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**3 - Salvation from the Wrath to Come:
An Exposition of Romans 5:9 and 1 Thessalonians 5:9**

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Introduction

First of all I would like to thank Kevaughn Mattis for inviting me to contribute to this vital theme of salvation and perseverance of the saints. He has put much effort into getting this online journal off the ground and I hope and pray that it receives the wide readership it deserves.

It is a sad reflection on the Church in my own country, England, that one rarely hears a sermon on the wrath of God. The fact that it is neglected shows to what extent the Church has departed from biblical teaching. For the subject of the wrath of God, as we shall see, turns up at crucial points in the scriptures. Further, it is only by understanding the wrath of God that we can comprehend how Jesus saves and what it means to be saved. For Paul's message in Romans 5:9 is that we are saved from the wrath of God: "Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God" (NRSV, the version I shall use throughout this

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article). Again in 1 Thessalonians 1:10 we read that Jesus “rescues us from the wrath that is coming”. Yet how often do we hear evangelists preach that we must be saved from the wrath to come? Often this uncomfortable message is replaced by the messages that faith in Christ gives you purpose in life. Jesus Christ does indeed give purpose in one’s life. But that is not the primary reason why one should become a Christian.

A. The Wrath of God

Before studying Romans 5:9 we have to be clear what Paul means by the wrath of God. The first point is that the wrath of God is concerned with the last judgement. We see this, for example, in Romans 2:5: “But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgement will be revealed.” In fact even in Romans 1:18, where a present tense is used, Paul is, I believe, speaking of judgement on the last day. Romans 1:18: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.” This verse, occurring at a crucial point in Paul’s argument, is often taken to mean God’s wrath is expressed in the here and now. But Paul is here speaking about the wrath of God which *will be revealed* at the last judgement. Then God will execute his judgement. It is true that in the Greek a present verb is used, “The wrath of God is revealed (apokalyptetai) from heaven”. But a Greek present can also be used for a future event when one is absolutely convinced that it will take place. So I think Rom 1:18, like 2:5, refers to the wrath of God revealed at the last judgement. One may also compare 1 Corinthians 3:13 where the same Greek present, (apokalyptetai), is employed; but there Paul is definitely speaking of the eschatological wrath.

The wrath of God is therefore concerned with the last judgement. The second point about the wrath of God is that it is not like human anger. For Paul, the wrath of God is not an emotion of God. Rather it is an objective entity - and the consequence of this wrath is that human beings will be condemned on the day of judgement. Wrath has to do with God’s function as a just judge.

The human predicament is that if Christ were not to have come we would all be condemned to death on the day of judgement. Paul

makes it clear that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). We are all under the power of sin (Rom. 3:9).

B. God’s Love for the Sinner

It may at first seem strange that in order to understand the love of God we must see it in the context of the wrath of God. But the relationship of the wrath of God to the love of God will become clear as we consider our text, Rom 5:9. First, I put it in its context, Rom. 5:1-11:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.⁷ Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.⁹ Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.¹⁰ For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we shall be saved by his life.¹¹ But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

Paul introduces the love of God (that is God’s love *for us*) for the first time in Romans in 5:5: “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us”. The remarkable thing about the love of God is that it is completely undeserved: “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6). Christ died for godless people. Romans 5:8 expresses a similar thought: “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us”. And again a similar idea is found in Romans 5:10a: “while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son”. We were God’s enemies. This language is striking. Rarely (if ever) does Paul speak about God being our enemy. The enmity between God and human beings is therefore not a mutual enmity. We are God’s enemy; but God is not

our enemy. In fact quite the reverse: God shows his love for us even whilst we were enemies of God. In line with this Paul speaks in terms of our being reconciled to God (not God being reconciled to us). And this reconciliation occurred through the death of his son. According to this text reconciliation is achieved in the cross of Christ. The cross of Christ does not just make reconciliation possible; the cross of Christ is the completion of the reconciliation (Rom. 5:10a).

