

What was Paul Thinking?

(An examination of what Romans teaches about salvation.)

*I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to **salvation** for everyone who **believes**, for the Jew first and also for the Greek (Romans 1:16).*

This is a very familiar verse to most Christians. Have you ever taken the time to ponder what Paul meant by the word **salvation** in this verse. It seems to me that, in general, most Evangelical and Reformed Christians in the U.S.A. think that Paul was talking about the salvation that occurs when a person first believes the gospel. For the first few decades of my Christian life, this is what I thought it meant. The point of this article is to demonstrate that Paul most likely was not talking about this, rather, he was talking about the salvation that occurs when Jesus returns and raises us from the dead.

You might not think this warrants consideration but if Paul was indeed talking about the salvation that occurs when Jesus returns, then there are important implications about how the word **believe** relates to the word **salvation** and these implications impact our understanding of the gospel. When we understand that Paul was talking about the salvation that happens in the future when Jesus returns, Romans 1:16 takes on a richer flavor and impacts how we see the rest of the book. This impacts how we understand the gospel itself. When understood properly, the book of Romans (Paul's gospel) has greater potential to affect how we live.

In the New Testament, the word **salvation** (noun- σωτηρια / soteria) and **save** (verb- σώζω /sozo) are occasionally used to describe something that happened in the believer's past¹ such as regeneration and justification. I aim to show that in his epistle to the Romans, Paul was talking about the salvation ready to be revealed at the last time, not something that happens when a person is born again. (Not something that happened in the past.) I base this on both syntax and context.

In Romans 1:16, the word **believe** (**believes**) here is a participle but retains its present tense aspect.² In the Greek, present tense conveys something that is happening and keeps happening, (as opposed to something that happened in our past at a particular moment). So, those who believe and keep believing will be saved when Jesus comes back. Everyone else will perish. The gospel empowers our believing which has been happening and will continue to happen.

Before moving on, I should probably make the point that the gospel described in Romans is much richer and broader in scope than many Christians understand. In the minds of many people, the gospel is basically God's legal remedy that makes it possible for Him (being absolutely righteous) to justify sinners and reconcile them to Himself. In chapter 5-8, Paul taught that the gospel is also God's remedy to deliver people from the bondage of sin so that lives begin producing the same fruits of righteousness that abounded in Jesus' life. According to Paul, believing begins when a person is born again and that believing does not stop. It is not merely an assent to a set of beliefs. I will say more on this near the end in the section, **Why is this important?**

¹ For example, most modern English versions translate Ephesians 2:8, "By grace you have been saved through faith."

² Present tense Greek participles do not always retain their aspectual force. So, when a present tense participle is examined, there must be good reason to conclude that it does retain its aspectual force. This use of the participle "**believes**" is one of those cases. Often, the New Testament writers would use the aorist tense form of participles when they wanted to indicate no aspect concerning time. Sometimes, there was no aorist option available to the authors so they were forced in some cases to go with the present tense spelling of the participle. But if they had both the present tense participle and an aorist tense option available, and they chose to use the present tense spelling, they were normally trying to indicate that they wanted the present tense aspect to be retained in the participle. The word **believes** in Romans 1:16 is a participle with its present tense spelling. Paul could have used the participle in an aorist spelling but chose not to do so. In addition, the aorist spelling only occurs 10 times in the New Testament while the present tense occurs 43 times and most often in a soteriological context. When the writers chose to use the aorist spelling, they seemed to be mainly pointing out that the people they were talking about were believers (vs. unbelievers). In those contexts, there was no reason to emphasize anything about tense so they chose to use the aorist tense. But in the cases that clearly have some soteriological significance, the present tense was purposely used. (cf. John 1:12; 3:15, 16, 18; 3:36; 6:35, 47,64; 7:38; 11:25; 12:46; Acts 2:44; 10:43; 13:39; Rom 1:16; 3:22; 4:11, 24; 9:33; 19\0:4, 11; I Cor 1:21; 14:22; Gal 3:22; Eph 1:19; I Thess 1:7; 2:10, 13; I Pet 2:6, 7; I John 5:1, 5, 10, 13.) So, since they had the aorist tense option to indicate that they were talking about a believer generically, but chose instead to use the present tense option, it is highly unlikely that the present tense was aspectually flat. The present tense was the best choice because the NT writers considered continual belief a necessary condition for salvation.

The believing that Paul described produces and keeps producing those things mentioned in the Romans 2 passage (below) that are underlined.

But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who "will render to each one according to his deeds": eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness -- indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 2:5-10).

Hopefully, you understand that Paul's understanding of believing is always tied to a life of genuine obedience and love to God. Assuming you agree, I will now go back to my main purpose of demonstrating what Paul normally meant by the word **salvation** in the book of Romans. In the passage below, we see Paul purposely making the distinction between the justification that took place in our past and the salvation from God's wrath that will take place when Jesus comes back.

God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 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. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation (Romans 5:8-11).

Please note that Paul talks about our justification as something that happened at one point in our past. (When we first believed.) He purposely makes a distinction between our past justification and our future salvation. He is clearly talking about two distinct events that take place in two distinct points in time. He taught that we SHALL BE saved from wrath. That wrath will be poured out at the judgment and we SHALL BE saved from that wrath.

Later in the book, Paul again uses the word **salvation** to describe that which will take place when Jesus returns. "*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). Our **salvation** is something that will take place in the future but it is closer now than when we first believed.

In harmony with the Romans 5:8-11 and 13:11 (both above), Paul again makes a distinction in the passage below between the justification that takes place the moment a person believes and the salvation that will happen when Jesus comes back.

