

THE REASONS FOR EVANGELISTIC PRAYER

Consistent with God's Desire

God's *desire* for the world's salvation is different from His eternal saving *purpose*. We can understand this to some degree from a human perspective; after all, our purposes frequently differ from our desires. We may *desire*, for example, to spend a day at leisure, yet a higher *purpose* compels us to go to work instead. Similarly, God's saving purposes transcend His desires. (There *is* a crucial difference, of course: We might be compelled by circumstances beyond our control to choose what we do not desire. But God's choices are determined by nothing other than His own sovereign, eternal purpose.)

God genuinely “**desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.**” Yet, in “**the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord**” ([Ephesians 3:11](#)), He chose only the elect “**out of the world**” ([John 17:6](#)) and passed over the rest, leaving them to the damning consequences of their sin (cf. [Romans 1:18–32](#)). The culpability for their damnation rests entirely on them because of their sin and rejection of God. God is not to blame for their unbelief.

Since “**God desires all men to be saved,**” we are not required to ascertain that a person is elect before praying for that person's salvation. God alone knows who all the elect are ([2 Timothy 2:19](#)). We may pray “**on behalf of all men**” with full assurance that such prayers are “**good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior.**” After all, “**the Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and great in loving-kindness. The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works**” ([Psalm 145:8–9](#)).

The Lord eagerly accepts prayer for the lost because it is consistent with His desire for their salvation. Such prayer is also consistent with His nature as Savior. His saving character is manifested through His Son, Jesus Christ ([1 Timothy 2:5–6](#)). God is the “**Savior of all men**” in a temporal sense, but “**especially of believers**” in an eternal sense ([1 Timothy 4:10](#)).

When God “**desires all men to be saved,**” He is being consistent with who He is. In [Isaiah 45:22](#), God said, “**Turn to Me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth.**” [Isaiah 55:1](#) invites “**every one who thirsts**” to “**come to the waters**” of salvation. Again, in [Ezekiel 18:23, 32](#), God states very clearly that He does not desire that the wicked should perish, but that they would sincerely repent (cf. [Ezekiel 33:11](#)). In the New Testament, Peter writes, “**The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance**” ([2 Peter 3:9](#)).

No true biblical theology can teach that God takes pleasure in the damnation of the wicked. Yet though it does not please Him, God will receive glory even in the damnation of unbelievers (cf. [Romans 9:22–23](#)). How His electing grace and predestined purpose

can stand beside His love for the world and desire that the Gospel be preached to all people, still holding them responsible for their own rejection and condemnation, is a divine mystery. The Scriptures teach God's love for the world, His displeasure in judging sinners, His desire for all to hear the Gospel and be saved. They also teach that every sinner is incapable yet responsible to believe and will be damned if he does not.

Crowning the Scripture's teaching on this matter is the great truth that God has elected all believers and loved them before the world began.

“To come to the knowledge of the truth” speaks of salvation. *Epignōsis* (“knowledge”) is used four times in the Pastoral Epistles ([2 Timothy 2:25](#); [2 Timothy 3:7](#); [Titus 1:1](#)), and in each occurrence it refers to the true knowledge that brings about salvation. Far from desiring their damnation, God desires the lost to come to a saving knowledge of the truth.

Some have argued that [1 Timothy 2:3–7](#) teaches universalism. If God desires the salvation of all men, they argue, then all will be saved, or God won't get what He wants. Others agree that what God wills comes to pass, because **“all men”** refers to all classes of men, not every individual. Neither of those positions is necessary, however. We must distinguish between God's will of decree (His eternal purpose), and His will expressed as desire. **“Desire”** is not from *boulomai*, which would be more likely to express God's will of decree, but from *thelō*, which Paul uses in [1 Timothy 2](#) and can refer to God's will of desire. This is precisely the distinction theologians often make between God's secret will and His revealed will.

God desires many things that He does not decree. It was never God's *desire* that sin exist, yet the undeniable existence of sin proves that even it fulfills His eternal purposes ([Isaiah 46:10](#))—though in no sense is He the author of sin ([James 1:13](#)).

Jesus lamented over Jerusalem, **“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling”** ([Matthew 23:37](#)). John Murray and Ned B. Stonehouse wrote, “We have found that God Himself expresses an ardent desire for the fulfillment of certain things which He has not decreed in His inscrutable counsel to come to pass” (*The Free Offer of the Gospel* [Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979], 26). God desires all men to be saved. It is their willful rejection of Him that sends them to hell. The biblical truths of election and predestination do not cancel man's moral responsibility.