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RESCUED BY THE RISEN JESUS

1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

By

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Special Easter Message

Rescued by the Risen Jesus
1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

The recent dramatic rescue of our soldiers who had been taken captive in Iraq brought great joy and relief to all Americans. It's tragic when people are held captive by an evil enemy that finds pleasure in torturing and destroying them. Our joy overflows when the captives are set free.

The Bible declares that "the whole world lies in the power of" a wicked tyrant called "the evil one" (1 John 5:19). He is a murderer by nature (John 8:44), intent on destroying those whom he holds captive (John 10:10; 2 Tim. 2:26). Jesus Christ, "the Son of God, appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). He does that by rescuing people from Satan's domain of darkness and transferring them to His kingdom, where they have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:13-14). God uses us, His people, as His commandos, to go into enemy territory with the powerful weapon of the gospel to liberate those who are being held captive by the evil enemy.

The apostle Paul made one such commando raid into the city of Thessalonica. He came under enemy attack, but was able to rescue some. His daring mission set the city into an uproar. They accused him and his co-workers as being men who had turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6). He was forced to leave town after just a few weeks, leaving these newly liberated people to face the angry opposition of those who were content with the evil regime.

A short time later, he wrote them a letter, which we know as 1 Thessalonians. He begins by thanking God for what He had done in the hearts of these people and by commending them for the example of their transformed lives, which was being spoken of everywhere in that region. Before Paul could say a word, people would tell him how the Thessalonians had "turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:9-10). We learn that...

The risen Jesus rescues from the coming wrath
all who believe in Him and turn to God.

These verses contain three vital lessons:

1. There is certainly a wrath to come.

I will admit that the idea of God's wrath and judgment is not popular in our day, even among evangelical Christians. We would rather tell people that God loves them and has a wonderful plan for their lives. We downplay the notion that God is angry with them because of their sin and that they face horrible eternal punishment in hell if they die without being reconciled to God. If we were honest, most of us would admit that the notion of God's wrath and eternal punishment is a bit embarrassing. So we dodge it and promote the gospel as a great way to have a happier life.

But in so doing, we misconstrue the biblical gospel and we water down the biblical picture of salvation as God's rescuing us from certain destruction. It becomes more like starting a new diet or exercise program, guaranteed to make you feel better right away. But our text shows that...

- A. The certainty of God's wrath to come rests on the very character of God.

Paul declares that God is "the living and true God," and that Jesus "rescues us from the wrath to come." He further describes this coming wrath in 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9, where he says that "the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, ..."

During His earthly ministry, Jesus Christ spoke more about the awfulness of God's judgment than any other person in the Bible. He described it as a place of outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 25:30). He calls it a place "where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48). He said that it would be better to cut off one's hand or foot, or even to die by having a millstone hung around one's neck and being cast into the sea, than to go into hell (Mark 9:42-

45). We may not like these words, but if we deny or dodge them, we are not following Jesus, who repeatedly taught this awful truth.

Of course, God's wrath is not like human wrath. Human wrath is usually an outburst against something or someone that frustrates us. Occasionally, human wrath may be "righteous indignation," but even then it is tinged with our fallible propensity toward selfishness and misunderstanding. God's wrath is His holy, settled, active opposition toward all evil, in line with His absolute knowledge of all motives and circumstances. If we do away with the concept of God's wrath, we also then do away with His holiness and justice.

If someone broke into your house and raped and murdered your wife or daughter, and the judge said, "You shouldn't have done that; try not to do it again," we would rightly be outraged. That judge would be neither righteous nor just. In the same way, if God who is infinitely holy does not judge all sin with infinite punishment, He is neither righteous nor just. Most of us can agree mentally with this concept, and it even gives us a sense of relief to know that the evil terrorists of the world will meet with God's perfect justice.

But at this point, many err by thinking that they will escape God's judgment because they are not like these terrible murderers. They think, "I'm a decent, church-going American. I pay my taxes and obey the law. I don't beat my wife and children. Sure, I've got my faults and I'm not perfect, but I'm *not* an *evil* person. I don't need to fear God's judgment."

But our text indicates that there are only two kinds of people: those who have been rescued by Jesus from God's wrath to come; and, those who have not. And, ...

- B. All who have not been rescued by the risen Jesus are in imminent danger of the wrath to come.

By nature, we all tend to look at our own works or at what we consider to be our good intentions, and we think that we're good enough for heaven. But the Bible is clear that no one gets into heaven by his own efforts, good works, or good intentions. Our problem is that we compare ourselves to the wrong standard. If we compare ourselves to other people, we may come out on the right

side of the curve. But God's standard is His absolute holiness, beginning on the thought level. As Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, if you've ever been angry with someone, you are guilty of murder in God's sight. If you've ever lusted after a woman, you are guilty of adultery (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28). Both sins make you "guilty enough to go into the fiery hell" (Matt. 5:22, 29-30).

