

THE SAVIOUR OF ALL MEN

(1 Timothy 4:10)

"For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God,
who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe"
(1 Timothy 4:10).

There are those who teach that God has provided salvation only for those who are *His elect*. They would also teach a limited atonement, that Christ died on the cross only for the sins of *God's elect* [those who will believe on Christ and be saved]. Such false teaching is answered by the verse cited above. This verse teaches that there is a sense in which God is the Saviour of **all men** and there is a special sense ("**especially**") in which God is the Saviour of those who believe. Timothy should have had no problem understanding this because Paul had already written in this same epistle that there is a sense in which God is the Saviour of all. He is the Saviour of all men because He desires all men to be saved (1 Tim. 2:3-4) and because Christ died for all men (1 Tim. 2:6). Paul also made it clear that there is a **special sense** in which He is the Saviour of those who come to God through Christ and who believe and know the truth (1 Tim. 2:4; 4:3).

Extreme Calvinists have a problem with this verse because the expression "all men" **must** here be understood as referring to *all humanity* without exception. The verse teaches that out of that large class of people referred to as "all men" there is a smaller class of people referred to as "those who believe." It is therefore obvious that the "all men" describes a group of people that includes more than just those who believe (more than "the elect"). He is the Saviour of all men. He is "especially" the Saviour of believers (in a special sense that is not true those who are not believers).

The expression "all men" is also found in 1 Timothy 2:4. Extreme Calvinists tells us that in this verse the "all men" means "all sorts of persons" (see Jay Adams' translation). They say that it refers to all men **without distinction** but not all men **without exception**. Thus in 1 Timothy 2:4 they understand the "all men" to refer, not to all humanity, but to "the elect" which would include elect Jews and Gentiles, elect men and women, elect slaves and freemen, etc. In other words, according to their theology, God does not desire to save all men without exception, but God desires to save only His elect who belong to all kinds of classes of people (God's elect are among the rich, the poor, the Jews, the Gentiles, etc.). This is forcing the text to fit one's theology. We simply must let the verse say what it says: "God will have (desires) all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." Indeed, God proved His desire for their salvation by sending Christ to die for them (1 Tim. 2:6)!

The extreme Calvinist must find a way to get around the clear statement of 1 Timothy 4:10. Jay Adams has tried to do this in a unique way in his translation: "who is the Saviour of *all sorts of men*, **that is**, of those who believe." The problem with this is that the word "especially" cannot be translated "that is." Adams is desperately trying to force the verse to fit his theology, even at the cost of abandoning sound principles of translation and ignoring the obvious meaning of words.

How then do extreme Calvinists explain this verse? They usually argue that the term "Saviour" is used in a temporal and not an eternal sense, meaning that God is the *Preserver* of all men or the Deliverer of all men, especially of those who believe. This runs contrary to all the standard translations (NASB,NIV,RSV,ASV,NEB, etc.) which render the word "Saviour" and not "Preserver." Also their view raises this problem: Does God really preserve believers in a temporal, physical way more than He does unbelievers? Often God lets the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer in this life. Christ promised His followers persecution, tribulation and even death at the hands of unbelievers. The truth is that they who believe are likely to undergo great difficulty in this world. Believers must suffer through natural disasters (floods, tornados, fire, etc.) just as unbelievers. It is true that there is spiritual help and comfort for believers even in the midst of their trials, but in what sense are believers preserved physically and temporally in a very special sense that is not true of unbelievers? Often unbelievers seem to be well-preserved in this life, whereas believers are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things (1 Cor. 4:13).

It is true that sometimes the verb "save" is used in different ways, and it does not always mean salvation from sin. 1 Timothy 2:15 speaks of the Christian woman being saved from satanic deception (compare 1 Tim. 5:14-15). Also 1 Timothy 4:16 is likewise speaking of being saved from Satanic deception (compare 4:1), but this is not a good parallel to the verse under discussion because obviously Satanic deception is not the issue in 1 Timothy 4:10.

It is helpful to ask this: How does Paul use the expression "**God our Saviour**"? The term "Saviour" is applied to God in several other places beside 1 Timothy 4:10. See Luke 1:47; 1 Timothy 1:1; 2:3; Titus 1:3; 2:10; 3:4; and Jude 25. Will anyone venture to say that in these seven texts the meaning is "God the Preserver," referring to temporal and not to eternal benefits?

The last place Paul used this term is very significant. It is found in 1 Timothy 2:3 (and see also 2:4 where "all men" is used). God is the Saviour of all men in the sense that He desires all men to be saved and Christ died for all (1 Tim. 2:4,6). The verse clearly refers to eternal salvation. The ASV understands 1 Timothy 4:10 in this way because in the marginal reference it gives these two verses: 1 Timothy 2:4 and John 4:42.

Is it a problem to say that God is the Saviour of all men? Only to the extreme Calvinists who say that the Saviour's work on the cross had nothing to do with those who are not elect. The Bible speaks of God being "the Saviour of the world" (John 4:42; 1 John 4:14) and yet it is obvious that the world will not all be saved. The vast majority of those who make up "world" will perish because of their unbelief and rejection of God's Saviour (John 3:16-18). And yet we must ask, how can the world reject Him as Saviour if He is not in some sense the world's Saviour? How can a person reject the gospel if Christ did not die for him (compare 1 Cor. 15:1-4)? What is the good news that he is rejecting? The extreme Calvinist has no good news for anyone but the elect. You cannot reject something that is not genuinely offered to you. If there is no gospel offered to the "non-elect," then how can they reject the gospel?

Why did Paul strive so diligently and why was he willing to suffer reproach as he labored in the gospel? Paul knew that he had a message for **all men**—a message of hope, a message of good news, a message of reconciliation. He also knew that as this message went forth it would be gladly received by some. There would be those who would believe and be actually saved. Note the similar motivation expressed by Paul in 2 Timothy 2:10. Paul was willing to endure all things for the sake of the elect, so that they might obtain the salvation that is found in Christ (not just so that they might have temporal and physical deliverance). Paul knew that God was using his gospel preaching (as he proclaimed the good news of Christ and His death on the cross **to all men**) as a means by which God would bring the elect to faith in Christ. Without preaching there can be no faith (Rom. 10:14-17). Paul was willing to suffer and labour and pray toward this end.

"His will is that all men should be saved, and He has made full and sufficient provision for the salvation of all, so that, as far as salvation stands in Him, He is the Saviour of all men...if God be thus willing for all to be saved, how much more shall He save them that put their trust in Him" (**Alford**).
"While God is potentially Saviour of all, He is actually Saviour of the believers. So Jesus is termed 'Saviour of the World' (John 4:42)" (**A.T. Robertson**). "He has a general good-will to the eternal salvation of all men thus far that He is not willing that any should perish...He desires not the death of sinners; He is thus the Saviour of all men" (**Matthew Henry**).

Those who take this verse at face value cannot be in danger of teaching universalism. If God were to **actually** save all men, then how would believers be saved in a special sense? The very fact that the verse says that there is a special sense in which believers are saved implies that there is a sense in which unbelievers are **not** saved. Unbelievers are not actually saved, even though God the Saviour has desired their salvation and provided for it in the death of His Son. May we joyfully carry the gospel to all men, telling them that there is a Saviour for them who has died for them! May we urge them to receive this One who came to be their Saviour. "I bring you good tidings of great joy, **which shall be to all people**. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a **Saviour**, which is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-12).

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