

## 5. ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSALISM

“When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.”

St. Paul

Let us now begin to consider the positive case for a universalist reading of the New Testament. I shall contend that the universalism of the New Testament is not only all pervasive, but clear and obvious as well. It emerges most clearly, perhaps, in the letters of Paul, in part because Paul addresses the issue more systematically than other writers do, but it is also implicit in the theme of victory and triumph that pervades the entire New Testament. It is so clear, I shall argue, that in the end we must try to account for this mystery: Why is it that so many, including perhaps a majority of scholars in the West, seem to have missed it?

Perhaps “missed it” is the wrong expression, however. The real mystery is why so many have failed to *appreciate* the universalism of the New Testament and why so many have tried to *explain it away*. For no one who reads the New Testament carefully could possibly miss the many passages that display the theme of victory and triumph and at least *appear*, when taken in their own context, to have a clear universalistic thrust. Paul, for example, speaks eloquently of the triumph of God’s sovereign love; again and again, we find in his letters explicit statements to the effect that God will eventually bring all things into subjection to Christ and reconcile all things in Christ and bring life to all persons through Christ. As we shall see, these statements are neither obscure nor incidental; indeed, the lengths to which some have gone to explain them away is itself a testimony to their clarity and power. But there is, of course, another prominent theme in the New Testament as well, namely that of God’s judgment and wrath; and the failure to understand this second theme sometimes induces people to ignore, or even to explain away, the all-pervasive theme of victory

and triumph. The irony is that Paul himself explains exactly how to harmonize the theme of judgment with that of victory and triumph, but his explanation is so unexpected and so counter to some deeply entrenched ways of thinking that we are apt to miss it altogether. And if we do miss it, we are not likely to appreciate fully the theme of triumph.

Accordingly, in this chapter I shall examine some of the passages in the Pauline corpus that display the theme of triumph. I shall argue, first, that the standard ways of explaining them away are untenable, and second, that Paul clearly did anticipate a time when all created persons would be reconciled to God. I shall argue further that, if we understand the theme of judgment in the way Paul does, we shall no longer be tempted to find a doctrine of everlasting punishment, or even everlasting separation, in it. Neither shall we be tempted to water down the all-pervasive theme of triumph. My aim in this and the following chapters, however, is not to refute every conceivable argument against a universalist interpretation of the New Testament; it is rather to illustrate a way of putting things together. For in the end, I believe, it is a failure of the imagination—an imagination crippled by fear—and an inability to see how to fit things together from a universalist perspective that lies behind many of the faulty and confused exegetical arguments in the Bible commentaries. Even more important than the details of specific arguments, therefore, is the matter of perspective, and it is a complete transformation of perspective that I would here hope to encourage.

### **“Justification and life for all”**

I begin with a remarkable assertion found in the fifth chapter of Romans: “Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation [or doom] for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all” (5:18). How should we understand such an assertion? To all appearances, Paul here identifies one “all”—that is, all human beings—and makes two distinct but parallel statements about that one “all”; and to all appearances, the second of these statements implies that all human beings shall receive

“justification and life” and hence shall eventually be reconciled to God. But our text is, of course, a single sentence, lifted from a context; and as we all know, we cannot finally determine the meaning of a sentence apart from the context in which it occurs. So let us ask this question: Are there good reasons either in the immediate context of our text or in the wider context of Paul’s thought for believing that Paul did not intend to say what his sentence, taken in isolation, *appears* to say? I think not, but many are those who disagree.

A popular strategy among conservatives at this point is to do an exhaustive (and, I should think, exhausting) word study: Look at every use of the word “all” in the New Testament, and try to find instances where it either does not literally mean *all* or where there is an understood (but unstated) limit to its scope. Fortunately, we need not actually carry out such a study in order to predict its likely results. When a storefront sign declares, “Going out of business. Everything must be sold!” we understand that “everything” does not include the cash registers and sales personnel;<sup>1</sup> and similarly, when Jesus tells his disciples that “you will be hated by all because of my name” (Luke 21:17), we understand that “all” does not include John’s hating Peter or, sillier still, Peter’s hating Peter. So the desired examples are not difficult to find. According to Loraine Boettner, “In some fifty places throughout the New Testament the words ‘all’ and ‘every’ are used in a limited sense”;<sup>2</sup> and though some of Boettner’s examples seem to me confused, we can let that pass. After citing his examples, Boettner concludes, without further argument, that “the doctrine of universal redemption cannot be based on the words ‘all’ or ‘every’ or the phrase ‘all men.’”<sup>3</sup>

But how does any of this bear on the correct interpretation of *our* text, namely Romans 5:18? There are several difficulties here.

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<sup>1</sup>I borrow the example from one of my own teachers in graduate school, Merrill Ring.

<sup>2</sup>Loraine Boettner, *Studies in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1947), p. 321.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

First, Boettner lifts almost all of his examples from the gospel narratives, and narrative is just where one would expect to find uses of “all” in which the scope of its reference is less than precise (“When the Portland Trailblazers passed over the chance to draft Michael Jordan, they disappointed all of Oregon”). Though Paul’s theological arguments are riddled with statements about “all human beings” and it is Paul’s view that is supposedly at issue here, Boettner fails to cite a single example from one of these contexts. And that is surely unfortunate, to say the least. Suppose that a future racist society should come to regard our country’s Declaration of Independence as a sacred document, and suppose further that some scholars in this society, being determined to explain away the statement that “all men are created equal,” should scour other letters and documents of the time in order to find instances in which “all” does not literally mean *all*. We might suppose that they find “some fifty places,” perhaps in some narratives of the Revolutionary War, where “the words ‘all’ and ‘every’ are used in a limited sense.” Would this have any bearing on the meaning of “all men” in the statement, “all men are created equal,” as it appears in the Declaration of Independence? It is hard to see why it should. And it is no less hard to see how Boettner’s strategy is even relevant to the correct interpretation of either Romans 5:18 or any of the other universalistic texts in Paul.

