

A More Likely Interpretation of Romans 10:9-10

The text:

⁸ But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): ⁹ that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. ¹³ For “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” ¹⁴ How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? (Romans 10:8-14)

Have you ever asked yourself what Paul meant by the word “saved” in Romans 10:9? The Greek word translated “saved” is the word from the Greek root *sozo*. The noun form translated salvation is from the Greek word *soteria*. This word could mean many things depending on the context where it is used. For example, in some verses, it means “of sound physical health.” A person is “made well” or healed physically. But usually, the New Testament authors used *soteria* in a spiritual sense. This is what we are thinking about when we sing, “*Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.*”

In this song verse, “saved” is in the past tense suggesting that at some time in our past, we were “saved.” In what sense have we been saved? After all, we are still walking around in bodies that will expire some day. I think most Protestants would say that this saving took place when God first made them spiritually alive, or “born again.” (See John 3:3-8 and Ephesians 2:1-4.) They think back to when they first believed. They can identify with the rest of that song verse, “*I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.*”

If we are going to use the word “saved” to describe what happened to us at some time in our past, we are speaking about concepts like regeneration, faith and justification. All those that God makes alive (regenerates) believe the gospel from their hearts. When this happens, God justifies us. This means that He declares us righteous. In this sense, we can say that God has “saved” us. He has made us spiritually whole.

When most Protestants read Romans 10:9-10, they read into it this idea of salvation. But is this what Paul meant when he used the word “saved” in Romans 10:9?

The point of this article:

I wrote this article to demonstrate that in Romans chapter ten, Paul was not thinking about the salvation that occurs when a person is regenerated by God and first believes. Rather, Paul was talking about the salvation that will take place when Jesus comes back and raises us from the dead. At the judgment, the wrath of God will be poured out on myriads of people who did not believe. But we who believe the gospel from the heart will be saved from the wrath that is coming upon all those who do not believe.

*“Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him **He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation**” (Hebrews 9:28).*

Before going further, let me rewrite the passage with notes in italic font that reflect what I believe to be the correct understanding of what Paul meant:

⁸ But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the word of faith which we preach: ⁹ that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved (*from God’s wrath that will be poured out at the judgment*).¹⁰ For with the heart one believes unto righteousness (*justified by God when the person first believes*), and with the mouth confession is made (*throughout his life after he first believes*) unto salvation. ¹¹ For the Scripture says,

“Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.”¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him.¹³ For “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”¹⁴ How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? (Romans 10:8-14) (*italicized words are mine*)

If you are a Bible student that is serious about knowing the truth, you will at least acknowledge that my interpretation is definitely a valid possibility. In other words, you cannot prove that it is incorrect. What I plan to show now is that not only is my interpretation a valid possibility, it is more likely the correct view.

1. *My interpretation is more consistent with Paul’s theology.*

Most English translations translate the Greek preposition *eis* as “unto” or something that conveys the idea of result. In other words, when a person believes, the result is justification (righteousness). Using this translation as the basis, we can see a cause and effect relationship being expressed by Paul.

Consider the cause and effect relationship in Romans 10:10 according to my view.

Believing results in righteousness (justification).

This of course, is in complete harmony with the rest of scripture. For example, “*Abraham believed God and it was counted unto him as righteousness.*”

Confessing (throughout one’s life) results in salvation (from God’s wrath).

This is in complete harmony with our Lord’s teaching concerning the confessing of our allegiance to Jesus. Namely, unless a person confesses Jesus before men, he will not be saved from the wrath of God when Jesus comes back.

“*For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father’s, and of the holy angels*” (Luke 9:26).

Consider the cause and effect relationship according to the other view:

Believing and then confessing results in righteousness (justified).

In this view, confessing, which is a work, results in being justified (being declared righteous by God when a person first believes). But according to Paul, a man is justified the moment he first believes solely on the basis of him believing.

2. *My interpretation is more consistent with the context of the immediate passage and the rest of the book of Romans.*

Consider Romans 5:9-10:

Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (Romans 5:9-10).

I have presented the idea that in Romans 10:9-10, Paul is speaking about two phases relating to salvation. Romans 5:9-10 (immediately above) is clearly presenting the same two-phase idea. Paul says that justification and reconciliation takes place first. Then, because of Jesus' life, we will be saved from wrath (a future event). The future sense of salvation Paul describes in Romans 5 is in harmony with Paul's words in chapter 13.

“And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed” (Romans 13:11).

If you do a word search on the word *wrath*, you will realize that this is a major theme of the book of Romans. If you study the book of Romans with an open mind, you will notice that in general, when Paul uses the word salvation (*soteria*), he is referring to the salvation that occurs when Jesus comes back. Throughout the book, he talks about the wrath of God that will be poured out when Jesus comes back. The arguments he makes throughout the book pertain to our great need as condemned sinners to be saved from the wrath of God that is coming.

