

Q&A: Does 1 Tim 4:10... provide an escape clause for humanists?

Reverend Mother asks: *Tim 1, ch 4, v 10 says "...who is the Saviour of all men and especially of those who believe..." Is this the verse to quote to people who have lost a non-believer... or perhaps an escape clause for humanists?*

Thanks for the question. The text of 1 Tim 4:10 in its most immediate context is (ESV):

8 For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. 9 This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. 10 That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, and especially of those who believe.

But to begin with, some basic principles: Your question is an exegetical one. That is to say, it is asking for an interpretation, an "get-meaning-out" question. Good exegesis attempts to disrobe the reader of current frameworks and asks the question "What did this mean for the person to whom it was originally communicated?" Once that question has been considered the question of "so what does it mean for me (or for a humanist etc.)" can be asked, and hopefully answered, to some extent.

We must give attention to semantical range of words. We know what we mean by, for instance, the word "Saviour" but is that the meaning that is intended? Paul, who wrote the original letter, knew nothing of modern day humanism. And before we collide a passage with a specific question such as "Does this

comfort those who have lost a person of no faith?" we have to consider whether or not the text is actually relevant to that question at all.

In my mind the sticking point is the phrase "Saviour of all people?" What does this mean? Do the applications you suggest apply?

The word "Saviour" is in the original Greek σωτήρ which certainly means "saviour" or "deliverer" but also "preserver."

It is a word that applies to the general sense of divine preservation of human life and the providential giving of all that is required for sustenance. It is telling that the word references the sense of God's preservation in the OT, but it is not a word that applies to the messianic figures of David (and others) where the more specific sense of "salvation" in terms of rescue or vicarious victory is present. Jesus is the first "Messiah" to also be "Saviour."

The word "Saviour" implies an object – who or what is actually saved? The natural object is "the world." When we talk about "the Saviour of the World" we do not intend some sort of exhaustive/universalist scope (in terms of individuals) the scope of the meaning is two-fold: this person has the capacity to save the world; this world has a Saviour, it is this person.

Therefore, based on this lexical analysis, my conclusion would be that the phrase "Saviour of all people" does not imply a universalism. It implies that Jesus has the divine attributes of being "saviour/preserver/benefactor" of all people.

This conclusion is supported by looking at the immediate context. What is the purpose of this passage? Well, in verse 8, the direct point is to encourage godliness. This godliness is like "physical training" which has benefit both for the "present life" and the "life to come." In fact, through godliness, we could say we are saved/preserved for this life

and the next. The argument that is being made is that the godliness is worth pursuing (for salvation/preservation) because it is shaped around the character, nature and demonstration of the one who saves and preserves. We strive for godliness because we hope/trust in this Saviour, even to the extent of recognise the preserving benefit of following Christ's example in this life.

However, for those whose hope in Christ extends to the eschatological hope of belonging to the age to come (the more specific sense of "salvation") there is even more reason to pursue the path of godliness because it is the path that pertains to the preservation of *eternal* life. Thus, in my opinion, the original audience of 4:10 would have heard something like this: *godliness is good for all people because it pertains to the preservation of all people in this world, and it is especially good for those who believe, because it especially pertains to the "life to come."*

How, then, does this apply to the applications you suggest?

a) Escape clause for humanists? Well, yes and no. It confirms the value of "godliness" for present-day preservation of human life. I think the Pope said something similar recently about the value of "good works" even the "good works" of atheists. Such good works are, well, good. Does that give them an "escape" – well, perhaps.

b) Comfort those who have lost a person with no faith? Perhaps, depending on the person. I would think that passages that refer to the holiness and justice and compassion of God would be of more application.