

Notes for

An Apocalyptic Reading of Paul's letter to the Romans
and a Discussion on Two Groundbreaking Theological
Implications

By Matthew J. Distefano for "The Happy Heretics"

I'm not a Pauline scholar. I don't claim to be. But among those who are, there is a big disagreement with how to approach his letters. And because the lay-Christian world tends to lag behind the scholars by about 100 years, the church has barely noticed. Hopefully that will begin to change with essays like this.

That being said, I am just going to get to the heart of it and say that I affirm what is called the apocalyptic perspective on Paul. This will be a vastly different approach to Paul than many are used to, especially when it comes to the book of Romans, as most readers take the view that everything Paul writes in this letter is Paul's theology. In other words, if it says it in Romans, Paul believed it. But that is not at all what I think is going on in this letter.

Now, this is not going to be some talk that attempts to *argue* through the details of the case I am trying to make. If I'm being honest, I am not sure what someone like me is going to add to the discourse, that folks like Professor Douglas Campbell haven't already said in such tomes as *The Deliverance of God*. What I am going to attempt to do, rather, is simply put forth a reading of Romans as I see it, so that you, the everyday Christian like me, can wrestle with the same things scholars are wrestling with.

What my main goal will be is to show how this apocalyptic reading of Paul brings to light two groundbreaking theological implications, namely, that 1) justification in the Pauline sense has been, broadly speaking, viewed incorrectly and 2) that for Paul, the "wrath of God" is not how we tend to think of it. But remember, this will be a very brief survey, a "bird's eye look" if you will.

So, before we get into this specifically, let's look at how most Christians view this business of justification. Campbell labels what most believe simply as "Justification Theory." Although there will be differences in the details of this, such as between Calvinists and Arminians (or should I call them semi-Pelagianists?) we need not be too concerned here. For most, here is how the story of salvation goes:

Everyone starts in a pre-Christian phase. In this phase, the person realizes their inability to, on their own, achieve salvation. There is an understanding that they cannot be morally perfect, that they are "sinners," so to speak. There is also an understanding of God as a God of retributive justice. Both of these realizations are manifested to all people: for the Jew through obedience to the law of Torah and for the Gentile through obedience of "natural law." Now, in order to be saved, one must enter into the second phase, or, the "Christian phase." To enter into this phase, one must have faith in Jesus, who died as a substitutionary sacrifice to propitiate either God's offense (Anselm) or wrath (Calvin). Thus, upon faith in Christ, the Christian is imputed with righteousness and he is thus justified.

Now, there are major problems with this theory, as Campbell points out in the first part of his groundbreaking book. They have led to all sorts of major issues within the church. Allow me to summarize the ones I have personally found to be most problematic (he lists plenty of others, and also describes in detail why they create such huge problems):

1. For a phase 1 person (pre-Christian) to realize they stand condemned, they would have to come to that conclusion on their own, by gathering certain information from the universe they live in. In other words, prior to “becoming a Christian,” they would have to know they are condemned before a retributive God because of their stubborn, immoral behavior. But how can they know this without first meeting God in Jesus? What evidence is there in the universe—sans the writings of other humans—for this?
2. The second problem is that if all in phase 1 stand condemned and that this condemnation can be gathered by “natural law,” or by what is in the heart, why the need for the Torah? Why do Jews and Gentiles have a different set of criteria?
3. Why does God need to be a God of retribution? How can this knowledge be gleaned from the universe?
4. This is the big one for me. The soteriology of Romans 1–4 (where Justification Theory comes from) is vastly different than Romans 5–8. According to Justification Theory, salvation is all about looking inward to discover yourself condemned and then entering into an economy of exchange with a retributive God. But the model of soteriology Paul describes in Romans 5–8 has none of this. It is apocalyptic or, as Richard Beck puts it: “God decisively breaks into history through the revelation of Jesus Christ who rescues us from ‘Sin and Death,’ the ontological condition of being ‘in Adam.’” (Beck, Richard. “Notes on The Deliverance of God: Part 3, The Systematic Problems of Justification Theory,” para. 4)

So, all of that being said, I want to now get into my understanding of Paul’s letter to the Romans, with our goal being that we will have a fresh understanding of Paul, justification, and the “wrath of God.”

