

2 Peter 3:9

“The Lord is not slack as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”

This beautiful text is claimed by universalists of every stripe as a basis for their doctrine that God loves all men, is graciously disposed toward all men, and desires the salvation of all men. “Look at the text,” they insist with shock horror that you would dare question the idea, “it says God wants all men to come to repentance; to come to repentance is to be saved, therefore God wants all men to be saved - what could be clearer than that?”

Well, no that is not clear to us at all. In fact, it is quite wrong to read the text this way. To do so is to take the text out of its context, making it say what you want. Let me explain why I say this.

First, we will put the text in its context - that will clear some of the confusion. Secondly we will show why the text cannot be understood as teaching universalism; and thirdly we will mention what this beautiful passage does teach. Firstly, consider the context.

In the broader context, the apostle Peter writes to the church and is concerned to put the saints in remembrance of the truth they have received, and to fortify their knowledge of, and adherence to that truth. They must be prepared to withstand the attack of errors of false teachers who deny Christ (chapter 2) and those who will scoff at promise of Christ’s return (3:1-4). In this connection Peter describes two distinct groups of people and their different ends. On the one hand, there are those undeserving sinners who God “knows how to deliver out of temptation” - that is the elect of God; and on the other hand, there are those whose “judgment now of a long time lingers not, and their damnation slumbers not” (2:3), and who “God knows.... how to reserve unto the day of judgment to be punished” (2:9) - that is the reprobate wicked. “He has reserved some to judgment, punishment and damnation” - as were reprobate angels, the world in Noah’s time, and the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorra (2: 4-6). The eternal destiny of these sinners is foreordained and they will arrive at that end in the way of their sin - unrepentant.

The apostle writes to those whom God is pleased to deliver from sin and temptation. He describes them as, “them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ” (1:1). As with the first epistle, Peter is writing to those he views as the elect of God chosen unto eternal life in the way of faith in Christ. These people Peter addresses as “beloved.” When he instructs and exhorts them, he uses the second person singular pronouns “eye and you.” And notice carefully that Peter associates himself, and the whole Church of Jesus Christ, with them by saying they “have obtained like precious faith with us...” (1:1). From this point on, whenever he speaks of blessings that are common to all God’s elect, called saints, he uses the first person plural pronouns “we” and “us” (4, 16, 19; 3: 9, 13, 15). In contrast, he uses the pronouns “they” and “them” whenever he speaks of those whose damnation (see chapter 2 throughout, and 3:5, 16). At no time does he say “we” or “us” with reference to those who has reserved to judgment. When he says “us” he is speaking of the body of Christ - the elect, redeemed, effectually called believing Church.

Obviously, therefore, without compelling evidence in the immediate context that shows that Peter has changed his usage, it will not be possible to extend the reference of the pronoun “us” to include any more than the elect church of Jesus Christ.

Then in chapter three, the immediate context is a warning against those who will arise in the last days to scoff at the promise of Christ’s second coming (3:3-4), as do the modernists and evolutionists of our day. They laugh at the idea that Christ can come again, overrule the uniform laws of creation, raise the dead, judge the world, and bring it all to a fiery end. Confronted by this jeering ridicule, the question quite naturally arises for the Church: “Why does the Lord delay? Why doesn’t He come immediately to silence these scoffers? Is it slackness? Why doesn’t Christ return to deliver his church through judgment? Why the delay - now over 2000 years?”

It is this question, in the context of God knowing how to deliver his people and reserve the wicked scoffers to judgment, that Peter addresses in verse 9. The delay is not caused by slackness, “the Lord is not slack as some men count slackness.” There is a good reason why the Lord stretches out the number of days - prolonging the history of the creation - “He is longsuffering to us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” His eternal counsel to save elect sinners from the present evil world and the judgment to come - through repentance - must first be realised. First, ALL must come to repentance - then He will return. That is the immutable will of God.

In its true context the text begins to take on a different complexion. Secondly, there are reasons why the text cannot be understood to mean that God wills that all men repent and be saved.

In the first place, “us-ward” is the same first person plural pronoun we have mentioned before. It appears here with the preposition “eis” and means “to us”, or more precisely “with a view to us.” God’s longsuffering has reference to his elect church. God is holding back the full and final blessedness of his church because He is not willing that any should perish but that they all should come to repentance. That is the idea.

