

Testamentum Imperium
An International Theological Journal

www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

Volume 1 – 2005-2007

**9 – Salvation from the Wrath to Come in
the Present Epoch**

Dr. Georg Plasger, Professor of Systematic and
Ecumenical Theology, Universität Siegen, Germany¹

Introduction: Theological Inquiries on God's Wrath

A. Theological Viewpoints on the Subject of God's Wrath

Viewpoint 1: God is Love and Not Angry—Albrecht Ritschl

Viewpoint 2: Martin Luther's Dualistic God-concept

Viewpoint 3: Wrath of God as His "Burning Love"—Karl Barth

B. Salvation from Wrath in the Writings of Paul

1. 1 Thessalonians 1:10

2. 1 Thessalonians 5:9

3. Romans 5:9

4. Ephesians 5:6 and Colossians 3:6

C. The Wrath of God and Judgment

Conclusion on the Wrath of God

Introduction: Theological Inquiries on God's Wrath

We find multiple statements in the New Testament that speak explicitly about the wrath of God. Particularly in the writings of Paul the subject of God's wrath is not an unusual topic. Nevertheless, there is an uneasiness in Protestant theology whenever the subject of God's wrath is addressed. Aren't these biblical statements simply anthropomorphisms? Aren't we simply applying human

¹ Author of *Die relative Autorität des Bekenntnisses bei Karl Barth* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2000; 297p), *Die Notwendigkeit der Gerechtigkeit : eine Interpretation zu "Cur Deus homo" von Anselm von Canterbury* (Munster: Aschendorff, 1993; 178p), *Ernstfall Frieden: biblisch-theologische Perspektiven* (with Marco Hofheinz; Wuppertal: Foedus-Verlag, 2002; 224p), *Herausgeforderte Kirche: Anstöße, Wege, Perspektiven* (with Christoph Dahling-Sander and Margit Ernst; Wuppertal: Foedus, 1997; 493p), and *Hoffen und Bezeugen: Karl Barths Religionskritik als Hilfestellung im Gespräch mit den Religionen* (with Christoph Dahling-Sander; Waltrop: H. Spinner, 1997; 50p).

characteristics to God? Another question arises from these: Doesn't such a heated emotional view of God endanger his transcendence? Doesn't the concept of a wrathful God lead us to conclude that his anger is grounded in an emotional expression of irrationality? Or is Paul's view of God dualistic in which there are two sides of God held together in a dynamic tension? Moreover, it is clear that according to Paul a deliverance from God's wrath takes place. Doesn't this imply that God repents or changes his mind and that he did not know from the beginning where history was heading? Doesn't the love of God take priority? If not, in what can the Christian trust? Is the loving will of God clear? These are all questions that can arise from biblical teaching on these matters.

A. Theological Viewpoints on the Subject of God's Wrath

Before we look at specific biblical statements that address the topic of God's wrath and deliverance from it, I would like to briefly describe three differing viewpoints regarding God's wrath. These examples address, in order, the questions raised in the former paragraph.²

Viewpoint 1: God is Love and Not Angry—Albrecht Ritschl

The theologian of liberal theology Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889) severely criticized the notion that God was wrathful. The starting point for Ritschl is the love of God. Therefore, it is only the love of God that is decisive. Thus, "the concept of God's wrath has no religious value for the Christian."³ It is true that in the Old Testament that God could respond wrathfully towards his chosen people, but He was never gracious and wrathful at the same time. Ritschl held that the fluctuation (between wrath and grace) in the Old Testament was superseded in the New Testament where the grace of God clearly stands in the foreground. According to Ritschl all the statements regarding the wrath of God in the New Testament refer to a future wrath during the end-times where the wrath of God refers to the

² For an overview, see Stefan Volkmann's *Der Zorn Gottes. (The Wrath of God) Studien zur Rede vom Zorn Gottes in der evangelischen Theologie* (Marburg, 2004). Volkmann discusses Martin Luther, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl, Werner Elert, and Karl Barth.

