

One God, of all people

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[0 : 0 0] Well, this evening then we continue our studies in Paul's first letter to Timothy, and we come as we enter chapter 2 into what could probably be seen as the main substance of the book. If you like, chapter 1 has kind of introduced Paul's argument, has laid down that charge, that commission to oppose the false teachers, and Paul is now adding in ammunition for that battle. Chapters 2 and 3 have often been seen as something of a manual of church government, and indeed they do have a lot to say to us about what the church should look like. That's why our series is entitled A Blueprint for Church Life. But we do need to be careful as we come into these chapters. We need to bear in mind that they, like the rest of the letter, are written to particular people in a particular place at a particular time, that they address a specific situation. So as we approach these verses, we do need to be careful not to skip too immediately to applying it to our own situation here, but rather first ask why Paul wrote these things to Timothy in the city of Ephesus. So we're asking how do these verses work as part of his argument to counter the false teaching. Now he begins this section by urging prayer for all people, and this is going to form the backdrop of the section, but the focus is more on the all people than it is on the prayer. And that sense of universality is, I guess, our first heading tonight. That's a theme that runs through these verses as it begins here in verse 1, comes up again in 3 to 4, as God desires all people to be saved, and again in verse 6, Christ as ransom for all. And finally at the end in verse 7, in slightly different terms, that universality as Paul describes himself as the true and faithful teacher of the Gentiles. Now that theme of universality contrasts with, and it's further enhanced by, a sense of oneness by the singular nature of God in these verses, and that's particularly in verse 5. So these two themes come together come together to give us our title, one God of all people. And we begin then in verse 1 with that call to prayer. Paul here uses four different words that refer to different kinds of prayer, rendered here as petitions, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving. And those different words do have different nuances, of course. But the emphasis, the focus is not on pray this way and this way and this way, but rather the varying terms are used by way of emphasis in the same way as we find in the

Psalms. We find that sense of parallelism, that it says something in one way and then on the next line says something very similar with a slightly different slant. It's a way of emphasizing the point rather than necessarily drawing out every nuance of the two different things. And here as part of Paul's argument against the false teachers, Paul's emphasis here is not so much on that variety of different prayers, but rather that they are made for all people. So verse 2 offers kings and those in authority as an example of those who might be overlooked or excluded from prayers. But that isn't to say that there aren't others being excluded or overlooked. And indeed it seems that in the Ephesian situation, there with the emphasis on salvation in the verses that follow, it seems probably that the principal problem is not so much the exclusion of the leaders, though we will come to that, but rather that the false teachers who remember are leaders within the church, that they are only praying for their kind of people.

You'll remember from the previous chapter that these false teachers have a mistaken understanding of the law. And so they're probably not interested in praying for Gentiles, but rather they pray only for the Jews who they see as respectable under the law, and maybe even a narrower group of the respectable ones within the Jews. Now in contrast to that, Paul commands that prayers be offered for all people. Now that can't literally mean for every single person. He's not imagining Timothy standing up there and giving a list of however million people in the world at the time. The sense then is of all kinds of people, and so rulers fits as a category within that. So the false teachers here are showing their exclusivism. They're showing that they have mentally, and even it would seem fairly explicitly out loud, limited those who can be saved.

And my suggestion is that it is helpful for us to ask where we are at danger of doing likewise. Now I don't know about you, but I think that my attitude to people is rarely colored by whether they've been circumcised or not, rarely affected by how strictly they observe the Jewish dietary laws. I mean, I like to taunt vegetarians by how much bacon they're missing out on, but that's neither here nor there. The point is that if you're like me, we aren't in danger of excluding people on precisely that same basis of adherence to the Jewish laws. But if we're willing to stop and reflect, there probably are people who we think are unlikely to come to faith, people who we don't bother to pray for, because what's the point?

People who we treat, even if we wouldn't say it, we act as if they are outside of God's power to save. If you put us on the spot, we'll trot out the right answer that God's grace is sufficient to cover every sin, but the reality is we don't behave as if that's true. We think there are some who are too far gone, or maybe you're in danger of what actually looks a little bit like the opposite. Maybe you're in danger of acting like some people don't even need to be saved. It's not that they can't be saved, but rather that they don't need to be. Maybe because their lives already look good enough, they look sufficiently moral. After all, maybe they behave better than you or I do already.

[6 : 37] Or maybe we treat them as outside the sphere of needing God's salvation because they already have a faith. Some of us, I suspect, are much less willing to go and speak of Jesus to a good Muslim than we would be to someone who grew up in a Christian home and then drifted away.