For the text to be interpreted to teach that God wills the repentance of all men, requires that we understand the "to us-ward" to refer, not to the elect believing church, but to all men including all who God has reserved to judgment. To broaden out the reference from its specific reference to elect church to every single man, requires a change of Peter's uniform use of the pronoun. We remind the reader of what we have previously shown to be the way the pronoun is used throughout the book. If we are to accept that the reference is changed, there must be clear evidence of this in the immediate context. But there is nothing that even hints at such a change. Rather, verse 7 speaks of the "world kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men." Then verse 10 speaks of divine judgment upon the unrepentant wicked, saying "the works therein being burned up." There is everything to indicate that the reference is unchanged same, and nothing to indicate a change. Therefore, we must accept that "to us-ward" refers to the elect believing church which God wills to be saved.

In the second place, the three terms "us", "any" and "all" which all appear in the verse, refer to the same group. It is often the case in Scripture "all" is used with reference to "all of a certain sort or group" (see for example 1Cor. 15:4-6; Rom. 5:18). In our verse, the apostle first establishes the extent of the reference when He says "to us-ward", then still speaking of this same group, he says God wills that not "any" should perish, but "all" should come to repentance. The same group distinguished by our Lord in John 6:37, "All that the Father hath given unto me, shall come unto me." This interpretation is required also by the fact that the phrase "not willing that any should perish but that all..." is a participial phrase modifying the verb "is longsuffering to us-ward." The activity of the verb "is longsuffering" is directed to a specific group "us", and then the participle in subordination to its verb, explains what this means with respect to the seeming delay. It is not possible to treat the participial phrase (and the "any" and "all" it contains) as if it has a different reference to which it modifies. Therefore, the will of God to the repentance of "all" is to all of the group described as "us". The meaning then is that, God who is longsuffering to us does not will that any (of us) should perish, but that all (of us) come to repentance.

In the third place, there is a strong and compelling theological reason why the text cannot possibly be read in a universalistic sense. The text lays great emphasis on the will of God. The word used is *boulomai*, meaning either "to will deliberately, to have a purpose" or "to want or desire something." Both meanings are involved in the will of God. Of course God's infinite self-sufficiency and blessedness allows for no ineffectual and unfulfilled desires. God is never left unfulfilled. Rather, God's will is "his good pleasure ... the good pleasure which He has purposed in himself ... the purpose of him who works all things after the counsel of his own will" (Ephesians 1:5, 9, 11). In our text, by the use of a negative "God is not willing that any" and then the positive, "but (God is willing) that all..." the will of God is declared to be the decisive factor. The will of God explains why God's longsuffering is being exercised, and Christ doesn't come immediately. Thus, we must reckon honestly with what Scripture says of the will of God. We cannot gloss over such an important truth as the universalists are wont to do.

Notice in this connection that the text does not speak of the revealed or preceptive will of God. Peter is not saying that Christ can't yet return because God "commands" all men to repent. The command to repent comes in God's revealed will to sinners. That revealed will is not what God himself, in his undivided and unchangeable being, is eternally willing to come to pass in time by his providence. The revealed will is different, it is what God commands man to do, and it is invariably disobeyed by unregenerate sinners. Obviously, Christ's return can not be suspended upon response of spiritually dead sinners to God's command! Peter is certainly not referring to the command to repentance when he says: "God is not willing..." If he was, then Christ would never return. If sinners' refusal to yield obedience is delaying Christ's return then the delay would be indefinite!

Rather, Peter speaks of God willing. The verb is a present active participle - which indicates continuous action that is contemporaneous with God's longsuffering. Thus, while God is exercising his longsuffering He himself is actively willing that all come to repentance. This will is God's living, active, eternal, almighty, immutable will of decree. It is the eternal purpose of God that is described in Psalm 115:2-3 "Wherefore should the heathen say, Where is now their God? But our God is in the heavens: He hath done whatsoever He pleased." This is the will which God himself describes in these terms: "My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure yea I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass: I have purposed it, I will also do it" (Isaiah 46:10-11). This will cannot be frustrated. This will is immutable. This will is always, and invariably, fulfilled in time in the history of this world. God wills that ALL those whom he has given to Christ in the decree of unconditional election be brought to repentance by the Holy Spirit in effectual calling; wherein He makes them both willing and able to obey. God's word concerning ALL repentant sinners is this: "By grace are ye saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).

