

GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS AS THE THEME OF ROMANS: GOD'S CHARACTER AND
PAUL'S NARRATIVE THEOLOGY

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*Unless otherwise stated, all Biblical quotations will be from the New International Version (NIV)

Introduction

There is little question that Paul's letter to the church in Rome has been his most widely influential writing throughout church history. Paul's longest letter, Romans, is packed with rich theology, containing countless launchpads for debates and conversations to spring from for everyone from the average reader to the studied academic. Discussions around the interpretation of Romans have been integral in the underlying history of Christian thought. One such dialogue has centered around Paul's use of a certain phrase, "the righteousness of God." Located first in Romans 1:16-17, often thought of as Paul's thesis statement of the letter, Paul uses the phrase and different versions of it throughout the entirety of the letter, often at critical junctures. Through the many centuries of Christian history, interpretations of "the righteousness of God" have varied in their meanings and emphases. In the Middle Ages, two primary views of the phrase were debated: the "classical view" which attributed the righteousness to God's very nature, and another view which focused on God's salvific activity in human history. Martin Luther, the great reformer of the 16th century, shifted the emphasis of God's righteousness as a "divine gift" that an individual receives "by faith."¹ This very brief overview shows just how important the meaning of "the righteousness of God" is for how one reads the Bible and applies it to their life, particularly for Paul's letter to the Roman church.

In Romans 3:21, Paul writes that the righteousness of God revealed by the gospel (Romans 1:17) has been testified to by "the Law and the Prophets" (i.e., the Hebrew Scriptures). To Paul, God's righteousness is not a new theme, but a familiar one that has been expressed in a new and ultimate way in the person and work of Jesus. While systematic theologizing, Christian sub-grouping and the debates therein lend themselves to views on God's righteousness which are

¹ Richard N. Longenecker, *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 296-298.

unnecessarily narrow and simple, a quick survey of the theme of Romans in connection to the Hebrew Bible shows it is much broader, a theme so grand that it can really only fit within the greatness of God's own character and work. The righteousness of God is God acting in accordance with His very character as a God of covenant faithfulness, justice and salvation. Through this enactment and revelation of God's righteousness, His creation, humanity and the world, might also be made righteous, free to act in accordance with their created order. In this, we see the extent to which Paul viewed the gospel he preached within the grand narrative of Scripture and the world.

The Righteousness of God as His Covenant Faithfulness

Much of the more recent thinking around the righteousness of God, as being directly and even primarily connected to God's covenant faithfulness, has come from scholarship within what has been termed the New Perspective on Paul. While a comprehensive overview of the New Perspective far exceeds the bounds of this paper, it might suffice to note that a major focus within this perspective has been considering Paul's writings and theology as orbiting around the inclusion of Gentiles into the covenant people of God.² Throughout Romans, Paul consistently works with the concept of Jew and Gentile in relationship to the gospel. For example, Paul begins and ends his letter mentioning his desire that the Gentiles might come "to the obedience that comes from faith" (Romans 1:5; 16:26), and mentions salvation as coming "first to the Jew, then to the Gentile" in his thesis statement of Romans 1:16-17.

One way by which many have come to understand "the righteousness of God" in a covenantal manner is through the meanings which Paul has loaded into the word "righteousness"

² Michael F. Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies on Paul, Justification and the New Perspective* (Bletchley: Paternoster, 2006), 29.

(Greek, *dikaiosynē*). With an understanding of “righteousness” as being primarily related to social relationships rather than an ethical norm (working with the Hebrew *צדקה*), James Dunn applies God’s righteousness (as in 1:16-17) to His relationship to His people, Israel. Dunn writes, “God is ‘righteous’ when he fulfills the obligations he took upon himself to be Israel’s God, that is, to rescue Israel and punish Israel’s enemies – ‘righteousness’ as ‘covenant faithfulness’”.³ In terms of how this covenant faithfulness is revealed through the gospel of Jesus, more complicated translation and interpretation is needed. N.T. Wright, who likewise views covenant faithfulness as the most central element of God’s righteousness,⁴ dissects a Greek phrase in Romans 3 to help complete this puzzle. In Romans 3:22, after Paul has announced that God’s righteousness has been revealed despite the universality of human unrighteousness (Romans 1:18-3:20, more on this below), many modern translations have him saying that this righteousness is given through “faith in Jesus Christ” to all who believe. However, Wright and others have argued that “faith in Christ” could be better translated as the “faithfulness of Christ”;⁵ using this translation of Romans 3:22, Paul’s logic in relation to God’s righteousness as covenant faithfulness in Romans is as follows: “(a) The covenant God promises to rescue and bless the world through Israel, (b) Israel as it stands is faithless to this commission, (c) the covenant God, however, is faithful, and will provide a faithful Israelite, the ‘faithful Israelite’, the Messiah.”⁶ That God will remain faithful to his covenant with Israel while also accepting the Gentiles is likely no more clearly stated than in Romans 11:11, where Paul responds

³ James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Dallas, TX: Words Books, 1988), 41.

⁴ N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 796.