Second, when we focus on the Apostle himself, we encounter this interesting fact: Every time he uses “all” in the context of some theological discourse, he seems to have in mind a clear reference class, stated or unstated, and he refers distributively to every member of that class. When he says that God “accomplishes *all* things according to his counsel and will” (Ephesians 1:11),<sup>4</sup> he is not, it is true, literally talking about everything, including numbers and propositions and sets of properties; he is talking about every *event*. Everything that happens in the world, he is saying, falls under God’s providential control. And similarly for Paul’s remark that

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<sup>4</sup>Here I adopt the traditional assumption that Paul was the author of Ephesians, but nothing of substance hangs on it, since the quotation from Romans 8:28 is of similar form and unquestionably Pauline.

“*all* things work together for good to them that love God” (Romans 8:28—KJV); here he means not just *some* events, but *all* events. Or again, when Paul asserts that “God has put *all* things in subjection” to Christ (I Corinthians 15:27), he clearly has in mind all *created* things; and so, as he points out himself, this does not include the Father (15:28). But it does include every member of the class he has in mind. And the same is true of his assertion that “*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). This “all” may not include dogs and birds and unfallen angels, as well as human beings; but it does include all the descendants of Adam, or more accurately, all the *merely human* descendants of Adam. Paul excludes Jesus Christ from this “all,” because he did not think of Christ as merely human—*fully* human, perhaps, but not *merely* human. In all of these cases, the scope of “all” is clear; indeed, I have been unable to find a single example, drawn from Paul’s theological writings, in which Paul makes a universal statement and the scope of its reference is unduly fuzzy or less than clear. Paul’s writing may be cumbersome at times, but he was not nearly as sloppy a writer (or a thinker) as some of his commentators, in their zeal to interpret him for us, would make him out to be.

Finally, and most important of all, we must do justice to the grammatical evidence that our text itself presents. Note first the parallel structure of the sentence: “Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.” This is typically Pauline. In the eleventh chapter of Romans, Paul again writes: “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all” (11:32); and in the fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians, he writes: “for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” (15:22). In each of these texts, we encounter a contrast between two universal statements, and in each case the first “all” seems to determine the scope of the second. Accordingly, when Paul asserts in Romans 5:18 that Christ’s one “act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all,” he evidently has in mind every descendant of Adam who stands under the judgment of condemnation; when he insists in Romans 11:32 that God is merciful to all, he has in mind every human being whom God has “shut up” to, or has

“imprisoned” in, disobedience; and finally, when he asserts in I Corinthians 15:22 that “all will be made alive in Christ,” he has in mind everyone who has died in Adam. The grammatical evidence here seems utterly decisive; you can reject it only if you are prepared to reject what is right there before your eyes. And though there seems to be no shortage of those who are prepared to do just that, the arguments one actually encounters have every appearance, it seems to me, of a grasping at straws.

Here is an example of what I mean. Following Charles Hodge, a number of commentators have sought to avoid the clear universalistic thrust of Romans 5:18 in the following way: First, they point to at least one exception—namely the man Jesus—to the first “all”; as Hodge himself put it: “Even the *all men* in the first clause, must be limited to those descended from Adam ‘by ordinary generation.’ It is not absolutely all” human beings.<sup>5</sup> Then, after finding this one *unstated* exception to the first “all,” they (in effect) hold out for a vast number of additional exceptions to the second. But a little reflection will reveal that this entire line of reasoning is spurious, because it attributes an unwarranted theological significance to a perfectly familiar way of talking.

Observe first that Paul excludes Jesus Christ from the “all” of *both* clauses; even as Paul did not regard Jesus as having been condemned in Adam, neither did he regard Jesus as someone who receives the salvation that Jesus himself brings. So Hodge’s claim is utterly irrelevant to this point: According to Paul, the very same “all” who were condemned in Adam received “justification and life” in Jesus Christ. Consider, moreover, a perfectly familiar way of talking. If I were to say: “Adam was the father of the entire human race and hence the father (or progenitor) of all men and women,” would anyone take this to imply that Adam was the father of himself (or even of Eve)? Of course not. In most contexts, others would simply take the expression “all men and women” to *mean* “all men and women except Adam and Eve”; hence, in most

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<sup>5</sup>Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1896), p. 269.

contexts I would have no need to state the two obvious exceptions. And similarly for Paul: In virtually any soteriological context—that is, any context in which Paul has in view Christ’s saving activity—he treats the expression “all human beings” as if it were shorthand for “all human beings except Christ” or, as already stated, “all the merely human descendants of Adam.” As the agent of salvation, Jesus Christ obviously is not included in the “all” who are the object of his salvific actions; but just because this is so obvious, Paul had no need to state it in an explicit way. Nor does that one obvious exception justify additional exceptions; much less does it justify Hodge’s conclusion that “the *all men* of the second clause is [not] co-extensive with the *all men* of the first.”<sup>6</sup>

Consider the context of Romans 5:18 more carefully. In 5:12 Paul identifies the group or class he has in mind with great clarity; it is, he says, all human beings, or more accurately, all human beings who have sinned. Then, in vs. 15, he distinguishes within that single group or class between “the one” and “the many”—“the one” being Adam himself, who first sinned, and “the many” being those who died as a result Adam’s sin. As John Murray points out:

When Paul uses the expression “the many”, he is not intending to delimit the denotation. The scope of “the many” must be the same as the “all men” of verses 12 and 18. He uses “the many” here, as in verse 19, for the purpose of contrasting more effectively “the one” and “the many”, singularity and plurality—it was the trespass of the one”, . . . but “the many” died as a result.<sup>7</sup>

In the same context, moreover, Paul insists that “the one,” namely Adam, was “a type” of Jesus Christ (vs. 14), presumably because Jesus Christ, the second Adam, stands in the same relationship to “the many” as the first Adam did. But with this difference: “if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did

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<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 268.