³ Albrecht Ritschl, *Die Christliche Lehre von Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung* (The Christian Teaching on Justification and Reconciliation; vol. 2; Bonn, 1889): 154.

destruction of all those who “with a raised hand” sin against God.⁴ Ritschl does not indicate whether the people involved will actually be destroyed or whether all the inhabitants of the earth in the end time will be saved. Wrath remains on the stiff-necked individuals; but whether this takes place at the end of time, is not relevant. Nevertheless, present day Christians can be tested and interpret it as God’s anger; but such a view is not a viable according to Ritschl for God only acts graciously towards his children.

God is love—therefore, for those whose sins have been forgiven, there is no wrath. Thus, according to Ritschl’s the subject of God’s wrath cannot be understood soterologically in the sense that the wrath of God was appeased through the death of Christ. Wrath is merely the flip side of love, the sphere in which love is absent. The wrath of God, according to Ritschl, is a logical consequence (of the absence of love) but not an actual personal intervention by God.

Viewpoint 2: Martin Luther’s Dualistic God-concept

According to Martin Luther, God’s wrath is a reaction against man’s sin. Luther views divine wrath from two perspectives: first, from the perspective of eternity, and second, with regard to justified individuals.⁵ Since Luther believes that not every individual will be saved, the wrath of God will be directed at those who will be eternally condemned. For those who are the elect and justified, God’s eternal wrath is already past. Just how the wrath and love of God belong together here, is not logically conceivable, rather it remains a mystery that will be revealed in the Eschaton (at the end of time).

In the present, Christians can also experience the wrath of God. This happens when God deals with the old man, who must be destroyed, and this results in the building up of the new justified person.

Luther represents a dualistic view of God in which the love of God is indeed dominate over His wrath but His wrath is also clearly seen as one of His valid reactions to the sins of men. Thus, according to Luther the wrath of God belongs to a soteriological context.

⁴ Stefan Volkmann, *Der Zorn Gottes (The Wrath of God)*: 187.

⁵ Luther speaks here from “opus alienum” and “opus proprium”—God’s wrath is subordinated to His love. Compare above, S. Volkmann, *Der Zorn Gottes (The Wrath of God)*, 91ff.

Viewpoint 3: Wrath of God as His “Burning Love”—Karl Barth⁶

In contrast to Ritschl, who actually pushes the theme of God’s wrath aside and accepts it only as a theological construct, and also in contrast to Martin Luther, who understands the wrath of God in its connection to the love of God, Karl Barth (1886-1968) attempts to understand wrath as an attribute (or characteristic) of God which does not stand in tension with His love, but rather is an expression of it. According to Barth, because God’s wrath is an expression of His love, the wrath of God is not directed at His creatures but rather towards the futility or evil which threatens the creation. God’s wrath is expressed for the good of his creatures and can be recognized in the event which took place on the cross at Golgotha; the wrath of God came upon the one who hung on the cross for the good of mankind. According to Barth, it is only when one considers the cross and the crucified Christ that one can speak theologically of the wrath of God. Eschatologically, this judgment which has already taken place on the cross will become revealed to the whole world. For Barth the wrath of God is an essential part of and an implementation of His grace, and therefore, does not call into question His love.

B. Salvation from Wrath in the Writings of Paul

Having previewed the aforementioned viewpoints, we will now consider the passages that Paul has written on the subject. In this regard, it is important to ask whether Paul falls into one of the previously mentioned models or whether he introduces entirely unique ideas regarding the subject. We will not examine the entire corpus of Pauline writings regarding the wrath of God but only those passages which speak of deliverance from the wrath of God.

1. 1 Thessalonians 1:10

In his introduction in 1 Thessalonians Paul focuses his attention on the conduct of the church and with few words describes the current condition of the life of the church in verses 9 and 10 of the first chapter: the church had turned from idols to serve the true and living God.⁷ After referring to their conversion (a statement concerning a

⁶ K. Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (I/2, Zuerich 1942): 205.

⁷ Paul accents here the unique one and only God, not simply an abstract idea of monotheism.

past event) and their service (a statement concerning the present), Paul directs their focus towards the future: the church awaits the Second Coming of the risen Christ, “who rescues us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess 1:10). The time references are striking. From one perspective the church awaits the returning Lord who will come again, and it can be added that he comes to judge the living and the dead, just as it is expressed in the Apostles’ Creed. But the time at which final deliverance will occur can not be determined. The participial phrase is linked more to the person than the time. Jesus Christ is the deliverer and His Second Coming will constitute the deliverance from the future wrath. The grounds for deliverance from wrath is more clearly explained in 1 Thessalonians 5:9.

