

Expendable Crewmen

Why Doesn't A Loving God Save Everybody?



And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. Acts 13:48

If we're honest with both ourselves and with God, there are a lot of things about Him, the world He has designed and the drama of life He has scripted that seem confusing, unfair and, at times, even wrong. Godly parents give birth to a little girl only to watch as she dies in their arms. The father of two on his way to a prayer meeting is killed by a drunk driver running from the police. A man spends years studying theology and languages and then leaves everything behind to go and minister to unreached peoples on the other side of the world, only to be killed by pirates on the way there.¹

But besides the notorious “problem of evil,” there are theological conundrums as well: an eternal hell; the lot of the “good” (relative to other men) pagan who through no fault of his own is born and dies in a village where false religion rules the roost and the Gospel has never been proclaimed; the “ugly” passages in the Old Testament calling for the extermination of pagan peoples or the amputation of offending hands.² I could go on.

But there may be no greater difficulty – likely because it weaves together many of the troubling themes just mentioned – than the notion that a loving God chooses not to save certain people. To put it another, more stark way, the Lord withholds His saving grace from great numbers of souls, thereby allowing their eventual freefall into hell. (Theologians call this “reprobation,” from the Middle English word for “condemned,” deriving from the Latin *reprobare*, meaning “to reprove.”)

This notion is so noxious that most people, including many (most?) Christians, refuse to accept it. And so they come up with all manner of theological theories in order to get God “off the hook.” Universalism – the idea that in the end God

¹ The first two I experienced in my own church in the last few months; the last I heard about on a recent trip to Princeton.

² Deuteronomy 7:1-2; Deuteronomy 25: 11-12

will save everyone – is one such supposition.³ But by far, the most popular is some form of Arminianism: where God makes the saving grace of the Atonement available to everyone and then leaves the choice of whether to embrace it – either through the rank *pelagianism* of a Pelagius or a Charles Finney or the prevenient grace of a John Wesley – to the “free-will” of the individual. It is ultimately our choice, not the Lord’s, whether we are saved. Case closed...and the jury finds for the Defendant. God’s “fairness” remains intact.

The problem with this response, besides any inference that men can dare to put “God in the dock;” that mere creatures are permitted to sit in judgment on their Creator, is that there is an abundance of scriptures – the passage I opened this with being only one of many – that clearly and emphatically reveal that it is God who chooses and God who saves. Furthermore, our wills are so in the thrall of sin, that we are utterly incapable of ever choosing God on our own steam.⁴

I am not going to defend these twin truths here. Books like *Chosen by God* by R.C. Sproul or our documentary, *Amazing Grace: The History and Theology of Calvinism*, among other publications, do a good job of presenting the Bible’s position on this counter-intuitive truth. Instead, I want to “search out God’s glory in this mystery” (Proverbs 25:2) by wrestling a bit with the “Why?” and see if we can come up with some clues – if not outright answers.⁵

Why does God save John Doe...but not John Roe? Why does He allow Jane Roe her free-fall into hell? What purpose could He have – and what glory could He receive – in creating a human being that ends up stoking the fires of Gehenna?

The first question: Why did God save John Doe or, for that matter, you or me? – is a simple one. Because He wanted to...and for His own glory. He has mercy on those whom He will have mercy (Rom. 9:15, 18; Exo. 33:19) and our ability to wrap our minds around His reason for picking us and not John Roe is about on

³ Universalism, also called universal or ultimate reconciliation, is a heresy that was most famously developed in the 3rd century by Origen – who on many other subjects was a very capable and orthodox theologian. It has always had its proponents – most typically among liberal, heterodox theologians – precisely because it does away with the “problem” of hell and the eternal torment of the damned. Most recently it has been propounded by Carlton Pearson, a graduate of Oral Roberts University, at one time a popular and respected speaker in the charismatic movement.

⁴ Salvation then is a monergistic act – a unilateral (*mono*, meaning “one”) act of God rather than a synergistic act of both God and man.