<sup>7</sup>John Murray, *Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 192-193.

God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!" (vs. 15—NIV). It seems to me indisputable, therefore, that Paul had in mind one group of individuals—"the many," which includes all human beings except for the first and the second Adam—and he envisioned that each of the two Adams stands in the same relationship to that one group of individuals. The first Adam's act of disobedience brought doom upon them all, but the second Adam's act of obedience undid the doom and eventually brings justification and life to them all.

### **"So all will be made alive in Christ"**

The explicit universalism of the fifth chapter of Romans is so clear that even the proponents of everlasting punishment have sometimes conceded, as Neal Punt does, that "Romans 5:18 and its *immediate context* place no limitation on the universalistic thrust of the second 'all men.'"<sup>8</sup> In opposition to absolute universalism, therefore, Punt argues from the so-called "analogy of Scripture": He in effect tries to find grounds elsewhere in the Bible for making exceptions to the second "all" of Romans 5:18. As our discussion in the previous chapter should already have suggested, however, arguments from "the analogy of Scripture" are tricky and fraught with difficulty; more often than not, they amount to little more than a deduction from the picture of God that someone brings to the text. Still, a legitimate question concerning Pauline thought as a whole is whether we can find elsewhere in Paul's writings grounds for rejecting a universalistic interpretation of Romans 5:18. Not a few have claimed that we can. According to John Murray:

When we ask the question: Is it Pauline to posit universal salvation? the answer must be decisively negative (cf. II Thess. 1:8, 9). Hence we cannot interpret the apodosis in verse 18 [of Romans 5] in the sense of inclusive universalism, and it is consistent with sound canons of interpretation to assume a restrictive implication. In I Cor. 15:22

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<sup>8</sup>Neal Punt, *Unconditional Good News* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Co., 1980), p. 14.



Paul says, “As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive”. As the context will demonstrate the apostle is here dealing with the resurrection to life, with those who are Christ’s and will be raised at his coming. The “all” of the second clause is therefore restrictive in a way that the “all” in the first clause is not. In like manner in Rom. 5:18 we may and must recognize a restriction in the “all men” of the apodosis that is not present in the “all men” of the protasis.<sup>9</sup>

Like Punt, Murray seems to recognize that nothing in the immediate context of Romans 5:18 justifies any restriction upon its universalistic thrust; so like Punt, Murray appeals to the wider context of Pauline thought. As his decisive evidence against attributing “inclusive universalism” to Paul, Murray cites a text that we shall examine ourselves in the following chapter, II Thessalonians 1:8, 9. But Murray also considers I Corinthians 15:22, whose parallel structure so resembles that of Romans 5:18, and concerning this text he argues in the following way: As the context demonstrates, the second “all” of I Corinthians 15:22 is restricted to those who belong to Christ; therefore, despite the parallel structure of the sentence, the second “all” is more restrictive than the first. Because the structure of Romans 5:18 is so similar to that of I Corinthians 15:22, moreover, we may also conclude that the second “all” of Romans 5:18 is likewise more restrictive than the first.

The first part of Murray’s argument, however, is a simple *non sequitur*. From the premise that the second “all” of I Corinthians 15:22 is restricted to those who belong to Christ, it simply does not follow that the second all is more restrictive than the first. To get that conclusion, one must make the additional assumption that the first “all” includes persons who will never belong to Christ—an assumption that not only begs the whole question of the correct interpretation of the passage, but also contradicts Paul’s explicit claim, in the following verses, that everything shall eventually be brought into subjection to Christ. If anything, the second “all” of I Corinthians 15:22 is *less* restrictive than the first; for in the

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<sup>9</sup>Murray, *Op. cit.*, p. 302.

following verses Paul immediately *expands* the second “all” to include not only every descendant of Adam (except Christ himself), but every competing will as well. Christ must continue to reign, Paul insists, until he finally brings *all things*, including every will and opposing power, into subjection to himself (15:24-27), and there is but one exception to this “all things,” the Father himself (15:28). The last enemy that Christ shall destroy is death (15:27), which in the larger context of Paul’s thought includes all separation from God. When Christ finally overcomes all separation from God, all persons will then be in subjection to Christ *in exactly the same sense* that Christ places himself in subjection to the Father (15:28)—a sense that, as I shall argue in the following section, clearly implies spontaneous and glad obedience. Then and only then will the Father truly be “all in all,” because then and only then will all persons belong to him, or at least *know* that they belong to him, through his Son.

The most natural interpretation of I Corinthians 15:22, then, accords perfectly with the most natural interpretation of Romans 5:18: The very same “all” who died in Adam shall be made alive in Christ. Against this interpretation, Larry Lacy has written:

Talbott believes that the theme of 15:22 is the affirmation that all those who have died in Adam will be made alive in Christ. But a close examination of the immediate context reveals, I believe, that this is not the theme which is in Paul’s mind. Rather, the theme in Paul’s mind in the immediately preceding verses and in the immediately following verse is the theme that the resurrection of believers is dependent on the resurrection of Christ, that is, it is only *in Christ* that believers shall be made alive. . . . We see this confirmed in v. 23, where Paul says “Christ, the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.”<sup>10</sup>

Now Lacy is certainly right about this: One “theme in Paul’s mind” when he wrote the fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians was that

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<sup>10</sup>Larry Lacy, “Talbott on Paul as a Universalist,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* XXI:4 (June, 1992), p. 402.