I now turn to our specific verse, Romans 5:9: “Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God”. Paul speaks here of being justified. He uses language of the law court. We are guilty and stand in the dock. God the just judge sees no good in us whatsoever and we could be justly condemned. This is the consequence of his wrath. But the miracle of “justification by faith” is that God declares us to be not guilty by creating faith in us. The only basis on which we can be justified is through the blood of Christ, that is through the sacrifice of Christ. If God has performed this remarkable miracle, declaring us to be “not guilty”, then, says Paul, he can certainly save us from the wrath to come. The present verdict of “not guilty” for those who have faith in Christ will correspond to the verdict they receive on the last judgement. This correspondence of these two verdicts, the one we receive now and the one we receive on the day of judgement, is the basis for the Christian’s assurance of salvation.

C. But What about Our Works?

But how is this related to our works? This brings me to the second passage, 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10: “For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him”. These verses have been frequently misunderstood and the problem is that many take Paul’s idea in v10 to be that whether we are alive at the second coming (“awake”) or have passed away before the second coming (“asleep”), we will live with Christ. It is assumed that just as Paul speaks of those who have “fallen asleep” (as in 1 Thes. 4:13), i.e. have died. Paul speaks of the same people in 5:10. But the Greek verbs are not the same. In 4:13 he uses *koimasthai*. This can mean natural sleeping but it can take on the metaphorical sense of “to be dead” and this is clearly how Paul uses it in 4:13. However in 5:10 he uses *katheudein*. This can be used also for natural sleeping but

there is no evidence that this can be used in Greek for “to be dead”. Significantly though it can mean “to be sleepy” in the sense of morally asleep. Further, the verb for “to be awake” in 5:10, *grēgorein*, can mean “be alert” but can never mean “be alive”. Paul is therefore not saying in 5:10 that whether be are alive or dead at the second coming we will be with Christ (even though he believed this was the case as 1 Thess. 4:13-17 makes clear). His point in 5:9-10 is quite different. The meaning of the Greek verbs suggest the following. God has destined us not for wrath (i.e. not for condemnation) but for salvation. This is achieved through Jesus Christ who died for us. The consequence is that whether we are morally awake or morally asleep we may live with him. This is assurance indeed. Our salvation does not depend on ourselves. It depends entirely on God. All of us, if we are honest, know those times when we are “morally asleep”. God wants us to do good works. That is clear in Paul and clear in the teaching of the Reformers. But our salvation does not depend on good works. Even in those times when we are morally asleep we can be assured of our salvation.

D. A Theological Reflection on Faith and Works

Why is it that salvation is through faith and not through works? Or putting it slightly differently, why is salvation dependent on faith but independent of works? One reason is that by being saved through faith in Christ, Jesus Christ is glorified. If salvation were dependent on works it would ultimately depend on us to some extent. By being saved through faith we are saved through grace. For faith itself is the work and gift of God.

But could one not argue that for the Christian good works also are the work and gift of God? For we read in Philippians 2:13 that God “is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure”. It is the case that our existence in this world as God’s saved people has to be “worked out” and that God is at work in us. But works and faith function for Paul in radically different ways. Faith is a creation of the “word of God”. Through faith we are taken out of ourselves and we find ourselves in the reality of the risen Christ. There our life is “hidden in Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). But works are related to our situation in the world where we as Christians have to live out the implications of our salvation.

Conclusion—Christ the Only Saviour

I end with a message which the Church seems to be losing: Christ is the only one who can save us from the wrath to come. And we can only be saved through faith in Christ. Through faith we have union with Christ and through faith we participate in Christ's death and resurrection. Only by dying with him and rising again with him can we be saved from the wrath of God. For if we are in Christ we are a new creation and the old self which deserved to be condemned has passed away (2 Cor. 5:17). This is the message we have to give to our lost world.