's atonement can be considered so good, is so big, so large, that it could have paid for the salvation of every single human being who has ever lived or ever will lived, or a trillion times that many is not a waste. If anything, if we do take that view, it's again God saying nobody's ever going to be able to come to me and say yeah, but you you only had

enough grace available for some people and I wasn't one of them. Well, that's technically true or not is not the point. The point is God is putting us in a position where that's not even an option that we can really use against him. He does things sometimes just for the sake of taking away our excuses and proving to us that what he's doing really is righteous.

Kevin Stone

If I could share one more verse here that I really love concerning this whole issue and Jeff, you just mentioned grace, the grace of God. And I love this passage in Titus two and verse 11 says, for the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. I think that says it so succinctly, so clearly. The saving grace of God is available to all people, not some, but all.

Shea Houdmann

Amen Kevin. Well said. And Jeff will said for you as well. This is such a intricate, so to speak theological topic. But who are we to say what God does or doesn't do with Christ's sacrifice? And to say that he's wasting it if Jesus died for some people who don't end up being saved, I don't think that's our place to determine what God has chosen to do. The one question that's related to what you asked that I still wonder about and I would love if you guys have heard a really good explanation of it, is the idea of a a double payment in a sese that if Jesus died for those who remain unsaved and they spend eternity separated from God and paying the penalty for their sins that in that sense, Jesus paid for the penalty for their sins, and they are paying the penalty for sins. Why is that not a good argument for limited atonement?

Jeff Laird

I would look at it that for exactly what we were saying about the difference between what is effective versus what is sufficient. So it would be like me having a billion dollars in my bank account and I said I'm going to put a billion dollars in a bank account specifically for this purpose. And then some people take advantage of that money, and I dole some of it out. Other people don't. It we wouldn't really be saying that well, now people are paying twice. No, I mean

only each person's only being paid for once. What I have is I have a reserve that could have been used to pay and wasn't. So I think that's where that difference between that which is sufficient versus that which is efficient comes in.

Kevin Stone

Yes, yeah, definitely. I I can't add to that. It's sufficient versus efficient or effective. And God has designed salvation to be provided for in Christ. But he also requires faith. That is a part of the salvation process.

Jeff Laird

Yeah, I think if we if we try to make the argument that Jesus, in the most literal sense, paid for the sins of the whole world on the cross, then if we take that literally, literally, then we're looking at universalism. Because then we would be saying but if at that moment the actual penalty was actually paid for all persons. You know, and again it's terminology that's that's tricky in there, but it provided sufficient payment, but not everybody's going to avail themselves of it.

Shea Houdmann

Good point. The the one thing I've I've read is the question that we all agree that we are not capable of paying for our own sins. So the the idea that people who are suffering eternally separated from God are paying for their sins, I don't think that's actually what's happening. They're not. They can't. I mean, they remain in that sinful state. They're all they have no righteous. Nothing that can be applied to pay the penalty for their sins. So it's, I don't know that hell should be considered a place where we're paying for it. It's more of a place of punishment for the fact that it wasn't paid for. That to me makes way more sense.

Shea Houdmann

So limited atonement is the one that's most the point of Calvinism that is most debated, primarily due to the fact that there are Bible verses that seem to teach both sides. We are, we are aware of both sides. We've all land more on the unlimited atonement. And 1st John 2:2 is just to me unescapable in that Jesus died for the sins, for our sins and for the sins of the entire world. Not

just the world, some Calvinist say, let's talk about the world of the elect. Well then John goes to the next step and adds the word entire, communicating the entire scope of like unless you are presupposing limited atonement, that verse clearly says Jesus died for everyone in the entire world, believers and unbelievers alike. So but for system of Calvinism, what I've been kind of doing with each episode is trying to show you how the how, for Calvinists, at least, those who buy all five points, how this is a logical flow. And please understand again, Jeff, Kevin and I do not hold to full Calvinism. We do not consider ourselves full Calvinist in that sense. With each point, varying degrees of agreement, but also like even the ones we agree with are like yes, but that's not the only possible way to explain it.

Shea Houdmann

But for Calvinist, you start with total depravity. Where human beings are so hopelessly corrupted by sin that the only way for them to even believe is for God to regenerate them. Basically, create faith in them, and essentially they become believers before they believe. It's so hopelessly corrupted by sin, requires God to completely bring us to life in order for us to believe, to actually place that faith in us. So if that's true, you have unconditional election. Well, if God has to regenerate a person in order for them to be saved well clearly not everyone has that experience. So God is clearly only doing that for the people he has sovereignly elected. So it is not a election based on God foreseeing faith. It's election on his, I chose these people. I place the faith in them, therefore they are the ones who are elect. Then you get to limit atonement. Well, if God is asked to instill faith in people in order for them to believe and if only the people who God has chosen is elect based on he elected them and therefore chose to regenerate them, well, clearly, then it makes logical sense for Jesus death to only be applied to those who God has elected, and God has regenerated. But in each of these points are like, did God really have to regenerate us? Were we that hopelessly corrupted by sin? Or was a lesser degree of an opening of the eyes of softening hearts. Convincing of our minds of the truth of the gospel and enabling us to believe, is that sufficient? Unconditional election. We of course believe in God's

sovereignty, that God can choose anyone who wants to to be saved for any reason. But to say there's absolutely nothing related to us that could have gone into that decision. I don't know that that's explicitly, biblically there. And then limited atonement, we discussed today. There are some verses in the Bible, Christ laying down his life for the sheep that seem to indicate Jesus death was only for certain people, but then the other ones where clearly has a universal aspect. So as we continue the series, the next point we get to is irresistible grace. So here's some of the same things for Calvinism, for a full Calvinist it flows, but in each point there's enough to be debated about that I don't think Christians should be as dogmatic as many are on these sorts of points.

Shea Houdmann

So hope our conversation today about limited atonement's been helpful to you, help you to understand what it is, what it isn't, what it does mean, but it doesn't and why to varying degrees, we do not accept it. And so Jeff, Kevin, as always, thank you for joining me for this conversation. It's been the Got Questions podcast on what is limited atonement. Got questions? The bible has answers. We'll help you find them.