⁵ *The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever.* (Deut. 29:29) The inscrutability of God is a well-established fact, really a necessity, within the Christian tradition. Where the secrets end and revelation begins is itself a bit inscrutable. No doubt much if not most of the “Why’s” connected with predestination, election and reprobation are firmly in the “secrets” camp. But the God revealed in scripture delights in having us “chase the mystery” as long as we do it properly: with love, humility and a sense of wonder.

par with a blob of clay discerning the mind of the potter. (Rom. 9:20) Bumping up against the working end of God's sovereignty in unconditional election and irresistible grace sits relatively easy with those who have been redeemed because it is such glorious good news.⁶

But the fact that the answer for Jane Roe is just as simple because it is also the same – that God chooses *not* to have mercy on Roe because He decided not to...and for His own glory – isn't at all easy to reconcile with our sense of fairness or our view of God as the personification of infinite love. *It is horrible news.*⁷ Why would an all-powerful, loving God – One who declares that He takes no delight in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11) – stand by and not only allow death to consume Roe but also the horrible judgment that waits for him on its other side? And all this, *when it is within the Sovereign's power to prevent this tragedy from taking place!* All He need do is choose Roe; to extend the same mercy He granted to the equally undeserving Doe.

This is a good point to bow before the Lord of glory and worship Him; to repeat the words of the equally mind-blown Peter: "Lord, to whom else shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (John 6:68)

Two insights into the mind of God on this difficult subject are granted to us in the Bible's most famous chapter dealing with the themes of election and reprobation: Romans 9.

Sandwiched in between two verses saying nearly the same thing – that God will have mercy on those He chooses to – the Holy Spirit through Paul declares:

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Rom. 9:17

And just a few verses later:

⁶ "Unconditional election" and "irresistible grace" are the second and fourth elements in the mnemonic that is commonly used to teach the "five points of Calvinism": T.U.L.I.P. Both speak specifically to the theological truth that God has mercy (in election) on those He will have mercy – and that His choice is in no way conditioned by any inherent goodness on the part of those He elects (hence "unconditional") – and Jesus will then "save to the uttermost" all those that the Father has given to Him (irresistible grace).

⁷ To help counter the humanistic, "sloppy-agape" spirit of our age, I have the occasional hankering to put up a billboard or design a T-shirt showing a person falling into Hell with the caption, "God may hate you and have a horrible plan for your life." (Just kidding.)

What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory. Rom. 9: 22,23

Pharaoh is perhaps the single clearest example of reprobation in the Bible. After squaring off against Moses and God's power, manifested through a series of ten plagues, the Bible repeatedly – fifteen times in fact! – speaks of Pharaoh's heart being "hardened."

Six times it is simply recorded as a fact; for example: *Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said. Exodus 7:13*

Three times we are told that it was Pharaoh who did the hardening: *But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet again and hardened his heart, he and his servants. Exodus 9:34*

But another six times the Bible declares that it was the Lord who hardened the king's heart: *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them." Exodus 10:1*

And it was this same emphasis on God doing the hardening that Paul mentions in Romans 9; right after talking about Pharaoh:

So then He has mercy on whomever He wills, and He hardens whomever he wills. Romans 9:18

So how do we understand what happened inside of Pharaoh's soul as he faced each of the plagues? Did he ever want to relent and let the Israelites go but was then somehow forced by God to stiffen his neck and refuse?

To put it another way, are we merely robots without any free will?⁸

⁸ "God's sovereignty operates in such a way that our freedom and responsibility to act are not compromised, yet the end result is still exactly what God has purposed. What is more, God achieves his perfect goals not just through our best intentions and most self-sacrificing acts, but even through our greatest sins and compromises." Ian Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, (P & R Publishing, 2005), pg. 69.

Not at all! We freely choose things all the time. But at the same time we cannot choose what we would not choose. This is not a tautology⁹ but a profound insight into human nature. The Bible's anthropology declares man to be a slave to his fallen nature; that as a result of the stain of original sin we are predisposed at the very core of our beings to seek our own way and to be our own gods. We are in our very essence slaves to "the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and (are) by nature children of wrath." (Eph. 2:3) We are, to borrow a lyric from my friend John Thompson, "basically bad" – or as the classic blues tune avers, "bad to the bone."

