

“Saved from God’s wrath” (Part One)

Reflection 21 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

Now in our series on “Salvation: The Quest,” we come to Romans 5:1-11 and the large concept of “the wrath of God” which many would say is a central part of Christian faith. In fact, if a 100 people on the television game show “Family Feud” were asked to describe the emotions of God when he observes humanity, the answers most often given would likely be “LOVE” and then “ANGER,” and not necessarily in that order. Now this is a great paradox for both are true.

So we come to Romans 5:1-11 and begin trying to unravel this paradox. First we note that this text is part of the sustained flow of Paul’s letter to the Romans. Now the sustained flow of Romans is: that Christian experience is one of “faith from first to last” (1:17); that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (3:23), that is, both Jews and Gentiles sin; that all who believe – whether Jew or Gentile – are justified, counted as right, freely by God’s grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus; that God presented Jesus Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood (3:23-25); so that this is a matter not of law but of grace so that it might be guaranteed (4:16) and so that the guarantee would not depend on me, on my circumstances, my mood swings, my fallible logic, my blind spots, or my self-absorption. Consequently Paul is saying as emphatically and as clearly as it can be said: that we are not under law but under grace (6:14); that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, not in the old way of the written code (7:6); that Christ is the end of law (10:4); and that now nothing can separate us from the love of God (8:31-39).

But wedged into this message – which is truly Gospel – is the issue of God’s wrath, now in our text, specifically Romans 5:9: “Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!” So fundamentally – at the heart of spiritual reality – is the problem primarily an angry God who must somehow be convinced to like us or angry, fearful people who must somehow be convinced to trust God?

Now I have said, “The problem’s us. We are angry, fearful people who must somehow be convinced to trust God.” But perhaps it’s not that simple! Certainly a wrathful God is the picture painted by the historic church, the church across the centuries. And historically it’s easy to follow this dark line of thought. The church of the second and third centuries became fundamentally concerned about, fearful of, ritual pollution. It came to emphasize Leviticus over the Gospels. And then the church turned Latin in its language and in its thinking, and law became its controlling metaphor, its animating spirit. Then in the Middle Ages feudal concepts of wounded honor carried the day. God was depicted as our Liege Lord, our High Lord, whose honor was violated, offended, outraged by our sins. Then too there was just the bloodiness of life for so many centuries – the sudden, spontaneous, nameless violence of everyday life for so long.

So God has often been presented by churchmen as an angry, vengeful, capricious tyrant acting in petty ways no decent, loving, caring person would, a ferocious God forcing us to jump through hoops, always testing our mettle, waiting for us to fail and then pouncing on us like a roaring lion. We are, in words immortalized by Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” And this portrait has done incalculable damage: making trust in God all but impossible for many people; skewering morality toward what is hard, cold, abstract and merciless; and producing in reaction an all-too-easy climate of permissiveness and self-indulgence; that is, it is this portrait of God that opened the door to secularism, that made secularism inevitable.

Yet Scripture itself testifies to the wrath of God. Early on it describes God as “a consuming fire, a jealous God” (Deuteronomy 4:24). It pictures God’s wrath being played out in sickness, famine, pestilence, and national catastrophe. God destroys the earth by flood. Three thousand and more die in the aftermath of the Golden Calf. Nadab and Abihu sin, and Nadab and Abihu die. Achan sins, and Achan dies. Saul by the command of God’s prophet Samuel massacres the Amalekites. Uzzah reaches out and touches the ark, and Uzzah dies. And on and on.

Then we come to Jesus, and what we get is not just Jesus cleansing the temple and his consistent anger at the small-mindedness of the Pharisees, but his stories of householders angered by the excuses of those who do not attend his banquet, of kings angry at their servants, of the door shut on the foolish and unprepared virgins, of those cast into darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, and always Gehenna where the fire never goes out. Jesus again and again draws on Gehenna, the valley just outside the Dung or Sewer Gate of Jerusalem, a dreaded no man’s land, a place of perpetual uncleanness, the city’s garbage dump, littered with corpses of dead animals, filled with maggots, perpetually smoldering day and night. And Jesus says, “Yes, the fate of the wicked is like this.”

And now we come Paul who also, in some contexts, has a strong sense of “the coming wrath” of the living God (1 Thessalonians 1:10), of a time when “the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels” (2 Thessalonians 1:7); who warns that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ to receive what we are due (2 Corinthians 5:10); who can speak of how we can store up wrath against ourselves for “the day of God’s wrath” (Romans 2:5), of “the day when God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ” (Romans 2:16). How could he not think all this in a time as decadent and violent as his? Paul knows, as every moral person does, that one day justice will be done.

However, he also knows something else about the wrath of God. This he develops at length in Romans 1. How does God’s wrath play out? What form does it take? How can it be evidenced? Demonstrated? Seen? Let’s go back to Romans 1:18-32. How does Paul picture God’s wrath there? He writes, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven” (1:18). How? Fire from on high devouring a sinful society? No, God reveals his wrath within history, as God did throughout the entire Hebrew Scriptures, not by intervening, but by just the opposite!

He quits intervening.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week