Therefore, we simply cannot entertain the idea that God wills the repentance of sinners who in the end perish because they will not repent. We cannot entertain the Pelagian / Arminian notion that God's will to the repentance of all men is conditional upon the will of totally depraved sinners who are described by God as "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 1:1-5) and incapable of the least saving good (Romans 3: 10ff). No, we must let God be God. God is sovereign - not man. Nor can we entertain the idea of the Well-meant offer advocates, that the text speaks of a non-saving "delight" of God to the repentance of all, but not of the active "will" of God. This notion creates unfulfilled desire for God - an impossibility. It also kicks up a cloud of dust to allow for a universalist "aspect" to be inserted into God's will, which, when the dust clears is seen to have no power to save. When all is said and done, non-saving, non-effectual delight of God leaves the prostrate sinner as it found him- dead in sin, unrepentant, and under greater condemnation for

denying the way of salvation. That, of course, is the will of God for them (1 Peter 2:8). Thirdly, and briefly, consider the positive teaching of the text.

The text gives the divine explanation as to why God stretches out these last days and seems to delay the second coming. The reason is NOT that God is slack. God's view point is different to ours - with God 1000 years is as 1 day, and 1 day as 1000 years. God's great purpose, toward which everything in the creation is working, is that Christ will return. But that return involves, indeed requires, that ALL those whom the Father has given to him in the eternal decree of election, are first brought to Christ and salvation through repentance. When this is done, Christ will return - and not one day sooner. Yes, as believers we are saved by pure mercy - how we thank God for his free grace - but we must never lose sight of the fact that there are more elect but perishing sinners, yet to be saved. The elect Church, of which we are but a tiny part, is as the stars of heaven for multitude and as the sand by the sea shore innumerable - and our faithful Saviour God is not willing that any of them should perish, but that all should come to repentance! Some are alive and living as unconverted sinners even now - others are not yet born, but God loves them all with an everlasting love, Christ gave himself for all their redemption, the Spirit is gifted to them all - they will be saved in God's good time. God's glory is to be fully revealed through the salvation of His Church in Jesus Christ. This is THE great thing. We must let the full weight of this glorious truth sink into our minds and hearts. As we conform our agenda to what God has revealed to us as his great purpose in Jesus Christ, we will be prepared to wait upon God and to serve him in the patience of faith and hope.

We also need to see that God is not coldly unconcerned for his suffering church in the world, hard pressed by error, mockery and persecution. God is longsuffering to us-ward. God's longsuffering is salvation for his Church! (2 Peter 3:9) It is his patience with respect to his elect whom He wills to bless. God eagerly intends, desires, wants, wills to bring his church, through judgment, into the blessedness He has prepared for them in the new heaven and earth wherein dwelleth righteousness (2 Peter 3:13) - but He holds it back for a time. That is God's longsuffering. He holds back our full and final blessedness - because there are other elect sinners yet to be saved. The gospel must be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations: and then shall the end come (Matthew 24:14). When the last of us is delivered through repentance into the living fellowship of God in Jesus Christ - THEN Christ can return. God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance - and they WILL! Praise God - his counsel stands. Our victory in Christ Jesus is certain.

With this knowledge of His saving purposes, God girds the Church of Jesus Christ with truth, so that we are enabled to stand fast in the patience of hope - praying: "Come Lord Jesus!" We know that God has not failed us; but rather, because He is faithful to his promise to Christ and ALL the elect in him, He is holding back our promised reward until ALL are brought to repentance.

Finally, by this glorious truth the Church is powerfully motivated to preach the gospel to every man, woman and child. God has his elect in all nations, tribes and tongues. He wills to bring them to repentance through the preaching of the gospel. He is able to do this because He is sovereign and his grace is irresistible to save even the hardest and seemingly most incorrigible sinner. This is our encouragement to preach the gospel and to witness to the power of Christ to every creature.

The Church that understands the truth of this text will be a truly evangelical, praying, preaching, witnessing, mission orientated church, for it will understand that the Lord tarries because He wills all of us to come to repentance - through the gospel He has commissioned us to preach and teach.

We do not need to conjure up some universalism into God and His word in order to give us concern for the souls of perishing sinners and mission zeal. Universalism, in any of its many forms, robs God and His gospel of its power, casting us back upon ourselves and other dead sinners; whereas the truth turns us from ourselves to the faithfulness and power of the one true and sovereign Covenant God in Jesus Christ - so that we might find all our strength and encouragement in Him - alone.

Soli Deo Gloria!

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