

Does God Desire Every Person to be Saved? A Brief Exegesis of 1 Timothy 2:4

At face value, it would appear that the phrase “*God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved*” in 1 Timothy 2:3-4 is a reference to God’s desire to save every single person. If this interpretation is correct, we must conclude that election is conditional, leaving God in the position of offering salvation and hoping that men accept his offer on the basis of their free will.

Is this the correct interpretation of the phrase in question or is there a more preferable explanation? The casual reader may be amazed to think that anyone would offer another explanation. Furthermore, if an alternate does exist, how could it possibly be any better? This explanation is so clear...or is it? What many people fail to take into account is that we tend to read a Bible text through the grid of modern American usage of the English language and forget that the Bible was written in ancient languages during ancient times. Paul penned his first letter to Timothy almost two thousand years ago in Koine Greek. Thus, we have a bit of a language gap to overcome if we are to correctly understand Paul and rightly divide the word of truth.

Understanding the Use of Words

The first question we must ask is whether the phrase “*all men*” exclusively refers to every single person (i.e. all men without exception) in every case. For the sake of brevity, let’s examine just a few of Paul’s usages of this phrase. In Romans 5:18, Paul argues that “*through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.*” No one (except perhaps a universalist) argues that Paul here was using the phrase “*all men*” to refer to all men without exception. That would amount to every single person being justified. We understand that only those who receive the free gift described in verses 15-17 are justified. So, “*all men*” here refers to all men who believe, not all men without exception, because the immediate context qualifies the phrase as such. In a similar fashion, Paul uses this phrase to mean less than every single person in Romans 12:17, 12:18, 1 Corinthians 7:7, 9:22, 10:33, 2 Corinthians 3:2, and Titus 2:11.¹ There are other phrases normally construed to mean every single person without exception that Paul and other inspired writers used in the same manner. For example, Paul used the phrase “*whole world*” in Romans 1:8 in a limited geographic sense, and John used it in 1 John 5:19 to refer only to unbelievers. Similarly, John used the phrase “*those who dwell on the earth*” throughout the book of Revelation to refer exclusively to unbelievers (3:10, 6:10, 8:13, twice in 11:10, 13:8, 13:12, 13:14, 17:2, 17:8). Given these considerations, it is quite possible that Paul did *not* intend to use of the term “*all men*” in 1 Timothy 2:4 as a designation for every individual in the world. Only proper exegesis of the text can determine if this is the case, and this determination can only be made by considering the passage in its context.

1 Timothy 2:1 *First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men,² for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.³ This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior,⁴ who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.⁵ For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,⁶ who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time.*

¹ Hebrews 12:14 and Revelation 19:18 furnish examples of other writers using the term in the same way.

An Examination of the Context

When examining the immediate context, it becomes immediately apparent that the phrase “*all men*” is used in both verse 1 and verse 4. Additionally, “*men*” is found in verse 5, and “*all*” is found in verse 6 (see the underlines above). Given that they are tightly housed within the same immediate context, all four of these instances must have a consistent meaning. Therefore, all four must either point to all men without exception (i.e. every single person alive on earth) or all men without distinction (i.e. all categories/types of men). This fact is critical to understanding what Paul intended by the phrase “*all men.*”

Further evaluation yields five clear reasons why we should understand this phrase as a reference to categories of men, not individuals. First, it would be absurd to think that Paul was calling Timothy to pray for every single individual in Ephesus (v. 1); that would be physically impossible! Second, verse 2 qualifies verse 1 by explicitly stating a category of men. In fact, Paul took care to state the class of men for whom it would be most difficult to pray. His point was that no category of man should be excluded from our prayers...not even pagan rulers. Third, if “*all men*” means “*every single person,*” then verse 5 would state that Jesus is the mediator of every single person. We know from Hebrews that this is clearly not the case (e.g. 9:15). He, as the mediator of the New Covenant, only mediates for those who are part of the covenant (i.e. those who are saved). Nowhere in Scripture is there any inkling that He mediates for unbelievers. Fourth, if “*all men*” means “*every single person*” then verse 6 would state that Christ paid the ransom for every single person. Of course, if this is the case, we are left with universalism. On the contrary, since payment of the ransom appeases God's wrath and effects redemption for those for whom it has been paid, we know that Christ paid the ransom only for the sin of the elect (i.e. “*to give His life as a ransom for many*” per Mark 10:45). Fifth, all of Paul's references in the verses which follow reference categories of people, not individuals. Paul was not the teacher to every single Gentile but Gentiles as a people group (v. 7). Similarly, he certainly did not command every single man, including unbelieving men, to pray and lift up holy hands (v. 8). Likewise, we would never think that Paul commanded every single woman to dress modestly (v. 9). Of course, these positions would be absurd. We know this cannot be the case, and we implicitly understand that Paul was referring specifically to those within the church. We understand this from both the broad context (e.g. 3:15 indicates that Paul's purpose for writing was to give instruction regarding how those in the church ought to conduct themselves) and the narrow context (e.g. Paul's provision of explicit modifiers in 2:2 and 2:10).