“the resurrection of believers is dependent upon the resurrection of Christ . . .” But why should anyone believe that this theme somehow excluded from Paul’s mind the additional idea that “all those who have died in Adam will be made alive in Christ”? Why not attribute *both* ideas to Paul? What Lacy evidently fails to appreciate is that in verses 20-28, or right in the middle of the discourse on resurrection, Paul works the theme of resurrection into a much larger context—one that includes, as we have just seen, the bringing of all things into subjection to Christ; indeed, the hope of the resurrection itself depends upon the hope that all things shall be brought into subjection to Christ. Like Murray and many other commentators, Lacy considers only two stages in a process that Paul describes as having three stages. After informing us that “in Christ shall all be made alive,” Paul goes on to say: “But each in his own order” (vs. 24). It is as if Paul has in mind the image of a procession, and he quickly lists three segments of the procession: At the head of the procession is Christ, the first fruits; behind him are those who belong to Christ at his coming; and behind them are the remainder—that is, those at the end of the procession—who are there when Christ “hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power” (vs. 24). Of course Lacy would no doubt reject my assumption that “ἐτα τὸ τέλος” (literally “then the end”) is correctly interpreted as “then, the remainder.” For though this *is* a documented use of the Greek expression, and it *is* what the structure of Paul’s list of three stages suggests, it is also controversial; hence, I shall not insist upon it here. For even if we understand “then the end” to mean something like “then comes the end of the ages or the end of redemptive history,” Paul makes one point absolutely clear: The end will not come until Christ’s victory and triumph are complete; that is, until “he has put all his enemies under his feet” (vs. 25), until he has destroyed the last enemy, which is death (vs. 26), and until “all things are subjected to him” (vs. 28)

We thus approach the very crux of the matter: How did Paul himself conceive of Christ’s triumph, of the defeat of Christ’s enemies, and of the final destruction of sinners? As we shall see in the following sections, nothing short of universal reconciliation could

possibly qualify, within Paul's scheme of things, as a triumph; and neither could anything short of personal redemption qualify as the defeat of an enemy or as the destruction of a sinner.

### **“And through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things”**

I have claimed that universal reconciliation is a central and pervasive theme in Paul. So far, we have seen that in the fifth chapter of Romans Paul spells out his universalism with great care and precision, and in the fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians he anticipates a time when every competing will shall be brought into subjection to Christ and all those persons in subjection to Christ shall be made alive. Let us now consider two texts that may help us to understand somewhat better what all of this means. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul again anticipates a time when “at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (2:10-11); and in his letter to the Colossians, he goes so far as to declare that the very same “all things” created in Christ—including “all things in heaven and on earth . . . visible or invisible, whether thrones or dominions or powers” (1:16)—shall in the end be reconciled to God in Christ (1:20).<sup>11</sup> One could hardly ask for a more specific statement; Paul here applies the concept of reconciliation, which is explicitly a redemptive concept, not only to all human beings, but to all the spiritual principalities and dominions as well.

It is within this context, I believe, that Paul himself understood the nature of Christ's victory, the defeat of Christ's enemies, and the destruction of sin. But consider how some have tried to limit and minimize the victory. A standard argument at this point is that in Colossians 1:20 and Philippians 2:10-11 Paul had in mind, not reconciliation in the full redemptive sense, but a pacification of evil powers, a mere subjugation of them against their will. Peter T.

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<sup>11</sup>Even if Paul was not the author of Colossians, as some scholars have argued, the old hymn or creedal statement reproduced in 1:15-20 is surely one that Paul would have endorsed.

O'Brien, a respected New Testament scholar of conservative outlook, puts the argument this way:

The reconciliation of the principalities and powers is in mind. They are one category whatever others are included. Yet these forces are shown as submitting against their will to a power they cannot resist. They are reconciled through subjugation (cf. I Cor 15:28) . . .

Although all things will *finally* unite to bow in the name of Jesus and to acknowledge him as Lord (Phil 2:10, 11), it is not to be assumed that this will be done gladly by all. For as the words following the hymn (Col 1:21-23) indicate, the central purpose of Christ's work of making peace has to do with those who have heard the Word of reconciliation and gladly accepted it. To assert that verse 20 [of Colossians 1] points to a universal reconciliation in which every man will finally enjoy celestial bliss is an unwarranted assumption.<sup>12</sup>

In the second paragraph of this quotation, we encounter the same confusion that we previously observed in Murray. For like Murray, O'Brien adopts a true premise: that in Pauline thought *only* "those who have heard the Word of reconciliation and [have] gladly accepted it" will experience reconciliation in the full redemptive sense. But that premise, which Christian universalists also accept, hardly provides a *reason* for denying to Paul the view that someday all will gladly bow before their Lord. So here we have, it seems, just one more *non sequitur*. The argument of the first paragraph, however, is perhaps more cogent and runs as follows: According to Paul, at least some spiritual beings, such as Satan and his cohorts, will never be reconciled to God in the full redemptive sense. Therefore, when Paul speaks of the reconciliation of "all things"—all things including these spiritual beings—he does not have in mind reconciliation in the full redemptive sense; and when he says that every tongue shall confess Jesus Christ as Lord, he does not necessarily mean that everyone will do it gladly.

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<sup>12</sup>Peter T. O'Brien, *Word Bible Commentary Volume 44: Colossians, Philemon* (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1982), pp. 56-57.