Let's assume that you are an unusually good person. You've only chalked up, on the average, one sin of thought, word, or deed per month since the time you were five years old. If you sassed your mother once that month, the rest of the month you had nothing but sweet, loving thoughts toward her. If you selfishly demanded your way, you only did it once that month, and did not at any other time think in a selfish manner.

At this record-breaking rate of righteous living, you will have chalked up 840 sins by the time you are 75. Can you imagine going into any court of law and pleading, "Judge, I admit that I've broken the law 840 times, but I'm far better than most people, so you should let me off"! How much less does anyone, even the best of us, stand a chance of acquittal based on our good deeds when we stand before the holy God whose standard is perfection?

The Bible declares that we are all by nature children of wrath because of our sins (Eph. 2:1-3). It warns that the wrath of God abides on all who do not obey the Son of God (John 3:36). Jesus did not come to earth and die on the cross just to help you live a bit more comfortable and happy life. He came to *rescue* you from the wrath to come! If He has not rescued you, then you are in imminent danger of that wrath! It is imperative that you understand how you can be rescued while there is still time.

2. To be rescued by Jesus from the coming wrath, we must hear the gospel, believe it, and turn to God from our idols.
 - A. To be rescued by Jesus from the coming wrath, we must hear the gospel.

Paul mentions the kind of reception [literally, "entrance"] that he had with the Thessalonians (1:9). We read about it in Acts 17:2-4, where it says that Paul went into the synagogue there on three successive Sabbaths and reasoned with them from the Scriptures, "explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and

rise again from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.'" Some believed that message, but the majority opposed it and formed a mob to set the city against Paul.

The gospel (or "good news") that Paul proclaimed may be summarized as follows: All of us have sinned against the holy God, thus incurring His wrath. God could justly condemn us all to hell. But being a God of great love and mercy, He sent His own eternal Son Jesus into this world to bear the penalty that we rightly deserve. He had to suffer death, which is the penalty that God imposed for our sin (Rom. 6:23). God accepted Jesus' sacrifice, as evidenced by the fact that He raised Him from the dead. God's justice was satisfied, in that Jesus paid in full the penalty for our sins. He can now be both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). You cannot be saved apart from hearing and understanding that message.

B. To be rescued by Jesus from the coming wrath, we must believe the gospel.

Hearing the gospel must be accompanied by faith (Gal. 3:5). The Thessalonians had "received the word" (1:6) with "faith toward God" (1:8). Paul says (2:13), "we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe."

Contrary to popular opinion, biblical faith is not a blind leap in the dark. It does not mean setting your brain on the shelf and believing a bunch of old Jewish legends. Rather, biblical faith is based on the testimony of eyewitnesses to Jesus' life, teaching, death, bodily resurrection and ascension into heaven. Granted, we cannot "prove" these truths in the same sense that we can prove that $2+2=4$, and so there is the need for faith. But it is not an unreasonable or blind faith, in that the evidence is trustworthy. We believe the testimony of men all the time, but the testimony of God concerning His Son is greater (1 John 5:9).

When Paul first preached in Thessalonica, he pointed to the evidence of the Scriptures concerning Christ's death and resurrection (Acts 17:2-3). No doubt he took them to Psalm 22, which describes in detail a death by crucifixion centuries before that mode

of execution was known on earth. He also took them to Isaiah 53, which predicts with great detail the suffering and death of God's Messiah, "when He will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities" (Isa. 53:11). Both of those texts also imply the resurrection of the crucified Messiah, when God "will allot Him a portion with the great, and He will divide the booty with the strong; because He poured out Himself to death and was numbered with the transgressors" (Isa. 53:12). Paul probably also pointed to Psalm 16:10, which predicted that God would not "allow [His] Holy One to undergo decay" (see Acts 13:34-35).

Beyond the evidence of Scripture, there was the further evidence of all of the eyewitnesses who saw Jesus after the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:5-6). There is also the evidence of the dramatically changed lives of the witnesses, including the apostle Paul. He was militantly against the Christian message until the day that he saw the risen Jesus on the Damascus Road.

Believing this message is not just assenting to the facts as presented in Scripture and by the eyewitnesses. Biblical faith involves an active commitment in which we renounce all trust in our own good works to save us from God's judgment and a total entrusting of ourselves to Jesus as the only Savior from God's wrath. Genuine saving faith is inseparable from repentance, which means turning to God from our sins.

C. To be rescued by Jesus from the coming wrath, we must turn to God from our idols.

Before, these people had hoped that their idols would placate God's wrath. But once they heard the gospel, they threw away their idols, turned to God alone and trusted in Jesus' death on the cross to rescue them from their sins. The word "turned" occurs often in the Book of Acts to describe the proper response to the gospel. Paul described God's commission to him as opening the Gentiles' eyes "so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins ..." (Acts 26:18). He sums up his preaching as telling people "that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance" (Acts 26:20; see also Acts 9:35; 11:21; 14:15; 15:19).

Maybe you are thinking, "This is all very interesting, but I am not an idolater. I don't bow down or pray to any statues. So this doesn't apply to me."