⁵ N.T. Wright, *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978-2013* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 99. Michael Gorman has also advocated for this translation: Michael Gorman, *Romans: A Theological and Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022), E-book Section: “3:21-31 God’s Faithfulness, Mercy, and Justice in Christ”; “The Faith of Jesus Christ/Jesus the Messiah”.

⁶ N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 839.

emphatically in the negative upon his self-posed question as to whether the Jews have stumbled beyond recovery.

God's redeeming covenant faithfulness as a central element of his character and action is, arguably, the driving force behind all the Hebrew Bible and Israel's history. One area which Paul might have in view is the Psalms, where psalmists often call for God to remember His covenant and remain faithful. An example of this is Psalm 98:1-3. Douglas Harink has argued that this short psalm could be imagined as a commentary on Romans, with its focus on the revelation of God's righteousness/justice.⁷ In Psalm 98:1-3, the psalmist calls for praise unto the Lord because He "has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations" by remembering "his love and his faithfulness to Israel." According to Paul in Romans 3:25, this faithfulness to Israel has been showcased to the ultimate extent through the death of Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement.⁸

The Righteousness of God as His Justice and Salvation

After providing his thesis in Romans 1:16-17, Paul spills a considerable amount of ink for the purpose of lining up humanity's unrighteousness, Gentile and Jew, against God's righteousness. Romans 1 recounts the tragic story of human hearts turning away from God and

⁷ Douglas Harink, *Resurrecting Justice: Reading Romans for the Life of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 28.

⁸ That God might Himself have to die to be faithful to His covenant goes all the way back to Genesis 15, a chapter which Paul discusses at length in Romans 4 (it could be argued that this concept goes back earlier as well, including Gen. 3:15). While Paul's focus regarding Genesis 15 is on Abraham's faith being credited to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6), it is just after this that God creates a traditional Ancient Near Eastern covenant with Abraham. In the ceremony depicted, Abraham is instructed by God to bring Him a series of animals, which Abraham proceeds to cut in half and arrange in two parallel lines. In this sort of ancient covenant ceremony, the parties would walk through the pieces of the animals, agreeing to the same fate as these animals should they not uphold their side of the covenant agreement (compare a similar ritual in Jeremiah 34:17-20). However, in Genesis 15, God alone (represented by a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch) passes through the bloody carcasses, taking upon Himself the full and unconditional responsibility for the covenant he has made with Abraham. James Chukwuma Okoye, *Genesis 12-50: A Narrative-Theological Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 76.

towards created things, even despite a knowledge of God's "righteous" decree (Romans 1:32). In the next chapter, Paul shows that even the Jews, who have the law, have not upheld God's standard, proving that "no one is righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10, quoting Psalm 14:3). In this state, Paul argues that God's judgment against sin is "righteous" (Romans 2:5). With human unrighteousness proving God's righteousness (Romans 3:4), A. Katherine Grieb views Romans 1:18-3:20 as a story outlining God's righteousness in the form of wrath against sin.⁹ All this changes, however, at the end of chapter 3. In 3:21-26, Paul offers another aspect of the righteousness of God, that it is demonstrated through Christ's death, which has brought redemption for those enslaved by sin.

These two aspects of God's character and righteousness, justice shown in part through judgment against sin and the redemption of his people, can seem to be in opposition to one another. This tension might also be felt in Exodus, when God speaks His name and reveals His character to Moses on Mt. Sinai. In Exodus 34:6-7, God reveals Himself to be "compassionate", "gracious", "slow to anger", "abounding in love and faithfulness", and "forgiving [of] wickedness, rebellion and sin"; yet, He immediately follows these elements of His nature by assuring Moses that "he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation." This seems to set up a dilemma: how can God be so loving and slow to anger toward His people, yet also just in His judgment against their blatant wickedness? For Paul, this apparent puzzle of the depiction of God's character and action in the Hebrew Bible finds its perfect solution in Jesus. According to Michael Gorman, Christ's death "demonstrates that God's righteousness (justice) means neither ultimately ignoring sins (see 3:25) nor allowing Sin permanently to disturb the relationship

⁹ A. Katherine Grieb, *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God's Righteousness* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 25-35.

between humanity and God.”¹⁰ Clearly, God’s righteousness in both His judgment of sin and His salvation are intimately connected. N.T. Wright also points out that through Romans 1:18-3:8, Paul sets up what seem to be two mutually exclusive realities within God’s righteousness, the Jewish perception of divine forbearance (Romans 2:4) as well as the Hebrew Scripture’s image of the righteous judge who must impartially judge evil; Romans 3:24-26 show, however, that “in Christ the apparently impossible has been achieved.”¹¹ In Christ, God’s righteousness in both His divine justice and His covenant-faithful redemptive work are made known to an unrighteous and desperate world.

The Result of God’s Righteousness on His Creation

In his important contribution to an understanding of “the righteousness of God” in 1969, Ernst Käsemann proposed that the phrase “is for Paul God’s sovereignty over the world revealing itself eschatologically in Jesus” and that “it is the rightful power with which God makes his cause to triumph in the world which has fallen away from him and which yet, as creation, is his inviolable possession.” For Käsemann, this salvific work of God through Jesus is enacted unto the whole world, including the individual person.¹² The righteousness of God is not only the enactment of His most central characteristics, but also allows God’s creation to act in accordance with what are its most central characteristics through the freedom available in Jesus Christ. This is the truth which Paul outlines through Romans 5-8.