More bluntly, sometimes we are more likely to speak of him to someone with white skin than someone with darker skin. Now, whatever it is for you that means that you treat some people as more suitable, more likely to be saved than others, well, what Paul says here is we should be praying for all of them. And he's going to go on to say that God desires that all of them be saved.

So whether it's religion or class or age or politics or they're too bad or they're already good enough, let me urge you to examine your heart to see who you have neglected. And our first response to that should be, yes, that we be more willing to go and speak to them, but also, first and foremost, that we make a conscious effort to pray for those people in particular as we follow this command that prayers be made for all peoples.

Verse 2, then we find a particular example that Paul offers, kings and those in authority. It seems likely that they would have been tempted not to pray for their rulers because they hated them. They were living under Roman rule, living under the persecution of the Emperor Nero.

Now, we don't tend to hate our rulers, not often. For most of us, I suspect it's more that we don't pray for them because we're basically indifferent. We don't care that much. It all looks the same anyway. What difference does it make who's in power? Politicians are all the same as one another.

[8 : 27] Why bother? And maybe there is some truth to that, that our political options are closer than possibly they used to be, and yet Paul commands prayer for those in authority. And it seems to me that our apathy and our indifference is a much feeblar excuse than theirs would have been. Now, I need to confess to you that this is not something I am good at. This is not something I have modeled well, as we've prayed here in church together or on Friday nights. It's not something I'm good at when I pray on my own.

I need to do better at this, at praying for those in authority, and I suspect so do many of you. It's interesting. I think it's helpful for me, at least, to take a look at the reasoning behind Paul's suggestion that we pray for them. I think he gives us two arguments for why we should pray for those in authority. The first in the second half of verse 2, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. It's probably a fairly familiar line of reasoning. This fits with the argument that Paul makes in Romans 13, that rulers are to bear the sword and to punish wrongdoing, and that they have that right to collect taxes. This isn't a new argument either. Jeremiah went and prophesied to the people in exile God's words, instructing them in Jeremiah 29 7, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. The people there were to seek the prosperity of the city of their oppressors in prayer, because that would bring them peace and prosperity too. We often don't bother to pray, do we, for peace and prosperity, because we feel like we already have it.

But the truth is that even if we do not need to ask for it right now, we ought rightly to offer prayers of thanks that we do have it, and we also live in a global culture. We are aware of what is happening on the other side of the world, and so whether we pray that for our own lives and our own rulers, we should surely be praying it for our suffering brothers and sisters who are in desperate need of peace and the opportunity of prosperity. He also offers a second reason for these prayers for our rulers in verse 4. Here he argues that God wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. This seems to be part of the argument of why we should pray for our leaders is because God wants all people to be saved. This seems to tie into that argument in the sense that peace promotes the spread of the gospel. A peaceful society allows Paul to travel the length and breadth of the empire proclaiming the gospel without quite as much fear for his physical well-being as would otherwise be the case. The Pax Romana allowed him that opportunity, and so we rightly pray for that same sense of peace that allows the spread of the gospel. Now, is God bound by such considerations?

Of course he is not. We can see evidence through history of times when the gospel has spread in a situation that is far from anything we could call peace. God is not bound to it, and yet we pray for rulers to this end. It is part of God's purposes. Now, probably for us here, we don't feel like that kind of peace that lets us travel in safety from Edinburgh to London or wherever we might be going, that kind of safety and travel isn't going anywhere anytime soon, is it? But what about praying for laws surrounding free speech? You've probably heard of a number of arrests of street preachers accused of hate speech for proclaiming what the Bible says. Now, whatever you might think of the effectiveness of standing on a street corner and preaching there, whatever the effectiveness of that, it isn't hard to join the dots between us failing to stand up for that freedom and finding that our own freedom to speak the gospel to our neighbors, perhaps particularly in the context of our working lives, or frankly, our opportunity to preach the gospel here in a building that, don't forget, is owned and managed by the council. It isn't that hard to join the dots between the curtailing of preaching on the street and it having a much more obvious impact on your lives and mine. So will you please pray for your rulers that they will enact wise laws in this area, as we also pray that more broadly? You'll find we try to have literature from the Christian Institute available and they do a good work in kind of flagging up for us where some of these things are beginning to be curtailed and, you know, where we can engage with the political process as well as where we ought to be focusing our prayers. So do sign up for their list yourselves and grab the literature and so on. There's another point that we ought to consider here in verse 4, and that is here this statement that God wants all people to be saved. And we have to ask how it can be true that God wants all people to be saved and that yet the equally unambiguous testimony of Scripture is that not all people will be saved. How can an omnipotent God want something and not get it? Well, now, the interplay between God's will and our will, between the secret will of God and the revealed will of God, between whether it's helpful to talk about God wanting one thing and willing another, whether those are useful different categories. These are the kinds of questions that whole books are written on, and all too often, frankly, books that leave you no wiser at the end of the book than you were at the start of it. We are not going to answer those questions comprehensively this evening. In fact,