Is O'Brien right about this? Does Paul in fact teach in I Corinthians 15:28 that some spiritual beings will merely be subjugated and not reconciled to God in the full redemptive sense? Before addressing the specific exegetical question, I want first to suggest that O'Brien has in fact attributed to Paul an incoherent idea. The contradiction in the very idea of reconciliation through subjugation is no superficial matter. If the powers and principalities of which Paul speaks are *competing wills*, then as a matter of logic these powers and principalities could never be *entirely* in subjection to Christ against their will; for if they should be subjugated against their will, then their *will* would precisely not be in subjection to Christ. Here one is reminded, perhaps, of John Milton's Satan who, even after God defeats him in battle, finds that "the mind and spirit remains / Invincible."

What though the field be lost?  
All is not lost; the unconquerable Will,  
And study of revenge, immortal hate,  
And courage never to submit or yield:  
And what else is not to be overcome?  
That Glory never shall his wrath or might  
Extort from me.<sup>13</sup>

As Milton's Satan illustrates, perhaps contrary to Milton's own intention, there is but one way for God to defeat a rebellious will and to bring it into subjection to Christ; he must so transform the will that it voluntarily places itself in subjection to Christ. For so long as a single will remains in a state of rebellion against Christ, so long as a single person is able to cling to his or her hatred of God, at least one power in the universe—the power of that person's will—is not yet in subjection to Christ. As a paradigm of subjection, therefore, consider Christ's own subjection to the Father, as Paul depicts it in I Corinthians 15:28. If Christ's will were in conflict with the Father's on some important issue, if he *wanted* to act contrary to the Father's will but simply lacked the power, would he truly be in subjection to the Father? Of course not. The very

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<sup>13</sup>*Paradise Lost*, Bk. I, 105-111.

suggestion seems incoherent. And yet, in the very passage O'Brien cites, I Corinthians 15:28, Paul draws a parallel between the subjection of all things to Christ and Christ's subjection of himself to the Father; so that very passage shows, it seems to me, that Paul did not in fact hold the incoherent idea that O'Brien attributes to him.

And similarly for Philippians 2:10-11 and Colossians 1:15-20. When Paul suggests that every tongue shall *confess* that Jesus Christ is Lord, he chooses a verb that throughout the Septuagint is used to imply not only confession, but the offer of praise and thanksgiving as well; and as J. B. Lightfoot points out, the verb has such implications of praise "in the very passage of Isaiah [45:23] which St. Paul adapts . . ."<sup>14</sup> Now a ruling monarch may indeed force a subject to bow against that subject's will, may even force the subject to utter certain words; but praise and thanksgiving can come only from the heart, as the Apostle was no doubt clear-headed enough to discern. Quite apart from the matter of praise, moreover, either those who bow before Jesus Christ and *declare openly* that he is Lord do so sincerely and by their own choice or they do not. If they do this sincerely and by their own choice, then there can be but one reason: They too have been reconciled to God. If they do not do this sincerely and by their own choice, if they are forced to make obeisance against their will, then their actions are merely fraudulent and bring no glory to God; a Hitler may take pleasure in *forcing* his defeated enemies to make obeisance against their will, but a God who honors the *truth* could not possibly participate in such a fraud.

There remains an even more important exegetical consideration. In Colossians 1:20, Paul himself identifies the *kind* of reconciliation he has in mind; he does so with the expression "making peace through the blood of his cross." Similarly, in Philippians 2:6-11, Paul himself explains the nature of Christ's exaltation; he does so by pointing to Christ's humble obedience "to the point of death—even death on a cross." Now just what is the power of the

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<sup>14</sup>J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), p. 115.

cross, according to Paul? Is it the power of a conquering hero to compel his enemies to obey him against their will? If that had been Paul's doctrine, it would have been strange indeed. For God had no need of a crucifixion to *compel* obedience; he was quite capable of doing that all along. According to the New Testament as a whole, therefore, God sent his Son into the world, not as a conquering hero, but as a suffering servant; and the power that Jesus unleashed as he bled on the cross was precisely the power of self-giving love, the power to overcome evil by transforming the wills and renewing the minds of the evil ones themselves. And Paul not only endorses this idea; he also tells us exactly what he means by "reconciliation" in the two verses following Colossians 1:20, citing as an example his own readers: "And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now *reconciled* in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him" (1:21-22—emphasis mine).<sup>15</sup> So the blood of the cross does bring peace, but not the artificial kind that some tyrannical power might impose; it brings true peace, the kind that springs from within and requires reconciliation in the full redemptive sense. It seems to me without question, therefore, that Paul did envision a time when all persons will be reconciled to God in the full redemptive sense.

### **"That he may be merciful to all"**

I have already mentioned one reason so many find it difficult to take Paul's universalism seriously: Many think it impossible to square such universalism with the theme of divine judgment that we find not only in Paul, but throughout the Bible generally. The God of the Bible, they like to remind us, is not only merciful; he is also just. But where is the biblical warrant, I would ask in return, for thinking that divine justice requires something that divine mercy does not, or that divine mercy permits something that divine justice does not? Where is the biblical warrant for thinking that mercy and

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<sup>15</sup>I leave it to the reader to puzzle out how anyone could cite this passage, as O'Brien does, on behalf of the view that Paul has in mind something less than reconciliation in the full redemptive sense.



justice are separate and distinct attributes of God? At this point, I fear, we sometimes read our own ideas (and our own philosophical misconceptions) into the Bible. We think that mercy is one attribute and justice another, so we read this into the Bible; we think that God's love is an attitude of one kind and his wrath an attitude of an opposite kind, so we also read this into the Bible; we think that God punishes for one kind of a reason and forgives for another, and we tend to picture God as a schizophrenic whose justice pushes him in one direction and whose love pushes him in another; so we again read all of this into the Bible. When we turn to St. Paul, however, we find that he challenges this whole way of thinking.