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): 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. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For "whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? (Romans 10:8-14)

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

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: 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). 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 starting when he first believes) unto

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

If you are a Bible student that is serious about knowing the truth, you will at least acknowledge that my interpretation of the Romans 10 passage above 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.

My interpretation of the Romans 10 passage 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.

A. 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 (Gen. 15:6)*.

B. 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 other 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.

My interpretation of the Romans 10 passage is more consistent with the context of the rest of the book of Romans.

As I already pointed out earlier, in both Romans 5:8-11 and Romans 13:11, Paul clearly and purposely makes a distinction between the two aspects of salvation. When a person first believes they are justified but salvation is something that takes place in the future when Jesus returns. *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.

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

In the Romans 10:9 text, the word *saved* (σωθήση) 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 below³ 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.

It seems quite clear that Paul purposely sets 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 life⁴), he will be saved from that wrath.

³ *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)*

⁴ The Greek verb form for "confess" in verse 9 does not imply in itself the idea of confessing and continue confession without stopping. (It is not in the present tense indicative mood.) But in the next verse (10), it

Why is this important?

A person's understanding of the gospel will have a direct impact on how he evangelizes and perhaps more importantly, how he lives his life. I have tried to demonstrate that the book of Romans describes believing as something a Christian does continually. Justification results the moment he first believes. But believing, he also produces fruits of righteousness and this production continues and does not stop. Because this believing produces fruits of righteousness, he will be saved when Jesus comes back. Without the fruits of righteousness, a person will not be saved from God's wrath.

Paul's gospel is one that he describes as: "God's power unto salvation" (See Romans 1:16.) I suspect that most Christians find this expression as one that conveys some mystery. Perhaps, this power is a form of God's grace which cannot be seen with the human eye. But what if it also has some inherent power that is a bit easier to understand? I believe that the truth inherent in the gospel produces incentive and motivation to pursue and lay hold of the fruits of righteousness in our lives. Without this truth, we will not be able to have sufficient motivation to pursue fruits of righteousness effectively. Romans chapters five through eight explain how this works.

Religious people try to achieve righteous living by ordering their way of living in accordance with God's laws. They believe that God's laws provide motivation to live godly because in their minds, if they follow God's laws, they might gain acceptance from God. But in Romans 5 through 8, Paul says that this is impossible because the flesh wants nothing to do with submitting to God's laws and it is not able to do so. *The mind set on the flesh is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be (Romans 8:7).* In chapter seven, Paul teaches that looking to the law for power actually does the opposite because... *When we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death (Romans 7:5).* He also said, *But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter (Romans 7:6).*

How can all this work? According to Paul, we had to be released from this entire way of relating to God in which we attempt to gain His approval by keeping His laws. *My brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another -- to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God (Romans 7:4).* For this to happen, all condemnation for our sins first had to be completely removed. *There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:1).* Because there is now no condemnation and wrath of God hanging over our head, the Spirit of life in Christ has set us free from the law of sin and death. We know that Jesus paid our ransom and that we have been adopted by God as His beloved children. We no longer have to concern ourselves with God's condemnation because of our sins. Jesus paid it all! We have every reason to live expecting to dwell with Him forever when He returns. We are now incentivized and motivated to please Him, not in order to gain heaven, but because we love Him and enjoy pleasing Him. And we know He loves us!⁵

What the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:3-4). The gospel therefore includes this reality that actual righteous fruits will be produced in the life of the believer and they will continue to be produced because believing is ongoing and never stops. Because fruits of actual righteousness are produced and will continue being produced in our life, we will be saved when Jesus comes back. Without the fruits of actual righteousness, a person will not be saved from God's

is in the present tense, indicative mood which clearly warrants my interpretation of confession as something a believer does and continues doing without stopping

⁵ Without the reality of "no condemnation," we would always be wondering if we will perform sufficiently well to gain God's acceptance. All the wind would go out of our motivation sails.

wrath when Jesus comes back. *Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20).* For a more detailed examination of this aspect of the gospel, I suggest my book, [The Abundant Life](#).

It must be noted that no believer takes the credit for all of this because even his righteous works are those that have been “wrought in God.” (See John 3:21.) In eternity, we will receive crowns but we will cast them at Jesus’ feet because He and He alone is worthy to receive the honor and glory. Without Him, we could do nothing. But it is important to see that Paul’s gospel includes more than just deliverance from the penalty of sin which is hell. It includes deliverance from slavery to sin and the production of actual righteousness by the power of His Spirit. This deliverance is facilitated by the gospel realities working in us.

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 guarantee⁶ to us, he did not assume his ultimate salvation from God’s wrath as a done deal.

Consider the following passage which is in harmony with these things.

I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ 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; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. 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. 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, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:8-14).

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.)

*I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to **salvation** for everyone who **believes**, for the Jew first and also for the Greek (Romans 1:16).* Hopefully, now you can see the ramifications of seeing salvation in this verse as something that takes place when Jesus returns. If you see these things, you will realize that your believing and continued believing not only makes way for justification, but also the production of actual righteousness that is necessary to lay hold of salvation which awaits all who believe (and keep on believing).

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.

⁶ *Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee” (II Corinthians 5:5).* 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.

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Note: Paul does use the verb save once in the aorist tense in Romans 8:24 (signifying something that happened in our past). But in this immediate context, including verse 25, he ties it to our hope. And his point is that because we hope (fully expect), we eagerly wait for it. We wait for that which we cannot see...the salvation that will come when Jesus returns.

Thomas Bear, 9/3/2018

Οὐαὶ μοί ἐστιν ἂν μὴ εὐαγγελίζωμαι (Προς Κορινθίους Α 9:16)