First, what we must understand is that Paul is going to be writing against a certain type of teacher who was either on his way to Rome or had already arrived. He does this in his Corinthian letters as well as his letter to the churches of Galatia (which he himself founded). The false teaching he will be speaking out against is a Jewish-Christian gospel being taught from the Jerusalem Church. In short, it is a teaching that includes various aspects of the law of Torah, namely, keeping a kosher table (Galatians 2:11–12), Sabbath-keeping, and circumcision (Acts 11:2–3, 15:1–2, and Galatians 6:12–13). That is why, in 2 Corinthians 11:10–15, he warns that “false apostles” will “disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness.” But their view of righteousness will be based on holiness codes, on markers like whether the tips of their penises are snipped. That really pisses Paul off and that is why, in Galatians 5:13, he rhetorically exclaims that he wishes they would castrate themselves. And then, later, in 6:12–13, he lays it all out by saying: “It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you

to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may [and please understand this] *boast about your flesh*” (my emphasis). Paul’s view, in contrast, is that “none may boast before God” (1 Corinthians 2:29).

So, when we get to the letter to the Romans, we must keep all of this in mind. That is the stage that is set and so, is the stage for Romans 1–4. What Paul is going to do is lay out his Gospel (in brief) and then the gospel of the false teacher. (Paul’s Gospel will be fully written out then in Romans 5–8. We can discuss that another night.) After both gospels are presented, he is going to put forth a mock debate between himself and the false teacher. His goal will be to use the false teacher’s argument against himself, thus proving just how false it really is. This is known as a Socratic technique, the Greek word being *prosopopoeia*.

So, let’s read through Romans 1–4 in this way, then we can discuss what is going on here. I will add just a few notes at the end as a guideline.

Paul's Greeting

1 ¹ Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ² which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, ³ the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴ and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵ through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, ⁶ including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, ⁷ To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. ⁹ For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, ¹⁰ asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. ¹¹ For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you-- ¹² or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³ I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles.

Paul's Introduction of Theme

¹⁴ I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish ¹⁵ -- hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome. ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ The deliverance of God is revealed through the gospel by means of

faithfulness for faithfulness; as it is written, "The Righteous One, by means of faithfulness, will live."

The Opposing Teacher's Introduction of Theme

¹⁸"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; ²¹ for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools; ²³ and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. ²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷ and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. ²⁹ They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice.

Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness,

they are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful,

inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents,

³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

³² They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die -- yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them."

Paul's First Rebuttal: The Teacher's 'Wrath of God' Seen Instead as the Human Wrath of Judging

2 ¹ Therefore you have no excuse, Every Person, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. ² You say, 'we know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with

truth.'³ How do you think about it when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself: that you will escape the judgment of God?⁴ Or do you disregard the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience -- unaware that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?⁵ So by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

The Opposing Teacher's Restatement of the Standard View of God's Judgment

⁶ ...Who will repay according to each one's deeds: ⁷ to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸ while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹ There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰ but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹ For God does not respect mere appearance. ¹² All who have sinned lawlessly will also perish lawlessly, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³ For it is not the hearers of the law who will be righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified.

Paul's Next Rebuttal: Gentiles Who Live by the Law Vs. Jews Who Don't

¹⁴ But when Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves; ⁽⁵⁾ ¹⁵ they show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them ¹⁶ on the day when God will judge the secret thoughts of all, according to *my* gospel, *through Jesus Christ*.

¹⁷ But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God ¹⁸ and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, ¹⁹ and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰ a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, ²¹ you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? ²⁴ For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

²⁵ Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. ²⁶ So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷ Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law. ²⁸ For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. ²⁹ Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart -- it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

First Dialogue of Paul and the Teacher -- Paul as Questioner

3 Paul: ¹ Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?

Teacher: ² Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.

Paul: ³ What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?

Teacher: ⁴ By no means! Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true, as it is written, "So that you may be justified in your words, and prevail in your judging."

Paul: ⁵ But if our injustice serves to confirm the justice of God, what should we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.)

Teacher: ⁶ By no means! For then how could God judge the world?

Paul: ⁷ But if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? ⁸And why not say (as some people slander us by saying that we say), "Let us do evil so that good may come"?

Teacher: Their condemnation is deserved!

Paul Marshals Scripture Citations Before Climaxing His Argument

Paul: ⁹ What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, ¹⁰ as it is written:

"There is no one who is righteous, not even one;

¹¹there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God.

¹²All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one."

¹³"Their throats are opened graves;
they use their tongues to deceive."

"The venom of vipers is under their lips."

¹⁴"Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."

¹⁵"Their feet are swift to shed blood;

¹⁶ruin and misery are in their paths,

¹⁷and the way of peace they have not known."

¹⁸"There is no fear of God before their eyes."

