

Monergism

Understanding 2 Peter 3:9 by John Samson

Without doubt, this is the single most popular verse used to dismiss the biblical doctrine of election, bar none. The meaning of the verse is simply assumed, and because of this, no time is taken to study it, which is the very hallmark of tradition. I have to admit that I did this for many years. Those most enslaved to tradition are those who think they do not have any.

First of all then, let us read the verse in its context:

2 Peter 3:1-9—"This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.' For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."

The first thing we notice is that the subject of the passage is not salvation but the second coming of Christ. Peter is explaining the reason for the delay in Christ's second coming. He is still coming and will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night (v. 10).

The second thing to notice is that the verse in question (v. 9) speaks of the will of God. "God is not willing" for something to happen.

Theologians have long recognized that there are three ways in which the will of God is spoken of in Scripture.

There is what is called the Sovereign Decretive Will. This refers to the will by which God brings to pass whatsoever He decrees. This is something that ALWAYS

happens. Nothing can thwart this will. (Isa. 46:10, 11). This will is also known as the secret will of God because it is hidden to us until it comes to pass in the course of time.

Secondly, there is the Preceptive Will of God. This is God's will revealed in His law, commandments or precepts. As the course of human history reveals, people have the power to break these commandments and do so every day. It is important to state though that, although men have the power to break these precepts, they do not have the right to do so. His creatures are under obligation to obey all His commandments and will face His judgment for not doing so.

Thirdly, we have God's Will of Disposition. Dr. R. C. Sproul states, This will describes God's attitude. It defines what is pleasing to Him. For example, God takes no delight in the death of the wicked, yet He most surely wills or decrees the death of the wicked. God's ultimate delight is in His own holiness and righteousness. When He judges the world, He delights in the vindication of His own righteousness and justice, yet He is not gleeful in a vindictive sense toward those who receive His judgment. God is pleased when we find our pleasure in obedience. He is sorely displeased when we are disobedient. (Essential Truths of the Christian Faith)

There are many in the Reformed community who look at 2 Peter 3:9 and feel that what we have here is God expressing His will of disposition. They believe the text to be saying that God is not wishing or desiring to see any human being perish (in one sense), even though that is exactly what will happen if a person does not come to repentance. The fact that people perish is not something that makes God happy. He would rather it never happened. But to uphold His holiness and justice, He must punish rebellious sinners by sending them to an eternity in hell.

A lot could be said for this view of the text and I have many Reformed friends who hold to it. It does seem to solve many problems. However, I take a different view because of what I see when I follow the pronouns of the passage.

WHO ARE THE "ALL"?

The people Peter is addressing are clearly identified. He speaks of the mockers as "they", but everywhere else he speaks to his audience as "you" and the "beloved." I believe this is very important.

But surely "all" means "all," right? Well usually, yes, but not always. This has to be determined by the context in which the words are found. When a school teacher is in a classroom and is about to start the class and asks the students, "Are we all here?" or "Is everyone here?" he is not asking if everyone on planet

Earth is in the classroom. Because of the context in which the question is framed, we understand that he is referring to all within a certain class or type—in this case, all the students in the class. To say that he is referring to all people on planet earth would be to grossly misinterpret the intended meaning of his question.

So, the question in 2 Peter 3:9 is whether “all” refers to all human beings without exception, or whether it refers to everyone within a certain group.

The context of 2 Peter 3:9 indicates that Peter is writing to a specific group and not to all of mankind. The audience is confirmed when Peter writes, “This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved...” (2 Peter 3:1).

Can we be even more specific? Yes, because if this is the second letter addressed to them, the first makes it clear who he is writing to. 1 Peter 1:1—“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect...”

So Peter is writing to the elect in 2 Peter 3:8, 9 saying “But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”

I would agree with Dr. Sproul (and other scholars) who believe that the will of God spoken of here is not God's will of disposition but His Sovereign decretive will. God is not willing that any should perish. He will not allow it to happen.

Allowing for this premise then, if the “any” or “all” here refers to everyone in human history, the verse would prove universalism rather than Christianity. (Universalism is the false doctrine that teaches that everyone will in the end be saved, with no one going to hell). If God is not willing (in His decretive Sovereign will) that any person perish; then what? No one would ever perish! Yet, in context, the “any” that God wills not to perish is limited to the same group he is writing to, the elect; and the “all” that are to come to repentance is the very same group.

This interpretation makes total sense of the passage. Christ's second coming has been delayed so that all the elect can be gathered in. The elect are not justified by election, but by putting their faith in Christ. If a person is to be saved they must come to Christ in repentance and faith. The doctrine of Sovereign Election simply explains who will do so. The elect will.

Jesus assured us of this when He said, "All that the Father gives to me will come to me" (John 6:37) and is confirmed by the testimony of Luke in Acts 13:48 when he observed that "... all who were appointed to eternal life believed."

2 Peter Chapter 3 teaches us that the reason Christ has not yet returned is because there are more of His elect to come into the fold. That is why He did not return yesterday. At this point in time, not all of the elect have come to repentance and faith. Therefore Christ has not yet returned to the Earth in power and glory. Christ's second coming may seem delayed (to some) but God is being very longsuffering toward us (you, beloved) not willing that any should perish but that all come to repentance. Speaking personally, I am so glad that the Lord Jesus did not return the day before I was converted. I would have been lost in sin forever.

Rather than denying election, the verse, understood in its biblical context, is one of the strongest verses in favor of it. The context of 2 Peter 3 shouts and screams that Peter, when writing of "all," is actually referring to all of the elect.

From Chapter 9 of the book, "[Twelve What Abouts - Answering Common Objections Concerning God's Sovereignty in Election](#)" by John Samson - Posted with Permission

Pastor John is a Reformed pastor, Bible teacher and author with a passion for the local Church and for the free offer of the gospel to be proclaimed far and wide. Ordained with Faith Community Church, Tucson, Arizona, he serves as the pastor of [King's Church](#) in Phoenix, Arizona, USA.