This is, of course, the first principle of the so-called "Five Points of Calvinism," the "t" in the acrostic "T.U.L.I.P.": *total depravity*.

Now many people, including more than a few professing Christians, object to this bleak assessment of human nature. After all, very few people – outside of MTV Spring Break Weekend – behave in a way that could be characterized as totally depraved. Most in fact are capable of all manner of what seem to us to be good and loving acts. *But understand that total depravity doesn't mean that people are as depraved as possible.* They aren't. Even the real monsters in human history had islands of decency that mitigate against the description of their being *totally* depraved. (Hitler was kind to dogs, certain children, Eva Braun, etcetera.) But all the "righteous deeds" performed by the descendants of Adam who have not been re-born after the second/last Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45) – in other words, those who are not yet redeemed – are as "filthy rags" when brought into the light of God's holiness. (Isaiah 64:6b) Why? Because even at their best they fall short of the glory of God; because they are not conceived and performed in and through true faith or the pure love of God; because they are not done *in the grace and to the glory of God*.

For our deeds to be anything but stained in some way by the leaven of original sin, our stony hearts have to be replaced by ones of flesh. (Eze. 36:26) And only God and His grace can accomplish this.

And so when the Lord does not supply that grace and in some way intervene in our lives, the unredeemed naturally revert to their default setting: their hearts become hard; they rebel and do what they want to do; that is, they shake their fist at the Almighty and declare "not Thy will but mine be done!"

⁹ *tautology*: a repetition of words that impart no new information

And so all that the LORD had to do to “harden Pharaoh’s heart” was simply to not extend His hand of grace and leave the Egyptian king to himself. In other words, to *not prevent* Pharaoh’s innate rebellion from manifesting itself in all its Psalm 2:2-3 fury.

This interface between the fallen nature of man and God’s sovereign grace, by the way, also explains the difference between “worldly and godly sorrow” in 2 Corinthians 7:10:

For godly sorrow produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly sorrow produces death.

All that the naked, unaided human heart is capable of producing is a worldly form of grief: “I got caught;” “I am so miserable;” “I can’t live without (fill in the blank);” etc. Coupled with the right words, tears and pleadings with both God and man, it can appear as true repentance to the human observer. (Think of Esau in Hebrews 12:16,17.) But all this will ever produce is death.

The type of sorrow that produces genuine repentance that leads to life is and can only be a gift of God.

So we are back to our original question, hopefully with a bit more understanding concerning its focus and scope: Why would God hold back that grace from Pharaoh or, for that matter, any other sinner stumbling about in the curse of blindness and intractability that result from Adam’s fall?

Well, according to Romans 9:17, 22 and 23 it is all for the benefit of the Lord’s redeemed children (the vessels of mercy) and so that His Name (and all that includes) might be known throughout all the earth.

Still confused?

Here it is critically important to place this mystery in the context of God’s ultimate purpose in creation. Have you ever stopped and asked yourself why the Triune God kicked off this whole divine tragedy (or is it a comedy?) in the first place? After all, the epic tale committed the eternal Son to a cross before the first “Let there be...” was declared. (Ephesians.1:4; 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 Peter 1:20; Revelation 13:8) What is the *raison d’etre* for which God was willing to subject both Himself and His creation to such indescribable suffering?

Well, at least part of the answer is clear: to save a people for His Name and elevate them to a level where they have been trained to rule and reign with Christ over a radically transformed and glorified earth and heaven.

Or to put it in another, more relatable way from a grand story-telling perspective: to create a warrior Bride-Queen for the King of Glory-Son.