But the only choices are, you either serve God or you serve idols. An idol may be a literal statue. Even here in Flagstaff, we have a store that specializes in selling idols! But an idol is anything that usurps the rightful place of the living and true God in your life. At the root of all idolatry is the god of self. Many people leave this god on the throne and try to "use" Jesus to get what self wants, such as happiness, health, wealth, love, or many other things. But to leave self enthroned and to use Jesus as an Aladdin's genie is not to turn to God from our idols. The Thessalonians did not just add Jesus to their existing pantheon of idols. They trashed their idols and turned to the living and true God alone.

For Jesus to rescue you from God's wrath to come, you must agree with God's judgment, that you have sinned against Him and that you deserve His wrath. You must understand and believe that God's Son Jesus came to earth and paid the penalty on the cross that you rightfully deserved. Genuine faith is not just agreeing mentally with these facts, but also turning from all of your false gods to the only true God. If you have done that, your life will be demonstrably different. Everyone could see the dramatic change in the Thessalonians. Paul mentions two things that stood out after they turned to God from their idols:

3. Those who have been rescued by Jesus submit their lives to God and wait expectantly for Jesus' return.

The word translated "serve" comes from a word meaning to serve as a bondsman. A bondsman was not free to do whatever he pleased. If the bondsman wanted to go to the beach, he couldn't tell his master, "I'm taking the day off. See you tomorrow!" He belonged to his master and lived to do his master's will.

In our case, our Master gave His life to rescue us from certain doom. Thus we do not serve Him out of bare duty or obligation, but out of gratitude and love. And, thankfully, He is a loving and gracious Master, who has our best interests at heart. Serving Him is not drudgery, but a delight.

Also, we eagerly long for His return from heaven, when He will crush all of His enemies and set up His righteous kingdom on earth. Just as a young bride whose husband has gone off to the war longs for his safe return, so we who have been rescued from God's judgment by Jesus long to see His face. As Paul later tells the Thesalonians (1 Thess. 4:16-18),

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Those whom Jesus has rescued from the wrath to come submit to Him as Master and eagerly look forward to the day of His coming. Those whom He has not rescued live for themselves and don't give much thought to the day of His coming, which for them will be a day of wrath and judgment, unless they repent.

Conclusion

Picture a bunch of people on a luxury cruise ship, sailing in calm Caribbean seas. They're lounging on deck, eating great food, and having an enjoyable time. Along comes a man selling sun visors. "Would you folks like to buy a sun visor? It will make your cruise much more enjoyable. They don't cost very much." So lots of folks try out the sun visors.

But lets suppose that before the cruise began, terrorists had planted a powerful time bomb on board that will blow the ship to shreds. You had just learned that it was certain that the bomb would go off and that everyone who didn't escape while there was still time would be hopelessly doomed. Would you be on deck selling sun visors to make the trip more comfortable, or would you be warning the people to get into the lifeboats as quickly as possible before they were blown to bits?

God is not a terrorist, of course! But He is a holy God who must judge all sin. He has given due warning that He is going to judge this cruise ship called "The World." But He has not left us without a means of escape. His Son Jesus is not a sun visor to

make your cruise more comfortable. He is the lifeboat! But you must abandon ship to get into the lifeboat while there is still time.

The point of getting into the lifeboat is not that it will make you happier and more comfortable than you are on board the ship. You may look over the side and yell, "Ahoy, down there! Do you serve gourmet meals on the lifeboat?" "No, we have C-rations on board. But please jump off that ship before it's too late!" "Do you have queen size beds on the life raft?" "No, we are somewhat crowded and uncomfortable here, but if you will get on the raft, you will be saved. If you stay in your stateroom on board, you will perish." "I really enjoy the shuffleboard here on the ship. Do you offer shuffleboard on your life raft?" "No, but your ship is doomed. Flee to this raft while you can!"

Believing in Jesus doesn't mean sitting on deck in your lounge chair, sipping a cool drink, and thinking, "I'm sure glad that I've got this Jesus visor to make my trip more comfortable!" No, believing in Jesus means that you take seriously His warnings about the coming judgment on this wicked world, so that you jump ship and trust totally in Jesus as your life raft.

Like the Thessalonians, today you have heard that God has pronounced wrath to come on this world. You have heard that He sent His Son Jesus to die for your sins and that God raised Jesus from the dead. He is coming again, either as your Savior or your Judge. Believing that message, you abandon ship and place your eternal destiny totally upon the risen Jesus. If you will do that, Jesus will rescue you from the wrath to come!

Discussion Questions

1. Are we presenting the true gospel if we say that Jesus is the way to a happier life, without mentioning sin and judgment?
2. Theologian Clark Pinnock complains, "Everlasting torment is intolerable from a moral point of view because it makes God into a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for victims whom he does not even allow to die." How would you refute him?
3. Since even the most sincere believers struggle against idolatry, how can we know when our faith is genuine?

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