

THEISM

The Righteousness of God

When we talk about a person being righteous we generally mean that a person is upright in the sense of conforming to an established standard of righteousness, such as being truthful, just, honest, chaste, obedient, pure in thought and conduct, etc. However, the biblical meaning of righteousness includes more than is conveyed by our English usage of the word. The biblical concept is rooted in covenant relationships within human communities or of covenants between God and people. In biblical usage, one is righteous when one fulfills the terms of a covenant, whether between God and humanity or of individuals between themselves. People may be said to be righteous when faithfully fulfilling social covenants related to family (Genesis 38), friendship (1 Samuel 25), nation (Proverbs 14:34), servants and foreigners (Job 31), etc.

Likewise, the righteousness of God is to be understood not in the sense of an attribute of deity but in the sense of God's activity in fulfilling agreements he has made with people. God made covenants with Noah (Genesis 6:18; 8:21), Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:5, 13-16; 17:1-13; 22:16-18), Isaac (Genesis 17:21; Exodus 2:24; Leviticus 26:42), Jacob (Genesis 31:3-13; 32:24-30; 35:1-2; 9-10; 46:2), David (2 Samuel 7:8-16; 2 Chronicles 7:18; 21:7), and others. He made a covenant with the nation of Israel to bless them when they obeyed his covenant and to curse them when they disobeyed the covenant (Deuteronomy 28:1-29). When Israel was unfaithful, God punished them with war, famine, and pestilence (Deuteronomy 32:24; 1 Kings 8:37; 2 Chronicles 20:9; Jeremiah 14:12; 21:6-7, 9; 24:10; 27:8, 13; 28:8; 29:17-18; 32:24, 36; Ezekiel 5:12, 17; 6:11-12; 12:16; 14:21; 33:27). When God judged and punished his people for their disobedience one of the responses of people was to acknowledge, at least on several occasions, that God is righteous (2 Chronicles 12:6; Psalm 7:9; Jeremiah 9:24; Daniel 9:14). By bringing judgments against those who are unfaithful, God is being righteous in fulfilling his covenant with them. God's righteousness is therefore to be understood in terms of his judging those who are in covenant relationship with him (Psalm 96:10, 13). But as God in his righteousness condemns the unfaithful, so also God in his righteousness blesses and saves the faithful. The upright may be assured that God will faithfully protect and preserve the obedient (Psalm 71). When God as judge enforces his covenants, by either rewarding or condemning in accordance with whether or not people are faithful to his covenants, God is being righteous.

The righteousness of God may be better understood through some observations about God's covenants with people. First, God is the one who initiates covenants. No one is empowered to require God to establish a covenant, or to call God into account, as Job came to realize. Second, all God's covenants, with whomever he has made them, have required faithfulness, i.e., trust, confidence, manifested through obedience. No one has the ability to be justified before God by one's own righteousness or by works of law, as demonstrated by Jewish failure to keep the Law of Moses. Third, God is the sovereign ruler who by his own holy character sets the standards for right and wrong in his covenants. No one can set standards for God. The creation cannot determine standards for the Creator. Fourth, God judges people according to whether or not they have complied with his covenants. No one can bring God into judgment; that's like pottery making demands of the potter (Romans 9:20-21). Fifth, God and his judgments (whether to reward or condemn) are righteous (Psalm 7:9; 19:9; Proverbs 21:12), whereas everyone sins and comes short of the glory of God (Romans 3:10, 23). Sixth, God has inaugurated a universal new covenant through the blood of Christ (Matthew 26:28; 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-47).

The righteousness of God may be best understood by recognizing that the gospel, i.e., the new covenant reveals God's righteousness. Paul wrote, "For 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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith'" (Romans 1:16-17). Paul quoted Habakkuk (2:4) to prove that the gospel reveals God's righteousness in his new covenant with humanity whereby people may be justified, i.e., acquitted from sin, by faith. In the sight of God, justification comes only through the gospel. No one can be justified by the law (Galatians 3:11). While Israel had a zeal for God in striving to keep the law, "they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Romans 10:2-4). Although the law and the prophets gave witness to the righteousness of God, God's righteousness is revealed "through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe" (Romans 3:21-22). The phrase "the righteousness of God" is therefore not about the quality of God's character, but about the activity of God through the gospel by which righteousness is imputed to an individual, i.e., given right standing in God's presence.

The gospel continues God's covenant with Abraham that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3; Galatians 3:6-9, 14, 16). More specifically, the gospel is accomplished through Christ. "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as of many, but as of one, 'And to your seed,' who is Christ" (Galatians 3:16). The gospel is the means by which God acts in righteousness through Christ, to whom people respond in faith. On the basis of faith in Christ, people are counted as righteous, i.e., justified. God set forth Christ, "as a propitiation by his blood, through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time his righteousness, that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:25-26). God acted by making Christ, "who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Paul said he wanted to be found in Christ, "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" (Philippians 3:9).

The righteousness of God in justifying the faithful does not annul God's wrath against those who become unfaithful. The "just shall live by faith, but if anyone draws back, my soul has no pleasure in him" (Hebrews 10:38). Moreover, the righteousness of God must be understood against the backdrop of God's wrath upon the wicked on the day of judgment. After stating that "the just shall live by faith" Paul wrote, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men . . ." (Romans 1:18). Then after describing wickedness subject to God's wrath, Paul wrote, "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. For there is no partiality with God" (Romans 2:5-11). Through Christ, God in his righteousness not only saves the obedient believer, he also condemns – punishes, destroys – the unbeliever.