In addition, the question of who belongs to those who are delivered is not clear from the wording. At least the church in Thessalonica and Paul himself are included because the use of the pronoun “We” links together the writer and his readers. It is not clear whether Paul is using a somewhat exclusive (authorial) “We” or whether the plural pronoun refers to all mankind or rather to the major part of it.

2. 1 Thessalonians 5:9

The Subject in the fifth chapter of 1 Thessalonians is the Day of the Lord—He will come like a thief in the night. Paul exhorts the church to be awake, sober in their faith, to love one another and to wait hopefully for their salvation (these three dimensions were also mentioned in 1 Thess 1:10; conversion, service and waiting). It is expected that the Day of the Lord will bring salvation. This designation for salvation is then thematically explained in verses 9 and 10, “For God has not appointed us to wrath, but rather for attaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him.” Again, the exact specification of “We” can not be determined; in addition there is no *genitivus auctoris* (subject of the genitive) introduced in the designation of wrath in 1 Thessalonians 1:10 nor here in 1 Thessalonians 5:9. God predestined men to obtain salvation not to suffer wrath. The deciding factor here is the personal declaration that Jesus Christ is the originator of salvation in that he died for us (“pro nobis”) so as to make possible “our” life. It is those who are reconciled and exempt from God’s wrath that will live. This

means that those who are not exempt from the wrath of God will not live but are dead. This signifies that the wrath of God implies spiritual death or separation from God. The central reason that Christians will not suffer death is that Jesus “died for us.” The death of Christ brings life to men. Those who deserve death are kept by him who did not deserve death; the one who freely took the wrath of God upon himself. Christians are already reconciled, and already living in fellowship with Him: because God did not appoint them to wrath but rather to live with Jesus Christ, a life (experience) that already exists.

3. Romans 5:9

In Romans 5:1-11, Paul addresses the theme of justification by faith which he designates as reconciliation (c.f. 5:1, 10ff.). Once again the major motif concerns “the one who died.” This *reconciliation* motif provides the central reason for Christ’s death, the event that encompasses and influences all time. Reconciliation, through the death of Christ, occurred “while we were yet sinners” (v8, 10), literally “while we were still enemies”; thus it precedes justification. The divine intervention in Jesus Christ takes effect in the present (“having *now* been justified” v9) and has an outworking into the future, “we shall be kept from the wrath” v9). The reconciliation that has taken place was not effected through the individual’s acceptance of justification but rather is a present reality.⁸ In addition, as is usual with Paul, the intimate connection and entwining of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is recognizable. Even though he only speaks of the death of Jesus Christ in verses 6, 8, 9, and 10a, in verse 10b he makes clear that the life of Jesus Christ contains eschatological

⁸ In the debate over the understanding of reconciliation in 2 Cor 5, Otfried Hofius’ view is to be preferred to that of Cilliers Breytenbach: That “God has reconciled” can not be relativized through the phrase, “be reconciled to God,” rather the latter is a condition of experiencing God’s reconciliation. Literature: O. Hofius, *Versoehnung (Reconciliation)*, in *Theologische Beilage zur Reformierten Kirchenzeitung* 1.89, 2-4; ders., *Erwaegungen zur Gestalt und Herkunft des paulinischen Versoehnungsgedankens (Considerations of the Form and Origin of Paul’s Thoughts on Reconciliation)*, ZThK 77/ 1980, 186-199, also in ders. *Paulusstudien* (Tuebingen 1989): 1-14; ders. *Gott hat unter uns aufgerichtet das Wort von der Versoehnung (God has Committed to us the Word of Reconciliation 2 Cor 5:19)*, in *ZNW* 71 (1980): 3-20, also in ders., *Paulusstudien* (Tuebingen 1989): 15-32; ders., *Suehne und Versoehnung. Zum paulinischen Verstaendnis des Kreuzestodes Jesu (Atonement and Recociliation. Paul’s Understanding of Christ’s Death on the Cross)* in W. Maar (Hg.), *Versuche, das Leiden und Sterben Jesu zu verstehen (Attempts to Understand the Passion and Death of Jesus)*, Muenchen (Zuerich 1983): 25-46, also in O. Hofius, *Paulusstudien* (Tuebingen 1989): 33-49; C. Breytenbach, *Versoehnung. Eine Studie zur paulinischen Soteriologie (Reconciliation. A study on Pauline Soteriology)* (Neukirchen, 1989 [= WMANT 60]).

promises. Christ's death and resurrection belong indivisibly together and build a complex context that gives to men both present reconciliation and future life. Since Christ died a substitutionary death, all those who belong to him will live, being exempt from wrath and exempt from death.