(Jesus) for the joy that was set before him endured the cross. Heb. 12:2

The great passage in the opening portion of Paul's letter to the saints in Colossae – one that scholars suggest was drawn from a hymn in the early church – gives us some wonderful insight into this mystery:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

Colossians 1:15-18

Note the awesome celebration of God's sovereignty: that the second Person of the Godhead has created (*by, in and for Him*) and sustains *all things* (see also John 1:2); here with a special emphasis on every form of ruling authority, whether in the invisible realm of the spirit (from angels to demons) or in the temporal/visible world of man (the Byzantine empire or the Third Reich). That means – prepare not to flinch – that virtually everything that has transpired in creation has done so *in, through and for Christ and His eternal purposes* – including everything that we (and God) would view as horrible and satanic: the Fall, reprobation, the Holocaust, etcetera.

As with God hardening Pharaoh's heart, we need to be careful that we don't allow either carnal or demonic reasoning to trip us up into thinking that this means that God "causes" evil things to happen in some kind of blind, deterministic way; that He dealt, for example, a hand of genetic and situational cards to Adolf Hitler that gave him no choice but to become the man that would spark so much evil and suffering. Men are free to operate and make choices within the parameters of their nature and so are completely responsible for what they do. (Rom. 3:5-8) But God – and this is deep, deep magic – superintends everything that both men and spirits do and uses them to accomplish His eternal

purposes. And also ever remember: the greatest abomination in history – the crucifixion of the Son of God – was also done under the decree and purview of the Sovereign God. (Acts 2:23)

And to what end does *everything* exist and occur “through Him and for Him?” Well at least in part so that He might become the head (the husband) of the Church (His body/Bride).¹⁰ And to do this He had to become incarnate, go the cross, die and be raised so that He could become “the firstborn from the dead” and thus redeem, resurrect and glorify His bride, the Church.

And how is this Bride made ready (Revelation 19:7); how is she prepared to take her place alongside her Husband; to rule and reign with Him in this world and into an eternity where she will even judge the angels? (2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 3:21; 5:10; 20:6; 1 Corinthians 6:2,3)

The answer, at least in part, is through spiritual warfare (2 Corinthians 10:3-6), learning through hands-on experience how to pull down vain imaginings and take every thought captive in obedience to Christ, scrimmaging against powers and principalities in both spiritual (Ephesians 6:10-20) and physical realms. The latter includes individuals, like our co-worker or next-door neighbor, and systems, as with politics, economics, religions, and demonic ideologies like abortion-on-demand and same-sex marriage.¹¹

To put it another way: how are great leaders made? Through discipline, hard work and invariably, by passing through some furnace – or more often *furnaces* – of affliction. When Philip II of Macedon, for example, set out to make his son a great king and military leader (in that day the two went hand-in-hand) he didn’t place him in a cushioned room with the 4th century BC equivalent of a Nintendo Game Boy. Rather he gave him Aristotle for a tutor and placed him in increasingly risky situations: wild boar hunts as a child, giving him a magnificent

¹⁰ Colossians 1:17. And so the last Adam echoes the words of the first: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” (Gen. 2:23)

¹¹ There is a tendency among some charismatics to emphasize the former, engaging in “spiritual warfare” (binding demons, praying against strongholds over cities) while not bothering to vote; while more traditional Christian conservatives can err in the other direction: trying to effect change primarily through the ballot box and championing “traditional” values and causes. (This is a gross generalization but you get the point.) But it is not an “either/or” proposition; we should be doing both. Satan *is* the “prince of the power of the air” but he *is also* the spirit that is “now at work in the children of disobedience.” (Ephesians 2:1). In cursing both the serpent and man, the Lord declared that there would be enmity – in fact it was stronger than that; He said He would *set* this hostility in place – between not only the serpent and the woman, but also between their respective “seeds,” their offspring. (Genesis 3:15) There is no “demilitarized zone” in this fallen world. Like it or not, we have been created for warfare and we should fight with all the weapons that the Lord of Hosts has given us.

but dangerous horse (Bucephalus) when he was ten; introducing him to deadly combat at eighteen. This is how Alexander became “great.”

