

This understanding of Paul's meaning also provides insight into his pivotal phrase, *the righteousness of God*.

- a. Among early churchmen a common view was that Paul was referring to righteousness simply as a *divine attribute*. Thus his point was that in the gospel God shows Himself to be a righteous God. However, there is an immediate problem with adopting this as Paul's singular meaning, and that is that the phrase, *righteousness of God*, is intimately linked with human faith, and so cannot be assigned merely to a particular attribute of God. Even in instances in Romans where Paul clearly has God's righteous character in mind, it is always contextually inseparable from the issue of the gospel of salvation through faith (cf. 2:1-16, 3:1-6, 21-26).
- b. Some, like Luther, have held that Paul was referring to the *status* of righteousness that becomes the property of men through the gospel. In other words, it represents a forensic (legal) reality; it is the judicial, righteous standing of the believer resulting from God's own righteousness being reckoned to him and appropriated through faith. *It is the righteousness that defines the character of God, is given by God to men, and is therefore received by Him with full approbation on their behalf.*
- c. Others have understood this phrase more in terms of a *divine activity*. A popular conception of this view today is that Paul had in mind the way in which the gospel reveals God's faithfulness to His covenant in His dealings with His people. In other words, God's righteousness speaks of His integrity in keeping His promises and honoring His covenantal vows. In the Old Testament God's covenantal righteousness is expressed primarily in terms of His *temporal deliverance and preservation* of His people, but also in terms of their *eschatological salvation* (cf. Isaiah 46:12-13, 51:1-8, 59:1-21; Jeremiah 23:5-6, 33:14-16; Micah 7-7-9; etc.) If this was indeed Paul's perspective, then by the phrase, *righteousness of God*, he meant God's delivering (saving) activity on behalf of His own.

What is important to note is that these views do not mutually exclude one another, nor do they encompass every conceivable nuance of interpretation. All are legitimate in the sense that they rightly understand some aspect of divine righteousness, whether in its essential nature or its operation. What is more, each of these meanings is supportable by Paul's varied use of the concept of divine righteousness in relation to salvation, both in the present epistle (cf. 3:1-6, 21-26, 5:17, 9:30-10:6, etc.), and throughout his other letters.

Though commentators and scholars often gravitate toward one particular arena of meaning, it is contextually suitable and arguably most appropriate to understand Paul's present use of the phrase, *righteousness of God*, in terms of **theological**, **soteriological**, and **anthropological** categories. The following observations demonstrate this to be so:

- Paul's insistence that in the gospel the righteousness *of God* is revealed clearly implicates the character of God. It is God's own righteousness that is the issue at hand. And consistent with His innate, impeccable righteousness, God is a righteous judge who will not - indeed cannot - leave the guilty unpunished (Nahum 1:1-3).
- However, God's righteousness is also associated positively with His *faithfulness*. As righteousness implies integrity, so God is always faithful to keep His word, whether articulated in promises, curses, or covenant structures. In Him "*there is no variation or shifting shadow.*" God's righteousness is manifested negatively by His wrath in satisfying the demands of His justice against every expression of sin and transgression. Yet the way in which God has done so - bearing the punishment for sin *Himself* in the person of His Son - exalts the positive aspect of His righteousness by fulfilling His promise to men of deliverance, forgiveness, and covenant sonship. Thus Paul later affirms to the Romans that God is both "*just and the One who justifies*" (ref. 3:21-26).
- But because this salvation brings with it *restored communion*, it also presupposes human righteousness in conformity to God's righteous character. It is not enough for God to merely satisfy His own justice against human sin; those so justified must be made to share the divine righteousness as a permanent endowment. In other words, for men to enjoy perpetual, unqualified communion with God they must be conformed to His nature and character in their own persons; they must be holy as He is holy.

As the gospel pertains to man's reconciliation with God - and that reconciliation and the resultant covenant communion presuppose human righteousness - so the gospel's power in effecting reconciliation and reestablishing communion lies in its mediation of God's own righteousness in such a way that it becomes the property of man.