Just as in 1 Thessalonians 5, here in Romans 5 the originator of wrath is not named; but from the context of the letter to the Romans it is clear that God Himself is the One who will execute righteous judgement on the day of the Lord (Rom 2:5). At the end of time "We" will be kept from experiencing God's wrath and be saved through His life (v10). In his use of "We" Paul keeps, as he normally does, a tension between exclusivity and inclusiveness. On the one hand, he does not speak of a total restoration (*apokatastasis panton*) since he refers to the coming wrath. But, on the other hand neither does he represent the view that holds to two differing destinies of history. Finally, Paul does stress the abundance of grace, when he says in Romans 11:32, "God has shut up all in disobedience, so that He may show mercy to all."

4. Ephesians 5:6 and Colossians 3:6

In two letters in which Paul's authorship is debated, there are two similarly worded statements that refer to the wrath of God. After naming individual sins, follows the statement, "For because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience" (Eph 5:6; similarly Col 3:6). Experiencing God's wrath is a consequence of sin. According to Ephesians 5:6, sin manifests itself in immorality, impurity and greed (in Colossians passion and evil desire are included). It appears that the letter to the Ephesians has a dual view of the end of the world because the children of disobedience (Eph 2:2; 5:8) are contrasted with the children of light (5:8); the latter will receive immeasurable riches in the coming ages, and the former, to whom the children of light once belonged, will experience wrath. However, Ephesians 5:6 is part of a *paraenese* (a warning) directed to those who believe—even these are threatened by the wrath of God if they do not live as children of light. Colossians mentions the coming wrath only in a limited way. It is wrath which threatened men as they were still in the condition of being the "old man": i.e., before they were saved. But now, since the Christians are saved, they should also live as saved individuals. Here as in Ephesians the concept of wrath is

linked to a statement of warning and therefore should be understood more as a threat than a description of the last days.⁹

C. The Wrath of God and Judgment

Normally, in the Old Testament, the wrath of God is not purely an emotional event in which God is offended and therefore desires to punish individuals. The basic line of thinking is not a divine reaction to human transgression of a command, though it includes that. Rather it is that God desires to reestablish and erect the fixed order in the relationship between Himself and individuals.¹⁰ In this sense, the concept of wrath is congruent with judgment and righteousness in the Old Testament in that it has to do with the reestablishment of rights and the restoration of the devastated sinner. The intended purpose of wrath is not to destroy men but rather to save them.

Is this basic idea recognizable in Paul when he speaks of individuals being given protection from wrath and when he speaks of salvation from wrath through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

Paul's argumentation develops as follows. The Sinner stands under God's wrath. What form does the wrath of God take? What happens to the person when he experiences God's wrath? The person will not live in God's presence. He will die. He will not be resurrected. Thus, protection from the wrath of God is salvation,

⁹ On this section "4" there was some e-mail dialogue as follows.

An email was sent to Dr. Plasger concerning section (4—Eph 5:6 and Col 3:6). One might get the idea that it countermands his convictions that salvation is irrevocable. Dr. Plasger responds below.

Dear Mr. Mattis, thank you for your request. Indeed one can think that there is a logical difference between the security of the believer and these sentences. But I think that one must make here the difference between "securitas" and "certitudo". Securitas means, that there is no possibility of doubt, no "Anfechtung im Glauben" (here I don't have an exact translation—it means that the faith is called in question by many things and so on). In the reformation time securitas was seen in the practice of the Roman Catholic church: if you pay money to the church you can be sure that the salvation is yours. The other word the Reformer (esp. Luther) used was "certitudo". That means, that one has nothing in his own hands, only the word (and that's a lot). Here alone you can find salvation, here alone you can find the security of faith (in German we use the word "gewissheit" for the term certitudo and the word "Sicherheit" for the term "securitas").

