

The Synoptic Gospels: A Journey Into the Kingdom

by Edward L. Bleynat, Jr.

Matthew
Mark
Luke

Volume II:
*From the Desert
to the Mount*

Foreword by Phyllis Tickle, best-selling author and founding religion editor of *Publishers Weekly*



R. BRENT AND COMPANY
Asheville, North Carolina
rbrent.com

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*From Shifting Sand to Solid Rock:
The Sermon on the Mount Concluded
Reflections on Christian Universalism*

Chapter 12 addressed the idea of universal salvation. This appendix provides additional food for thought and reflection on this topic.

We begin with St. Augustine, whom we discussed in chapter 12. His views on predestination and other matters reshaped Christian theology.

Augustine was born in the late Roman Empire and followed an oft-tortured spiritual journey through various religious movements before settling on Christianity. He was pressed into service as a priest and later became bishop of Hippo in North Africa, during which time he saw Rome sacked by Goths. As bishop, he presided over innumerable legal proceedings, many of them arising out of spite. Augustine came to view human choice as very limited and human happiness in this life as illusory. The further he pursued this line of reasoning, the bleaker his outlook became. Augustine eventually came to the view that God's grace would redeem some, but surely not all, of the people in the broken and decaying world. His theology signaled a shift away from universalism, and toward a grimmer view of human destiny. He saw the two ways, and was not hopeful about the outcome.

1. Knowing these outlines of Augustine’s life, what do you think about his theological viewpoints? How were they reflected in the Reformation—particularly, in the views of Luther and Calvin? Do you agree with Augustine? Why or why not?
2. One of the major objections to universalism is that the evil are not held accountable. They may oppress others in this life, yet prosper. Then, in the next world, they get to participate in the heavenly feast. What do you think of this objection to universalism?
3. Often, we view religious issues entirely in light of eternal consequences. Evangelical Christianity focuses on leading people to be saved, and so protected from judgment. Much of Roman Catholic Christianity is focused on confession and forgiveness so that we do not die with our sins still burdening us. Even mainline Protestantism involves regular repentance and prayers for forgiveness of sins, though it is often just as much about reconciliation in this life as about what occurs beyond. What do we miss when we focus on such other-worldly issues? What do we gain?



Universalism provides a counterweight to convenient fatalism. For instance, if people or nations are in dispute, it is easy to associate “them” with the devil and “us” with God. Once we have concluded that this alignment exists, we can easily dehumanize the other. “After all,” the thinking goes, “if he ain’t right with God, and is going to hell anyway, why not just hurry him along, instead of letting him oppose God’s will and mine any more?” An equally arrogant and wicked version of this is, “Kill ’em all; let God sort ’em out!” Armed with such judgmental weapons—freed by distorting the words of Matthew 7:13–14 to decide what road our opponents are on, or gate they enter—we can more easily objectify and destroy them. Universalism offers a balance, as it affirms that all are eventually to become members of the household of God. If “the enemy” is

included in that number, then who are we to judge whether he should live or die? After all, isn't our job to love our enemy?¹

Another favorable aspect of universalism is its tendency to keep Christianity from becoming a tool of bigots, and to keep others from associating Christianity with bigotry. If Christians acknowledge that we are all in God's hands, under God's mercy, and within God's grace, then we cannot treat others as second-class citizens. Universalism blunts the sharp edge of Christian exclusivism and protects Christianity from accusations of arrogance. Are these sufficient reasons to embrace universalism? Are there opposing considerations, too? If so, what are they? Where does our internal sense of the divine will come into play?

Some people of good faith and good will maintain that they have no desire for others to be lost; but believe that it occurs because of their failure to accept the gospel message as a remedy for their sins. A text frequently cited to support this position is John 14:6 about Jesus being the way, the truth, and the life. However, it is not clear that the text should be interpreted in such an exclusive fashion. Here is Jesus in John 14, at the last supper with his disciples:

¹Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going."

⁵Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

⁶Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

¹This paragraph does not speak either to defensive wars, or to Augustine's concept of the "just war." Sometimes, we are drawn into those conflicts regardless of our desires. When that occurs, people are called to do whatever their duty might be. It is an example of human tragedy, where we must make the best of a bad situation. Instead, the point of this paragraph is to discourage a more aggressive way of defining who is an enemy. Because once we take that step, we give ourselves leave to disregard his interests, exploit him, demonize him, or kill him in furtherance of our own ulterior motives.

During a meal of reassurance with his disciples, Jesus talks of a happy destination with “many dwelling places.” He then lets his disciples know that he is the way there. Are these statements legal rules that we must either confess and accept Christ in a certain way, or rot in hell? Or do they provide constancy amid unthinkable turmoil?

1. Who is to say that the manner in which Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life” means exclusion, rather than inclusion? Isn’t it possible that he is using the phrase in this sense: that he is doing what he alone can do, and once it is accomplished, he has opened the door to the many dwelling places for all?
2. The term “the way” in the biblical witness may not be a simple decision to embark on the narrow road and automatically achieve the desired destination. Mark uses “the way” throughout the heart of his gospel. It will demand a lot of interpretive attention in later volumes in this series. Could it be that Mark and John were both familiar with this image, and that both used it to show the Christian journey as being much more demanding, and ultimately much more grace-filled, than just consciously “confessing and accepting Christ”?
3. How does the interpretation of John 14 that I offer above compare with the following ideas of Paul and his followers, found in Colossians 1?

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.



In my own spiritual journey, I have sometimes considered a view that more or less equates God's saving action with asymptotes. You may remember asymptotes from geometry as those strange lines that move toward curves, getting ever and ever closer, without quite reaching them. It may be that the idea of universal salvation looks a little like the asymptote and the curve. We continually approach God in response to his call, but never do all of us quite reach him. There is always someone who, in self-absorption or wickedness or madness, simply cannot let go of his own pride enough to surrender to God's love. Instead, such people continue to stumble around in a haze of self-aggrandizement. Some level of resistance and rejection remains strong enough within them to keep God's saving grace always just beyond their reach.

When I read the Watson passage quoted in chapter 12 at 361–362, I began to question my own theory. Are my curves and asymptotes—that intellectual compromise between universal salvation and allowing enough room for human sin and stubbornly free will—now proved ineffectual? Do they lead to a divine cry of anguish that rends the cosmos and leaves the heavenly feast to be eaten in a terrible, terrible silence?

Interestingly, Augustine—the non-universalist—came to believe that God's grace is irresistible. Those he has elected for salvation have no choice in the matter. Might that irresistible grace extend to everyone? Stated differently, is it possible that predestination really is the way of all souls—and that all are predestined to eternal life? If so, can it be resisted?

Throughout this appendix, we have pondered whether there are limits to God's mercy and, if so, where they lie. What limitations should *we* observe as we ask these questions and probe around for the will of the Almighty? Does the admonition in Luke 12:23–24, in which Jesus responds to the question about how many will be saved by directing that man to strive to enter through the narrow door, provide guidance? Stated differently, what can we really know about these essential, but finally unanswerable, questions? After all, Jesus turned the man who asked back toward the smaller, but more personal and more practical question: How are you to live your own life? It is a question to which we should often return, even as we ponder the larger questions of human destiny.

But, for my part, I choose to believe grace is stronger than sin.