Romans 5 is a central image in how Paul connects what Jesus has accomplished all the way back to the fall of Adam. Through Jesus, not only is the punishment of Adam reversed, but,

¹⁰ Michael Gorman, *Romans: A Theological and Pastoral Commentary*, E-book Section: “3:21-31 God’s Faithfulness, Mercy, and Justice in Christ”.

¹¹ N.T. Wright, *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978-2013*, 100.

¹² Ernst Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today* (London, UK: SCM Press Ltd., 1969), 180-181.

as Craig Keener notes, “a new basis for humanity” has been formed in which people are empowered to live righteously.¹³ In 5:17, Paul refers to righteousness as a “free gift,” which brings to mind Luther’s reformation understanding of God’s righteousness as a “divine gift” given to humans; more than simply a declaration of righteousness, however, this gift from God transforms for the sake of embodied human obedience. In his commentary on Romans, Michael Gorman discusses this doctrine of justification, concluding that the debate between justification as a declaration of righteousness (imputation) as opposed to an impartation of righteousness is a false dichotomy. He writes, “In justification, *dikaiosynē* (righteousness/justice) is restored to humans who have been characterized by *adikia* (unrighteousness/injustice).”¹⁴ This is where Romans 8 comes into the logic of Paul’s argument; it is the Holy Spirit’s empowering of humans that accomplishes this outworking of God’s justification. Because the righteous requirement of the law has been met in humans through God’s sending of his Son (8:4), the Spirit might dwell within them (8:9), bringing freedom from the law of sin and death (8:2), bringing life (8:10-11), bringing humans into adoption as children of God (8:15-17), aiding in weakness (8:26), and allowing humanity to be glorified in him (8:17, 30). As Gorman puts it, “The story that unfolds within Romans, therefore, is an implicit invitation both to join in and to help spread the ultimate divine project: the fulfillment of God’s promise to allow Israel and the nations to share in the justice/righteousness and glory of God—and to live out those divine attributes in the real world in anticipation of full and final salvation to come.”¹⁵

¹³ Craig S. Keener, *Romans* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 77.

¹⁴ Michael Gorman, *Romans: A Theological and Pastoral Commentary*, E-book Section: “3:21-31 God’s Faithfulness, Mercy, and Justice in Christ”.

¹⁵ Michael Gorman, *Romans: A Theological and Pastoral Commentary*, E-book Section: “Introducing Romans”; “The Story Within the Letter”; “The Story as a Whole”.

Understanding the unfolding story of Romans as the letter's substructure is a crucial element to understanding the result of the righteousness of God revealed in Jesus. The story which Paul has in view, that of the Hebrew Bible, involves God's creation of man in his image, mandated to rule the world alongside God. Unfortunately, however, because Adam turned from God, man has been unable to live out this image-bearing creation mandate with God. Nevertheless, it is likely no coincidence that Paul uses the language of "reigning" as directly connected to God's gift of righteousness to man through Jesus¹⁶; man has been enabled to live once again as he was originally intended to live. Not only this, but Paul puts this redemption narrative into cosmic proportions as well. Indeed, humanity has been set free, but creation itself also awaits the day when it will be completely "set free from its bondage to corruption" upon the completion of God's redemptive arc (Romans 8:21).

Conclusion

God's righteousness through his covenant faithfulness, justice and salvation is all over the Hebrew Scriptures with which Paul would have been so familiar. Several examples have been given, but, in essence, these characteristics of God are the very narrative of the Bible. Time and time again, God acts in justice and/or saving redemption to move the story of his covenant people along. In every case, the seeming tension of his character, expressed so well in Exodus 34:6-7, is present; he is slow to anger and forgiving, yet cannot leave the guilty unpunished. And, ultimately, because of God's inability to stray from his very character, his greatest enactment of righteousness comes in the form of Jesus, who Paul views as fulfilling every aspect of God's righteous character through his death on the cross. Jesus is the climax of the story – a story

¹⁶ Craig S. Keener, *Romans*, 76.

which has constantly had in view the restoration of God's creation. This is the outworking of Paul's narrative and apocalyptic theology, grounded in Christ's resurrection as the beginning of God's transformation of creation from decay to redemption.¹⁷ Paul views his gospel, and God's righteousness, as part of a macro-narrative of God triumphing over the competing forces of the world. Clearly, the righteousness of God which is the enacting force behind this gospel narrative is incredibly grand – a grandness which only the very character of God can uphold and sustain. Understanding Paul's view of "the righteousness of God" is like a window into Paul's broader narrative theology; together, these substructures can act as a key to unlocking much of Paul's thinking in his great letter to the church in Rome. In doing so, one might be awakened afresh to the vastness of God's righteous character and work revealed in Jesus Christ.

¹⁷ J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia, PN: Fortress Press, 1980), 149.

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