I don't think we'll get all that far on any of them, but I do want to offer two pointers that I think will be helpful in thinking around this area. Firstly, remember back in verse 1, we noted there that all people there in verse 1 refers more to every kind of person, every category of person, all groups of people, rather than referring to every single individual. It isn't unusual in the New Testament for the word all, whether of all people or all in some other fashion. It's not unusual for that to be limited by the context in which the word is used. It would, for instance, be a nonsense for us to think that when Jesus commissioned Paul to go and be a witness to all men, it would be a nonsense for us to think that Jesus meant him to go and speak to every single individual on the earth.

[15:52] Clearly, the context there limits that all to Jews and Gentiles, to talking about the encompassing of different categories of people. And I think something similar is part of the picture here.

Now, as we've said, these false teachers want to limit the scope of salvation to a particular type of people, want to limit it to those who agree with their interpretation of the law, want to limit it to the Jews. And against this, against that attitude of the false teachers, in that context, Paul writes that God desires all people to be saved. God desires Jews and Gentiles to be saved. That's at least part of what Paul is saying here. And secondly, we do just have to grapple with the fact that God's word does talk about salvation both in terms of it being limited to the elect and in terms of it being for all people. It does talk about it in both of these ways. Professor Donald MacLeod talks about this as being sufficient for all and efficient for some. Christ's sacrifice is sufficient to cover every sin of every human being who has ever lived and ever will live. And yet the reality is that it only effectively covers the sins of some. The atonement is only applied to some people. Now, if we try and go much further down this line here and now, we will tie ourselves in knots, I fear. So we're going to leave it there with those two points, if you like, because there does come that point where we have to be willing to say, you are God and I am not. We do not always know. Romans chapter 9, Paul says, one of you will say to me, then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?

But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, why did you make me like this? Folks, this is on some level a profound mystery by which, before which, we must be silent.

We'll come back to verse 5 in a moment. Verse 5 takes a slightly different slant on this same theme of universality. But before we do, let me make a couple of quick points from the last couple of verses, verses 6 and 7, that both refer back to some of what we've already seen. If you look at the end of verse 6, you'll find this slightly odd statement that this has now been witnessed to at the proper time.

What Paul seems to be arguing here is that through the death of this man, Christ Jesus, through the paying of the ransom that he talks about in verse 6, that through doing that, God has given a clear and definitive testimony, a clear and definitive statement of his desire to save people of all kinds. Nothing surely is more convincing of God's desire to save than coming and paying such a steep price. As for at the proper time, well, that would seem likely to be a reference to it being the most conducive time for that universal proclamation of the gospel.

[19 : 24] In the providence of God, in the sweep of history, that that was the most propitious moment for that sacrifice to take place. Maybe you're tempted to think that today might be better with our rapid means of travel from one end of the country to another, around the world, and instantaneous around the world communication. Maybe that seems better to you, but to me, as we look at the hardness of hearts around us, as we look at a society in which the prevailing attitude is that science has all the answers, well, I'm not sure it would be all that much better, would it? And in any case, today wouldn't be like today if it weren't for Christ having come when he did. So let's not try and speculate too much on what might have been. It seems that in God's providence this was the time.

In the first century AD, the Assyrian and the Babylonian empires had collapsed, and for all of its faults, the Roman Empire did provide this kind of peaceful situation in which the gospel could spread, the political stability, the rule of law that allowed this kind of proclamation. Paul wasn't afraid to use his rights as a Roman citizen to demand a fair trial and so on for the benefit of the spread of the gospel. And I think it was also becoming apparent that the Greco-Roman philosophizing, the attempts to explain the world around them, were starting to show their bankruptcy, were starting to be seen as inadequate to the task, that they couldn't answer the questions of life, and they couldn't deal with the moral bankruptcy of the world then any more than our philosophies can address it today. I think at that point, people were looking for something different. Equally, we bear in mind that it was the right time in the sense that the revelation of the Old Testament was complete, that God had already showed what we needed to see in the revelation of his law, in his saving other people for himself, and so on, and that foundation was there in that place.

In any case, whatever it was that made it the opportune moment, God, in his wisdom, decreed it to be so and sent Christ at that point. Second little point, looking at verse 7. Here we see Paul reiterating his authority as an apostle, presumably reiterating that authority in the face of false teachers who were refusing to recognize it, refusing to say that he had the right to come and speak and declare what was so.