Perhaps the best example of such a challenge is the eleventh chapter of Romans. For here Paul explicitly states that God's severity towards the disobedient, his judgment of sin, even his willingness to blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the disobedient, are expressions of a more fundamental quality, that of mercy, which is itself an expression of his purifying love. In Romans 11:7 he thus writes: "What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened" (or blinded). He then asks, "have they [the nonremnant who were hardened or blinded] stumbled so as to fall?" and his answer is most emphatic: "By no means!" (11:11). By the end of the following verse, he is already speaking of their full inclusion: "Now if their stumbling means riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!" (11:12).<sup>16</sup> And three verses later he is hinting that their

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<sup>16</sup>In order to avoid the implication that God hardens the heart as an expression of mercy, some commentators have insisted that Paul here speaks of Israel as a corporate whole. John Piper thus writes: "Notice that this [i.e., the "they" in 11:11] is not a reference to all Jews but to Israel as a corporate whole conceived of as an entity that endures from generation to generation made up of different individuals from time to time" ("Universalism in Romans 9-11? Testing the Exegesis of Thomas Talbott," *The Reformed Journal*, Vol. 33, Issue 7, p. 12). But that will never do. For in 11:7 Paul mentions three groups of people: Israel or the nation as a corporate whole, "the elect" or the faithful remnant, and "the rest." that is. the nonremnant Jews who were hardened. Now the

acceptance will mean “life from the dead” (9:15). He then generalizes the whole thing: God blinded the eyes and hardened the hearts of the unbelieving Jews, we discover, as a means by which *all* of Israel might be saved (Romans 11:25-26)—all of Israel including those who were blinded and hardened. There is simply no way, so far as I can tell, to escape the universalistic implication here. The *specific* point that Paul makes in Romans 11 is this: Though the unbelieving Jews were in some sense “enemies of God” (11:28), they nonetheless became “disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy” (11:31-NIV). But the general principle (of which the specific point is but an instance) is even more glorious: “For God has imprisoned *all* in disobedience so that he may be merciful to *all*” (11:32—my emphasis).

According to Paul, therefore, God is always and everywhere merciful, but we sometimes *experience* his mercy (or purifying love) as severity, judgment, punishment. When we live a life of obedience, we experience his mercy as kindness; when we live a life of disobedience, we experience it as severity (see 11:22). Paul himself calls this a mystery (11:25) and admits that God’s ways are, in just this respect, “inscrutable” and “unsearchable” (11:33),

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antecedent of “they” in 11:11 cannot be the faithful remnant; they are not the ones who stumbled and were hardened. Neither can it be the nation as a corporate whole, for Paul has just distinguished between two groups within that corporate whole: the faithful remnant who did not stumble and were not hardened, and “the rest” who did stumble and were hardened. Accordingly, the antecedent of “they” in 11:11 must be “the rest,” the nonremnant Jews, the very ones whom God had hardened. Even John Murray admits this. Murray thus asks (*op. cit.*, p. 75, n. 18): “Is not the denotation of those in view [in verse 11] the same as those mentioned in verse 7: ‘the rest were hardened’? And is not Paul thinking here of those in verse 22: ‘toward them that fell, severity’?” The answer is, “yes” and “yes.” But since Murray cannot believe that God’s severity, or his hardening of a heart, is an expression of mercy, he insists that “those who stumbled did fall with ultimate consequences.” The “denotation of those in view” in verse 11, however, is not only “the same as those mentioned in verse 7”; it is also the same as those mentioned in verse 12: those whose “full inclusion” will mean so much more than the stumble which makes their full inclusion possible.

but nothing could be clearer than his own glorious summation of the whole thing in 11:32. If the first “all” of 11:32 refers distributively to *all* the merely human descendants of Adam, if all are “imprisoned” in disobedience, then so also does the second; they are all objects of divine mercy as well. And if one should insist, as some have in an effort to escape universalism, that neither “all” literally means “all without exception,” the obvious rejoinder is that here, no less than in Romans 5:18 and I Corinthians 15:22, the parallelism is even more important than the scope of “all.” According to Paul, the *very ones* whom God “shuts up” to disobedience—whom he blinds, or hardens, or cuts off for a season—are those to whom he is merciful; his former act is but the first expression of the latter, and the latter is the goal of the former. God hardens a heart in order to produce, in the end, a contrite spirit, blinds those who are unready for the truth in order to bring them ultimately to the truth, “imprisons all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.”

Romans 11:32, where Paul declares the full extent of God’s mercy, is the culmination of a theological argument that begins in chapter 9 and extends through chapter 11. It is here that Paul takes up the problem of Jewish unbelief and systematically defends his view that, contrary to what many of his kinsmen believed, God has every right to extend his mercy to all human beings including Gentiles. But though his argument *as a whole* is an explicit argument against limited election, against the pernicious idea that God restricts his mercy to a chosen few, we also confront this irony: Many commentators have interpreted the early stages of his argument (in chapter 9) as precisely an argument *for* such a restriction. And perhaps that is not surprising. For in the early stages of his argument, Paul does say some things that, if removed from the context of his full argument, might seem to imply that God does indeed restrict his mercy to a chosen few. For one thing, Paul gives several examples here of the severity of God’s mercy—as, for instance, when he reminds his readers that according to the story in Exodus God himself had hardened Pharaoh’s heart (9:17-18). In addition, Paul appears to draw a sharp distinction between (what he calls) vessels of mercy prepared beforehand for glory and vessels of wrath fit for destruction (9:22), and some have read into this a

distinction between the elect and the non-elect. But no one who follows Paul's argument to its conclusion in Romans 11 will likely confuse the *severity* of God's mercy with the *absence* of mercy; nor will they likely confuse the distinction between vessels of mercy and vessels of wrath with a distinction between those who are, and those who are not, objects of God's mercy.

