

# **An Exegetical Study of 1 Timothy 4:10** **(A Doctrinal Study on the Extent of the Atonement)**

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## **Preface**

The purpose of this doctrinal tract is to set forth, in a readable outline form, a positive polemic for the doctrine of definite atonement — a doctrine which the author is firmly convinced glorifies the triune Jehovah to whom salvation belongs.

An outline method is used to assist the reader in his study of three theologically controversial verses in the Pastoral Epistles on the "salvation of all men." The outlines which follow were originally prepared as separate theological tracts in conjunction with an exposition of 1 Timothy and Titus at Grace Reformed Fellowship in 1974-1975.

The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance received from William Hendriksen's *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles* — an excellent work by one of the foremost, if not the foremost, sovereign grace, New Testament commentator in our generation.

## **I Timothy 4:10**

AN OUTLINE OF THE THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS CONCERNING I TIMOTHY 4:10: "WE TRUST IN THE LIVING GOD, WHO IS THE SAVIOUR OF ALL MEN, SPECIALLY OF THOSE THAT BELIEVE."

### **I. SOTERIOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS.**

#### **A. Universal Salvation.**

1. God is the Saviour of all man in the sense that ultimately He actually saves each and every human being who has lived or will on the earth.

2. Objection. This view is contrary to all biblical teaching. Not all men are saved in the full, spiritual sense. Moreover, if this were true, why would Paul have added, "specially of those who believe"? The last phrase of this verse would make no sense.

#### **B. Free Will Salvation.**

1. God wants (desires) all men without exception by their own free will to be saved (cf. 1Tim. 2:4). However, in the case of some, His will can be and is effectually resisted through obstinate unbelief, because man has a free will and God will not force His will upon man. As a result, God's foreknowledge is understood to mean foresight; that is, God foresees who will believe and chooses them to be saved (cf. Notes on 1Tim. 2:4).

2. Objection. The text in I Timothy 4:10 does not say that God wants (desires) to save, but that He actually saves: He is actually the Saviour (in some sense) of all men. Also, resisting the divine will — in the absolute sense — is impossible. Likewise, it is impossible for God's foreknowledge to be limited (even voluntarily or by man's faith). Otherwise God would not be God! (Cf. Acts 13:48; Eph. 1:11; 2:8-9; Phil. 1:29.) Furthermore, the biblical meaning of "foreknowledge," when used of God, does not mean mere foresight, but an everlasting, intimate relationship stemming from an eternal electing love (cf. Rom. 8:28-29; Eph. 1:4-5; I Pet. 1:2).

#### C. Modified Free Will Salvation.

1. God is able (has provided) salvation for all men without exception upon the condition of faith. But all can not (will not) be saved, only those who exercise faith; that is, only the elect are actually saved: the non-elect are only provisionally or hypothetically saved (placed in a salvable position) but are never actually saved.

2. Objection. While it is true that only those who believe will be saved, this interpretation of the text dodges the issue. The verse does not say that the living God is **able** to save, but **has provided** salvation for all men without exception. It says, "He **is** the Saviour of all men." But "all men have not faith" (II Thess. 3:2) because saving faith is a gift from God; is it not (Phil. 1:29; II Thess. 2:13)? If faith is a gift from God, why does not God give saving faith to all men without exception? Does one's ability to believe lie within his own will (cf. John 1:13; 6:44; Jas. 1:18), or solely within the sovereign grace and good pleasure of God? (Cf. Matt. 11:25-27; John 6:63; Eph. 1:11; II Tim. 1:9.)

#### D. Distributive Salvation.

1. God **actually** bestows salvation — in the full, evangelical sense of the term — on **all kinds (classes) of men**. He gives to all of them everlasting life; that is, He gives everlasting life to all kinds (classes) of men. "All" is a relative rather than an absolute term.

2. Objection. Although It is true that God does desire that prayers be made on behalf of the salvation of all kinds (classes) of people (cf. Rom. 9:24; 1Tim. 2:1-2, 4; Rev. 5:9; 7:9), this truth does not fit the context here because of the final phrase, "specially of those that believe."

## II. NONSOTERIOLOGICAL-SOTERIOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION (FREE GRACE SALVATION).

A. This is the correct interpretation. It is found by making a thorough study of the term "Saviour" (in both its noun and verb forms<sup>1</sup>) in the context of the chapter, the epistle, the New Testament and the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> The final phrase "specially of those that believe" clearly indicates that the term is here given a twofold application. Of all men God is the Saviour, but of some men, namely, believers, He is the Saviour in a deeper, more glorious sense than He is of others.

This clearly implies that when He is called the Saviour of all men, this cannot mean that He imparts to all everlasting life, as He does to believers. The term "Saviour," then, must have a meaning which we today generally do not immediately attach to it. And that is exactly the cause of the difficulty. Often in the Old Testament, the term meant "to deliver — (verbal form) or deliverer (nominal form)" — both with reference to men and God (cf. Judg. 3:9; II Kings 13:5; Neh. 9:27; Ps. 25:5; 106:21). Also, in the New Testament, reference is made to the Old Testament where God delivered Israel from the oppression of Pharaoh for He had been the Saviour of all, but specially those who believed. With the latter, and with them alone, He was "well pleased" (I Cor. 10:5). All leave Egypt; not all enter Canaan." POINT: In both the Old and New Testaments the term "Saviour" is often used to speak of God's providential preservation or deliverance which extends to all men without exception. (Cf. Ps. 36:6; 145:9; Matt. 5:45; Luke 6:35; Acts 17:25, 28.) Moreover, God also causes His gospel of salvation to be earnestly proclaimed to all men without distinction; that is, to men from every race and nation (Matt. 28:19). Truly the kindness (providence or common grace) of God extends to all. But even the circle of those to whom the message of salvation is proclaimed is wider than those who receive it by a true saving faith.

B. Conclusion. A paraphrase of what Paul is teaching in I Timothy 4:10 is this: "We have our hope set on the living God, and in this hope we shall not be disappointed, for not only is He a kind God, hence the Saviour (i.e., preserver or deliverer in a providential, non-soteriological sense) of all men, showering blessings upon them, but He is, in a very special sense, the Saviour (in a

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<sup>1</sup> The verb form of "Saviour" is used in I Timothy 4:16. Unless salvation is by works and not by grace, it must be translated "preserve" or "deliver" in verse 16. And this makes sense in context. For Paul is saying to Timothy: "Take heed unto thyself, and unto thy doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt save thyself (i.e., preserve or deliver thyself from those who depart from the faith and teach false doctrine as described in the first part of the chapter), and them that hear thee." Furthermore, the term "living God" is used elsewhere in conjunction with His providence (cf. Acts 14:15).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Hendriksen.

soteriological sense) of those who by faith embrace Him and His promise, for to them He imparts salvation, everlasting life in all its fulness.

THE LIVING GOD IS THE PROVIDENTIAL PRESERVER OF ALL MEN; BUT HE IS ESPECIALLY SO FOR BELIEVERS, FOR HE NOT ONLY PHYSICALLY AND TEMPORALLY DELIVERS THEM, BUT HE ALSO SPIRITUALLY AND ETERNALLY SAVES THEM.