It's particularly important for Paul to be able to do this because of his role as the apostle to the Gentiles. As Paul had that particular commission to go to all people, then that was valuable for him to stand up for against false teachers who wanted to limit going to only a particular people.

I want us to reflect, though, for a moment that in the context of talking about a peaceful society, in the context of that being one of the reasons why Paul says we should pray for our rulers, in the context of that desire for a peaceful and quiet life in all godliness and holiness, verse 2.

[22 : 56] In that context, let me invite you to reflect for just a moment or two on what Paul's life looked like. Let me invite you to reflect on what it looked like for him to live out that calling and what his apostleship entailed.

Paul, of course, faced numerous beatings and imprisonments and shipwreck and all kinds of hardships and whatever that thorn in the flesh was and so on.

Paul didn't live what we would normally call a quiet life, did he? But that was what he thought people should be aiming for. And so somewhere within that definition of a peaceful and quiet life, there has to be space for the apostle Paul to sit within that.

So maybe we should consider for just a moment that your definition of a quiet life, your definition of what your quiet life should look like, might need a small amount of tweaking, that maybe God might have something slightly more dramatic in store for you than the quiet life that you have in mind.

Well, if the rest of the passage that we've looked at, from verses 1 through to 7, if that's concerned with universality, that focus on all people, verse 5, if we go back there, kind of turns that view on its head as we consider here the one God in the context of all people.

[24 : 21] And amongst these claims that the gospel is to be freely offered to all, that God desires all men to be saved, that God gave himself as a ransom for all, there is still an exclusivity to be reckoned with.

In God's providence, our theme from this morning ties in rather well with this evening's passage, doesn't it? We consider this morning that the witness of Scripture is consistent, that there is only one true God.

There is no other God besides Yahweh. There is no other God besides the Lord. This doctrine that dominated Jewish thinking continues to be affirmed in the New Testament.

There isn't the slightest hint of replacing the monotheism of the Old Testament with some kind of strange tritheism here in the New. Now, over and again, the Bible affirms there is one God.

Why is Paul making this point here? Well, again, back to this morning, he says this because henotheism is not true. That idea that there is the one God of this people group and another God of that people group, or the one God of that land and another God of this land, or the God who rules over this sphere of life and the other God who rules over the other sphere of life, that is not true.

[25 : 38] It is not true that there are different gods for different places and lands and nationalities. So it is not true that there are different gods for the Gentiles than there are for the Jews.

And therefore, there is no other way of salvation. Therefore, the salvation that is available through Jesus Christ is not just for the Jew, but is the same salvation on offer for the Gentiles too.

There isn't a different path to salvation. There is only the one true God to be united to and only the one mediator. He states here in verse 5 the unity of God and then he assumes the unity of the human race.

As he states more explicitly elsewhere in other arguments, humanity comes under the headship of Adam, that first man and we are descended in sin from him and need to come under a new head through the mediating work of Jesus.

There isn't one mediator for Jews and another mediator for Gentiles that bring them both to the same God. No, there is one God and one mediator. The false teachers, they cannot go and suggest that there's this exclusive route for Jews and maybe there might be another route for other people, but frankly we don't really care whether there is or not.

[27 : 01] No, there is one mediator and to avoid any possible doubt, Paul specifies who that is. One mediator, the man Christ Jesus. What kind of mediator is he?

Well, have a look at verse 6 because this mediator is also the ransom. Now when we talk about mediators, they're supposed to maintain a kind of professional distance, a reserve from the situation, aren't they?

There's that sense of detachment. There's no personal involvement one way or another. The mediator comes and brokers some kind of compromise between two conflicting parties.

Well, not this mediator. There is no compromise possible here, is there? There is only one way that a holy and righteous God can be reconciled to a sinful and unholy people.

The only route, the only possible way, whether for Jews or for Gentiles, whether for the most apparently sinful person or for the person who looks most holy and least in need of it, whether for the most saintly or for the most genocidal of maniacs, whether for you or for me.

[28 : 12] There is only one route. There is only one who has paid that ransom. There is only one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.

Let's pray. Lord, we ask that you would guard our hearts and guard our thinking in these areas that we have considered this evening.

We ask that you would keep us from drifting into acting as if there are multiple ways to be reconciled to God, as if there are some people more in need of salvation than others, as if there are some people more able to be saved than others.

Lord, we ask that you will keep these truths in our minds, that there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. Lord, would that be true to us?

Would we depend upon it for ourselves? And would we recognize it for our friends and our neighbors and our colleagues? In Jesus' name we ask. Amen.

[29 : 22] Amen.