Consider first the severity of God's mercy towards Pharaoh: the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. One can find, it seems to me, a good deal of nonsense about this in the literature. Some speak as if the hardening of Pharaoh's heart were an instance of God's causing a man to sin;<sup>17</sup> others, in an effort to do justice to our moral intuitions, insist that Pharaoh first hardened his own heart and then God hardened it further.<sup>18</sup> Before jumping to conclusions of any kind, however, one should perhaps first consider what God's hardening of a heart *means*. The Hebrew word most commonly used in the Exodus account to which Paul refers literally means "to strengthen"; it is the same word that appears throughout the Old Testament in the formula "Be of good courage."<sup>19</sup> God simply strengthened Pharaoh's heart and gave him the courage to stand in the face of the "signs and wonders" performed in Egypt. God consistently hardened (or strengthened) Pharaoh's heart in connection with a specific command: "Let my people go!" Why would a merciful God do that? In the context of the story in Exodus, one possibility is this: Though Pharaoh had exalted himself over the Hebrews for years, he was essentially a coward who could never have stood the pressure, apart from the strength that God gave him, once things began to get difficult in Egypt. It is often that way; cowardice often prevents us from doing the wrong that we in fact wish to do. In the case of Pharaoh, God gave him the strength not

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<sup>17</sup>See, for instance, Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1968), pp. 222-223.

<sup>18</sup>See, for example, Edward John Carnell, *Christian Commitment* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1957), p. 236.

<sup>19</sup>See, for example, 2 Samuel 10:12, 1 Chronicles 19:13, Ezra 10:4, Psalm 27:14, 31:24, Isaiah 41:6 in the King James Version.

to be cowed too easily; God gave him the *courage* to sin, if you will, but it hardly follows that God was the sufficient cause of the sin itself. And the hardening of Pharaoh's heart was an expression of mercy in two respects: First, it revealed to Pharaoh the destructive nature of his own sin, and second, it revealed to the Egyptians something of the nature of God. For as the Lord declared to Moses, "The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out from among them" (Exodus 7:5). These great historical events no doubt brought real hardship to the Egyptians, even as they did to the Israelites; but they were also a revelation to the Egyptians, even as they were to the Israelites. Within the context of Paul's own argument, moreover, God's actions towards Pharaoh and the Egyptians were no different from his actions towards the Israelites or anyone else; if, at one time or another, God "imprisons" all the descendants of Adam in disobedience and does so for a merciful purpose, it is hardly surprising that he should do the same thing to Pharaoh.

Consider next Paul's distinction between vessels of mercy and vessels of wrath and why he could not possibly have in mind a distinction between those who are, and those who are not, objects of God's mercy. In the first place, the vessels of wrath of which he speaks in 9:22 are the unbelieving Jews, the very ones concerning whom he later makes two claims: (i) that "as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors" (11:28), and (ii) that "they have now become disobedient in order that they too might receive mercy" (11:31-NIV). In Paul's scheme of things, therefore, those who are vessels of wrath, no less than those who are vessels of mercy, are objects of God's mercy; it is just that, for a person's own good, God's purifying love sometimes takes the form of wrath. Secondly, if Paul was indeed the author of Ephesians, then he clearly assumes that the *same individual* can be a vessel of wrath at one time and a vessel of mercy at another; he also assumes that every individual who is now a vessel of mercy was at one time a vessel of wrath. For as he says in his letter to the Ephesians, using a slightly different metaphor, all Christians were at one time "children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3). But then, if Paul himself is a

vessel of mercy who was at one time a vessel of wrath (call him Saul), a paraphrase that captures part of the meaning of 9:22-23 is this:

What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience Saul, a vessel of wrath fit for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for Paul, a vessel of mercy which he has prepared beforehand for glory. . . ?

And what this paraphrase illustrates is again only what Paul himself explicitly states in 11-32; namely, that those whom God has “imprisoned” in disobedience—the vessels of wrath whom he endures with much patience—are precisely those to whom he is merciful. By literally shutting sinners up to their disobedience and requiring them to endure the consequences of their own rebellion, God reveals the self-defeating nature of evil and shatters the illusions that make evil choices possible in the first place.

## Some Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, we have examined some of the passages in the Pauline corpus that display Paul’s belief in the ultimate triumph of God’s love and mercy. Though the weight of tradition lies on the side of those who would try to explain these passages away, the actual arguments we encounter in the tradition are remarkably weak. One of the most common arguments rests upon a mere confusion. First, someone points out that, according to Paul, only those who belong to Christ, or only those who gladly confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, or only those who repent of their sin will be saved; no unrepentant murderer, for example, can enter the Kingdom of God. Then, the person draws the faulty inference that, according to Paul, not all sinners will be saved. But as I have tried to show in this chapter, that is a simple *non sequitur*. Paul’s whole point is that the day is coming when all persons will belong to Christ, all will gladly confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and all will have repented of their sin. For though Paul nowhere endorses the absurd view that God will reward unrepentant sinners with eternal bliss, he does endorse the view that the same God who transformed

Saul, the chief of sinners, into Paul, a slave of Christ, can and eventually will do the same thing for every other sinner as well.