The Core of Paul's Argument Against the Teacher: Universal Sinfulness Prompted Not Wrathful Judgment Under the Law but God's Unilaterally Saving Act in Jesus Christ

¹⁹Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰For "no human being will be justified in his sight" by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. ²¹But now, apart from law, the saving act of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²²the saving act of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who trust. For there is no distinction, ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God intended to be a singular act of atonement effective through that faithfulness in his blood. He did this to show his justice, because in his divine forbearance he granted amnesty for sins previously committed; ²⁶it was to prove at the present time that God's justice is itself just in the very act of declaring everyone just from the faithfulness of Jesus.

Second Dialogue of Paul and Teacher -- Teacher as Questioner

Teacher: ²⁷ Then what becomes of boasting?

Paul: It is excluded.

Teacher: By what teaching? By that of works?

Paul: No, but by the teaching of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that a person is delivered by faithfulness apart from works of law.

Teacher: ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only?

Paul: Is he not the God of Gentiles also?

Teacher: Yes, of Gentiles also.

Paul: ³⁰ If God is one -- the God who will deliver the circumcised through fidelity -- then he will deliver the uncircumcised through that same fidelity.

Teacher: ³¹ Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?

Paul: By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

4 *Teacher:* ¹ What then are we to say was found out in relation to Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about.

Paul: But not before God. ³ For what does the scripture say? "Abraham trusted in God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

Discussion Notes: Justification and Wrath

Romans 1:18–32

This draws heavily from anti-Gentile Wisdom of Solomon literature (chapters 13–14 most specifically).

Notice that one of the anti-homosexual “clobber passages” are contained in the false teacher’s gospel.

Here is what I notice about this business of the “wrath of God” contained all throughout this letter (from an article entitled “The Wrath (of God?)”)

What is interesting is the way in which Paul specifically speaks of “God’s wrath” throughout this letter. In every instance after Romans 1:18, he simply uses the word *orge*, or “the wrath,” rather than *orge theou*, or “the wrath of God” (see 2:5; 4:15; 5:9; 9:22; 12:19; 13:4–5). In other words, the “wrath of God” is only found in the gospel of the false teacher. In contrast, when Paul, during his initial rebuttal in Romans 2:5, talks about wrath, he ties it to human behavior. This subtle change is key. Romans 2:5 reads: “But by *your* hard and impenitent heart *you* are storing up wrath for *yourself* on the day of wrath, when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed (my emphasis).”

Nuechterlein explains what is going on here:

“Wrath is simply ‘wrath’ here, and no longer the ‘wrath of God,’ because it can instead be seen to be the wrath we store up for ourselves, due to our idolatry of righteous violence. On the ‘day of wrath,’ namely, the time when our human wrath comes to roost, God’s righteous judgment will be revealed, precisely as something different than our wrath. It will be revealed as a love that reaches out in grace as a free gift in faith (Romans 3:21–26) even to sinners, to God’s enemies (Romans 5:8–10).” (Nuechterlein, “My Core Convictions: Nonviolence and the Christian Faith,” part 2)

Now, there is one other instance—namely Romans 3:5—where “wrath” seems specifically attached to God. But even then, Paul qualifies this by saying he is “speaking in human terms.” What is interesting, then, is that when Paul *does* speak, not in human terms, but rather, in divine terms, he ties it directly to mercy, not wrath. Romans 11:32–33 read: “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How *unsearchable* are his judgments and how *inscrutable* his ways!” For Paul, the ways in which God works is so dissimilar to that of humanity, that he deems them unsearchable by human standards. The human mind, which talks in terms of wrath, cannot fathom the God who is wholly merciful.

Romans 3:21–22

There is the ongoing debate about whether the phrase *pistis Christou* should read “faith in Christ” or “faith of Christ.” With regards to salvation and justification, how we translate this could have huge implications. Without getting into all of the details, I believe what Paul intends here (as well as in Galatians 2:16) is that *pistis Christou* should be rendered the “faith of Christ.” It is Christ’s faithfulness that reveals the righteousness of God (Romans 1:17), not our faith in Christ. After all, “the one who is righteous will live by faith.” And there is but one who is righteous. We trust that and when we do, we know we are rectified (which is really a better translation than justified). So in that way, we must trust Christ in order to experience rectification. But we aren’t rectified by our trust in and of itself, as those who hold to the traditional “Justification Theory” believe.

For a detailed study on this, see comment #28 from J. Louis Martyn’s *Galatians*.