And now it's especially the sense of such phrases in Eph, that also the Christians should not be secure in that sense, that they trust in their own faith. No: It is not the faith that makes the justification, the faith is the channel, through which salvation comes from God and can be noticed. God is the one who is the reconciler—don't be self-sure (selbstsicher in German). And in this sense I understand the words in Ephesians. They are a warning to look not upon oneself but to God. I don't understand them as a description of the last days that I have written.

¹⁰ Siegfried Plath, *Furcht Gottes (Fear of God): Der Begriff jr' im im Alten Testament (the term jr' im in the Old Testament)* (Stuttgart, 1963): 105.

reconciliation, justification, and freedom from death, that has already taken place *before* physical death. In Romans 6:23 Paul states, “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The main argument detected in the verses introduced above regarding the freeing of the sinner from that which threatens him, is the declaration, that Jesus Christ “died for us.” Paul continually emphasizes that His death was substitutionary in nature because it was a death that was actually due us but assumed by Jesus Christ. He died for us and in our place. This implies that He became the object of God wrath. Since He bore the wrath of God, in that He died for us, the reconciled are freed from the consequence of that wrath. Thus, they will not die, but live.

God himself assumes His own wrath and gives to His creation new life. So, Paul formulated fundamental christological ideas that structurally follow or blend into Old Testament concepts. Judgment occurred to our benefit. The wrath of God does not destroy but rather saves. We are saved from death and kept from wrath because Jesus Christ Himself took God’s wrath upon Himself.

Conclusion on the Wrath of God

Therefore, it is only correct to speak about God’s wrath from the perspective of its close connection to the substitutionary death of Christ. It is evident that Paul is not willing to relinquish this connection. When the wrath of God or the judgment of God is viewed as unimportant, then the salvific meaning of Christ’s death is diminished. Then the sin of individuals would remain unpunished and the dramatic result would be that the individual would be left in his sin and bound in his separation from God.¹¹ But, because God rescues the individual from separation from Himself and takes the consequences of sin that were due the sinner upon Himself, the sinner is freed and becomes a new person. God remains faithful to His covenant which is recognizable in the substitutionary death of Jesus and in His vicarious resurrection.

¹¹ Compare my interpretation on Anselm from Canterbury to this thought: Georg Plasger, *Die Notwendigkeit der Gerechtigkeit. Eine Interpretation zu “Cur deus homo” von Anselm von Canterbury (The Necessity of Rigtheousness. A Interpretation to “Cur deus homo” from Anselm from Canterbury)* (Muenster, 1993).

Albrecht Ritschl is the furthest away from this interpretation of Paul's texts. He attempts to separate the wrath of God completely from the death of Christ. Indeed he correctly stresses that God is not the recipient of a sacrifice. But he so strongly separates the wrath of God from His love that in the final analysis God's love degenerates into that which is directed towards those who do not believe. He does not consider that here a soteriological purpose should be assumed. Also with Luther we must consider that he separates grace and righteousness far from one another. According to Luther, God would be righteous if he punished men, but since he is merciful, the sinner receives a future. Therefore, Luther reads into God a dualism that in the final analysis separates God and Jesus. In Jesus, God shows grace; but outside of Jesus, God he is wrathful. Karl Barth's position is very close to Paul's when he interprets the wrath of God as burning love. Only in the Christ-event can we understand what God is really able and ready to do. He remains true to the covenant with his creation.

Therefore, it is only too understandable that Paul does not unfold the subject of God's wrath separate from the topic of God's love. Essentially, the subject appears, particularly in the selected passages, only from the perspective of protection from wrath itself. Christians are reconciled and are protected from wrath. But this protection is based upon the fact that the consequences of sin are carried by God Himself. Jesus Christ who died for us is the nexus where the love-dimension of God's wrath in its deepest sense can be understood.

God is a wrathful God, because of man; His care for His creation does not allow Him to become cold or unconcerned. He puts Himself at risk for us, He goes the way of death, and to give men life he allows Himself to be forced out of the world—in order to give that world a future. God's wrath is an expression of his mercy.