Now if God is truly merciful to all, as Paul insists in the eleventh chapter of Romans—if God’s severity towards the disobedient, no less than his kindness towards the obedient, is an expression of his mercy—then we must adjust our understanding of divine punishment accordingly. We must come to appreciate that, according to Paul, God punishes sin for exactly the same reason he sent his Son into the world: to redeem or reclaim those who have fallen into sin. Such a view is logically compatible with many things, including fierce punishment in the next life; but it is *not* compatible with a doctrine of *everlasting* punishment. So the full weight of what we have argued in this chapter provides a powerful reason to deny that Paul himself believed in everlasting punishment. But at this point someone may ask: Does not at least one text traditionally attributed to Paul, namely II Thessalonians 1:9, speak of the “eternal destruction” of the wicked?—and does not this text seem to imply a doctrine of everlasting punishment? Certainly many commentators have thought so. As I have already mentioned, John Murray cites this text as his decisive evidence against a universalistic interpretation of Romans 5:18; and in a similar vein, Charles Hodge writes:

As, however, not only the Scriptures generally, but Paul himself, distinctly teach that all men are not to be saved, as in 2 Thess. I.9, this [universalistic] interpretation [of Romans 5:18] cannot be admitted by any who acknowledge the inspiration of the Bible.<sup>20</sup>

What are we to make of such an argument? In the following chapter, I shall argue that Murray and Hodge have misinterpreted II Thessalonians 1:9 entirely: Not only does this text carry no implication that some persons will be lost forever; we have every reason to believe that, within the context of Paul’s own thought, the concept of “eternal destruction” is itself a redemptive concept. Before turning to that matter, however, I want to consider Hodge’s claim

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<sup>20</sup>Hodge, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

that a universalistic interpretation of Romans 5:18 “cannot be admitted by any who acknowledge the inspiration of the Bible.” On the face of it, that is a remarkable claim for two reasons: first, because many Christian universalists have believed as strongly as Hodge did in the inspiration of the Bible, and second, because one could just as easily, if one wanted to be uncharitable, use the same kind of argument against Hodge. For surely, the following argument is at least as strong, if not stronger, than the one that Hodge gives:

Because not only the Scriptures generally, but Paul himself, distinctly teach universal reconciliation, as in Romans 5:18, Romans 11, and I Corinthians 15:20-28, Hodge’s interpretation of II Thessalonians 1:9 cannot be admitted by any who acknowledge the inspiration of the Bible.

As this argument illustrates, the issue of inspiration is a distracting irrelevancy in the present context; it is the correct interpretation of a text, not the inspiration of the Bible, that is here at issue. And concerning that issue—the correct interpretation of Romans 5:18—the appeal of Murray and Hodge to II Thessalonians 1:9 suffers from a serious weakness. For without any trouble at all, we can simply reverse their argument and argue in the opposite direction.

We here touch upon a point that is perhaps more familiar to philosophers than to others, and it illustrates how something that comes naturally to a philosopher can help to clarify our interpretation of the Bible. The logic of the situation is this: At least one proposition in the following inconsistent set must be false:

- (1) Paul wrote both II Thessalonians 1:8-9 and Romans 5:18.
- (2) II Thessalonians 1:8-9 teaches that some persons will literally be punished forever and hence will never be reconciled to God.
- (3) Romans 5:18 teaches that Christ’s one act of righteousness “leads to acquittal and life for all men” and



hence that all sinners will eventually be reconciled to God.

- (4) There is no inconsistency in Paul's teaching.

Because we know that at least one of these propositions is false, we must also consider whether one of them is more plausible to deny than the others. Some would no doubt reject proposition (1), because some scholars have come to doubt the Pauline authorship of II Thessalonians; others may want to reject proposition (4) and simply admit that Paul was himself inconsistent. But those who accept a traditional view of the Bible, as Murray and Hodge both do, are unwilling to reject either (1) or (4); such persons must therefore reject either (2) or (3). So let us ask ourselves: Which of *these* propositions is the more plausible to reject. According to Murray and Hodge, (2) is true; therefore, (3) is false. These theologians allow, in other words, their understanding of II Thessalonians 1:8-9 to determine their interpretation of Romans 5:18 and the other universalistic texts in Paul. But one could just as rationally argue in the reverse direction and insist that (3) is true; therefore, (2) is false. One could just as rationally, in other words, allow one's understanding of the universalistic texts to determine one's interpretation of II Thessalonians 1:8-9. At the very least, therefore, Murray and Hodge owe us some explanation of why they prefer an argument in the one direction rather than an equally plausible argument in the other.

We have here but another instance of the hermeneutical problem discussed in the previous chapter. Whichever way we argue, we shall end up denying a proposition for which there is at least some *prima facie* support in Paul. But consider this: On the one side, we have such systematic discourses as Romans 5 and 11 and I Corinthians 15; on the other, we have a single incidental text whose translation, as we shall see in the following chapter, is by no means clear and whose interpretation is debatable on any translation. Is it not remarkable, therefore, that Murray and Hodge should think it sufficient merely to *cite* this text without so much as *discussing* it or defending their interpretation of it?

The proponents of everlasting punishment do not, of course, restrict themselves to a single text in Paul; like Neal Punt, most would appeal to the so-called “analogy of Scripture,” placing great weight upon the words of Jesus as these words are recorded in the Gospels. Accordingly, in the following chapter, we shall examine not only the idea of “eternal destruction,” as it appears in II Thessalonians 1:9, but also that of “eternal punishment,” as it appears in the parable of the sheep and the goats. We shall find that, contrary to what some have read into them, neither of these ideas carries an implication of unending punishment and, as surprising as it may at first appear, both turn out to be redemptive ideas.