In precisely the same way, whether we are talking about King David facing the bear, the lion, Goliath and then Saul or the many exploits of a Theodore Roosevelt or Winston Churchill, in a fallen world we are called to face tribulation while taking heart in the knowledge that Jesus has overcome the world. (John 16:33; see also 1 John 2:13, 1 Peter 1:6-7, Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-3)

(Paul strengthened) the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. Acts 14:22b

With this background and these truths firmly in mind, let’s now go back now to our aforementioned “expendable crewman.” Why doesn’t God save him or her? Why does He allow Jane or John Roe’s freefall into hell as a “vessel of wrath prepared for destruction?” (Romans 9:22) How does this “make known the riches of his glory” for those vessels of mercy which he has prepared beforehand for glory?”¹² (verse 23) Or to put it in the starkest of terms, how does the presence of the unredeemed in the world make the “riches of God’s glory” more manifest for the Christian and help us attain the purpose for which we were created – to become like the One who redeemed us (glorification)?

Well, without the lost, without adversaries, there would be little for us to wrestle against. And without these opponents – these sparring partners – we would never learn the lessons and receive the training and the subsequent maturity we will need for the world to come.

But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

Hebrews 5:14

¹² The word that is translated “prepared beforehand” is used one other time in the N.T.: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God *prepared beforehand*, that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:10) So both we (Christians) and our good works are foreordained. But so is everything else really. But allow me to point out that the evil that also happens in the predetermined purposes of God is never referred to as being “prepared beforehand.” In other words, it exists to fulfill His ultimate purpose: to serve and help perfect the children of God. But when it comes to those things that are the “apple of His eye” – those things that everything else is called to serve as He has “prepared them beforehand” – well the scriptures only record two: His elect children and their good works.

Think about it. Without the presence of evil, there would be little opportunity to practice discernment and at least one primary path to maturity would be closed to us.

*...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. **Philippians 3:10***

It isn't a message that is very popular in today's "self-actualized" culture, but learning how to resist evil, striving (agonizing) against it, even if necessary to the point of the shedding of our blood or the losing of our lives (Hebrews 12:4), or – as Paul puts it to the church in Philippi: sharing in Christ's sufferings and being conformed into His death – is a fundamental and really indispensable path to knowing and becoming like Him. This protocol would not exist were it not for evil and evil people.

So now that we understand something of how God uses the existence of evil and evil people to show forth His power, mercy, the riches of His glory, and His name, what should our attitude be towards the evil people around us?

Condescension, knowing that their *raison d'être* is to be a chisel – to use another helpful analogy – that God uses to help carve the Bride of Christ out of the "marble slab" of this world and its human inhabitants and that He will later discard when she has been made perfect? (Revelation 19:7) Pride that we are the apple of God's eye while they are the focus of His wrath? A shudder of indifference because they will not be with us in eternity?

Well, if we knew who the expendable crewmen were,¹³ such attitudes may have some justification. (Not really!) But the key point here is that we don't. We really don't have a clue. The elect of God throughout history are peppered with "I can't believe he or she got saved" people. Consider Saul of Tarsus. Or John Newton. And moving from the sublime to the more ridiculous, if you went to the College of William and Mary in 1977 and took a campus-wide survey as to who was the most likely candidate for reprobation, yours truly would likely have been on the short list.

No, we need to love, pray and minister to those around us as if each is a lost member of the house of Israel. And those who are the most antagonistic to the

¹³ Like if they all wore red shirts ala *Star Trek*; brilliantly parodied in the fun movie, *Galaxy Quest* where one character was actually referred to as "the expendable crewman."

truth of God should be treated as if they may yet experience the one-hundred-and-eighty degree turnaround that gave us the Apostle Paul.¹⁴

In fact, figuring out how to love, pray for, challenge (and thus humble) and then minister the Gospel to the God-hating, curse-breathing, bondage-brokering infidel in your life may well be among the greatest assignments – and victories – that God will give you on your own journey to the Celestial city and to a better resurrection.

¹⁴ And that doesn't mean that we get all sentimental and "nicer than Jesus" with them. Challenging, rebuking, even praying imprecatory prayers against them ("Save him...or slay him") can easily fall within the rubric of "Christian charity" when done in the right spirit. In fact, to not do these things can be very the very antithesis of love.