3. *Consideration of sozo (saved) in Romans 10:9-10*

In the Romans 10:9 text, the word saved ($\sigma\omega\theta\acute{\eta}\sigma\eta$) is in the future tense, passive voice.

If we base our interpretation of *sozo* (saved) in Romans 10:9 solely upon the word form that Paul used, either way of interpretation is possible. Either the salvation that occurs at conversion or the future salvation from God's wrath is a possibility because *sozo* (saved) is in the future tense. Therefore, to properly interpret this passage, we must look beyond the form of the word *sozo* (saved) in Romans 10:9 & 10 and consider the immediate and overall context. The word *sozo* (saved) here seems to be better understood as referring to **salvation from God's wrath** (when Jesus comes back).

The interpretation I suggest, (that Paul is referring to the salvation from God's wrath) is in full harmony with Paul's quote from Joel (Romans 10:13) and his deductions supported by that quote.

There can be no question that Joel was referring to the salvation that takes place on judgment day when he said, *“Whoever calls upon the Lord will be saved.”* (See Joel 2:30-32 below [\[1\]](#) and you will agree.)

In my article, [“What Does it Mean to Call Upon the Lord?”](#) I demonstrate that “calling upon the Lord” is not a one time act but involves a way of living in dependence upon God through continual prayer. So, Paul believed that those who “call upon the Lord” as a way of life are the people who will be saved from the wrath of God on judgment day.

Who are the ones who call upon the Lord as a way of life? According to Paul, they are the people who “believe.” *How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? (Romans 10:14).* People must first believe. And all those who do believe call upon the Lord as a way of life from that point on.

Since Paul is clearly talking about **salvation from God's wrath** in verses 13 and 14, why should we assume he is talking about anything different in Romans 10:9 and 10? He seems to be presenting parallel thoughts here. Just as calling upon the Lord accompanies believing, so also confessing Jesus as Lord accompanies believing. Both the calling and the confessing are THE RESULT of regeneration, not vice versa.

Summary

As I see it, Paul seems to be purposely setting forth different events in Romans 10:9 and 10.

First, in verse 9, he says that in order to be saved from the wrath of God, a person must believe the gospel from his heart and that believing must be evidenced by confession that shows allegiance to Jesus. If he believes the gospel from the heart and confesses the Lord Jesus, he will be saved from the wrath of God that will be poured out at the judgment.

He then spells out the sequence in verse 10:

1. When a person believes, he is justified. (This is in full harmony with his teaching in the earlier chapters of Romans.)
2. Because he believes, he confesses with his mouth (in the threat of persecution) his allegiance to Jesus. This confession is evidence that he truly believes. Without such evidence, a person will not be saved from the wrath of God that will be poured out when Jesus comes back. But because a person confesses Jesus (and continues to throughout his life[2]), he will be saved from that wrath.

Why is this important?

In my opinion, many Protestants have a myopic view of salvation as mainly something that took place in their past. Wonderful doctrines like God's sovereign grace and eternal security are viewed through this prism by many. As a result, they have little sense of urgency. They seem content to sit back passively and think "I'm all set."

The Apostle Paul taught about God's sovereign grace and eternal security but he also had a great sense of urgency. Though he considered the Holy Spirit as God's pledge and guarantee[3] to us, he did not view his ultimate salvation from God's wrath as a done deal.

***Philippians 3:8-14** I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; ¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, ¹¹ if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. ¹² Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. ¹³ Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, ¹⁴ I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

Paul taught that if a person is not actively battling against sin and living under Jesus' authority, he should not expect to be saved from God's wrath. (See Romans 8:13.) The lack of these things in a person's life is evidence that they might not actually believe. He taught that we should examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith. (See II Corinthians 13:5.)

If we share Paul's view of salvation, we will be motivated to press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. If we do not share it, we may be leaning toward a passive unbelief that results in eternal destruction.

[1] *"And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth: Blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord. And it shall come to pass That whoever calls on the name of the Lord Shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance, As the Lord has said, Among the remnant whom the Lord calls (Joel 2:30-32)*

[\[2\]](#) *The Greek verb form for “confess” in verse 9 does not imply in itself the idea of confessing until the day you die. I added this idea in my parenthetical note on the basis of many other scriptures that allude to this idea. For example: “He that endures to the end will be saved” (Matthew 10:22).*

[\[3\]](#) *2 Corinthians 5:5 Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. Obviously, Paul understood that the gift of the Holy Spirit is a solid guarantee on God’s part. But Paul evidently thought that **our believing**, as evidenced by a righteous life and enduring faith, might in some way still be in question. He lived in such a way to make sure that in the end, his faith would be proven as real at the judgment.*