Understanding the Use of Words – Part Two

Some interpreters attempt to jettison these straightforward observations from the context in favor of a lexical argument pertaining to the word “*desires*” in verse 4. They argue that the Greek word for “*desires*” (i.e. *thelo*) is never used to refer to God's will of decree and is only used to express God's will of desire.² Although this is an interesting argument, several simple considerations cause it to fall flat. From a lexical standpoint, it may be true that the verb *thelo* is not used elsewhere in reference to God's will of decree. However, the Greek word *thelema*,

² God's will of decree is God's eternal purpose and unconditional will that man cannot resist or thwart (e.g. God's decree to create the world). God's will of desire, on the other hand, represents God's standards which are often expressed as His will or desire that man can, to some degree, resist and ignore (e.g. God desires that believers abstain from immorality).

which is a cognate of *thelo*,³ is clearly used in this manner (e.g. Ephesians 1:1, 5, 9, 11). This argument alone destroys the alleged lexical argument, but even if there were no clear examples of the term itself or any cognates referring to God's decretive will, the argument still would not hold. If all we had was an argument from the context which pointed toward one conclusion and a lexical argument which pointed toward an opposing conclusion, we would have to defer to the contextual argument. As the oft-repeated axiom of hermeneutics states, "context is king." All words have a range of meaning, and our job as exegetes and interpreters is to understand what particular meaning was in the mind of the author on the basis of the context. Our goal is always to find the *uses loquendi* (i.e. the use in speech by the author). Although a study of how the same word was used in *other contexts* by the same and different authors can be helpful for determining the custom of use during that time period, the only thing that ultimately matters when interpreting a passage is what the word means in the *context of the passage at hand*. Furthermore, we know that it is always possible for a word to be used in a way in one passage that it is not used in others. For example, the word *dikaioo* (i.e. to justify, set free, or pronounce righteous) is used by Paul fifteen times in the epistle to the Romans. Although he used it in the technical sense (i.e. to declare righteous) twelve times throughout the epistle (3:20, 3:24, 3:26, 3:28, 3:30, 4:2, 4:5, 5:1, 5:9, 8:33, and twice in 8:30), he chose to use the same term twice in reference to justification/vindication (2:13, 3:4) and once in reference to being set free (6:7). If an interpreter commits the exegetical fallacy of assuming that the same word is always used in the same way, he would run into serious problems here in Romans when attempting to interpret 6:7, or even 2:13 or 3:4. So, it is quite possible for an author to use a word in a way that is not found in other texts. Once again, "context is king." One should never entertain the idea of allowing a lexical argument derived from cross-references to trump a strong contextual argument. In the case of 1 Timothy 2:4, given the use of the cognate *thelema*, the lexical argument itself does not even hold, so there is no tension between contextual and lexical data.

Conclusion

In summary, consistency in interpretation necessitates treating all referents in the same immediate context in the same way. Given this, we must either understand the four references throughout the context to be referring to every single individual in every case (i.e. every individual person in verses 1, 4, and twice in 5) or categories of individuals in every case. We cannot mix and match. When we take the time to exegetically analyze the text, we find strong contextual and lexical reasons to believe that Paul was in fact speaking about categories/types of men. Thus, this passage provides no basis for concluding that God desires every single individual to be saved.

³ The verb form *thelo* and the noun form *thelema* share a common root (i.e. they are different forms of the same word).