At the same time, the above three categories of righteousness are not localized in the New Testament gospel. In the Old Testament God's righteousness is equally associated with His intrinsic character (Psalm 7:9, 11:4-7, 129:4, 145:17), His saving (delivering) activity, both in motive and operation (Psalm 5:8, 31:1-5, 35:19-24, 71:1-24; Isaiah 45:14-25), and the status and blessing enjoyed by those who commune with Him (Psalm 35:27-28; Isaiah 46:12-13, 61:10-62:3).

And so, throughout the Scripture the concept of divine righteousness is seen to have theological, soteriological, and anthropological implications. Furthermore, as all are woven into Paul's thought and teaching in the Roman epistle, including them in his present use of the phrase, *the righteousness of God*, is not at all unjustified. In fact, narrowing his meaning in such a way as to exclude any of these aspects arguably results in missing the richness of his declaration.

4. Paul's insistence is clear: the reason that the gospel is the power of God for salvation is that its core message concerns God's righteousness. Specifically, the gospel's power lies in its promise that God's own righteousness becomes the permanent endowment of men through belief in the One who secured the promise; the gospel is the power of God for salvation *to everyone who believes* (1:16). Paul's gospel was the good news of a righteousness appropriated *by faith*, even as in it the righteousness of God is revealed "*from faith to faith*" (1:17a). This phrase, too, has been subject to various interpretations.
 - a. The first question to be addressed is whether it should be viewed as modifying the noun *righteousness* or the verb *is revealed*. In other words, did Paul mean to say that the righteousness of God is from faith to faith, or that His righteousness is revealed from faith to faith?
 - 1) In the case of the former, Paul's exact meaning is somewhat obscure. For it is obvious that God's righteousness as such has no connection with human faith; it is intrinsic to His nature and entirely independent from anything in man. Therefore, Paul must have been linking faith with God's righteousness in the sense that divine righteousness, as it becomes the property of man, is inseparable from faith; *a righteous man is a man of faith*.
 - 2) The latter view associates faith with the way in which the gospel reveals God's righteousness to men. It was seen that the verb *revealed* as used here is eschatological, meaning that it speaks of *fulfillment* and not simply disclosure. Just as the prophets promised Yahweh's coming redemption, so they promised that the proclamation of His accomplished redemption would fill the earth and bring all men under its embrace. Thus the gospel is both the *message* of fulfillment and itself a *point* of fulfillment.

But the "mechanism" of this worldwide ingathering is *belief of the truth*; men enter into God's redemption by way of faith. And so, while faith is not directly relevant to the gospel as the objective revelation of God's fulfillment of His promise, it is implicated in the gospel's *personal* revelation. That is, if this second view is correct, then Paul was indicating that the gospel as the message of fulfillment is revealed, made compelling to men's souls, and appropriated by them through the instrumentality of faith.
 - b. Another consideration is the phrase itself. In the most literal sense, "from faith to faith" expresses the idea of something that both *originates* and *terminates* with faith. Accordingly, some have argued that Paul was speaking of faith as it was originally directed toward Old Testament prophetic revelation ("from faith"), but now rests upon the full, New Testament revelation that is in the gospel ("to faith").

More commonly the phrase has been viewed as indicating a faith that advances from embryonic immaturity to the full flower of mature perfection. Still others have referred the prepositional phrase “from faith” to God’s faithfulness, and the phrase “to faith” to human faith. In other words, the righteousness of God as revealed in the gospel has its source in God’s own faithfulness and finds its terminus in the faith of men.

But most probably Paul was simply using an expression emphasizing the *singularity* of faith in the matter of man’s righteousness. In this way the phrase “from faith to faith” is equivalent to the expression, “of faith from first to last.” This being so, Paul’s point was that a man’s relation with God - which depends upon meeting the demands of personal righteousness - is attained, exercised, and perfected solely through the vehicle of faith.

- c. This conclusion is further supported by the explanatory quotation Paul cites from Habakkuk: “...as it is written, ‘*But the righteous man shall live by faith.*’” This excerpt is taken from Habakkuk 2:4, and is referenced again by Paul in his Galatian epistle (3:10-12). As well, it is cited by the author to the Hebrews (10:35-39), making it an important Old Testament reference point in the New Testament’s doctrine of faith.

In context this affirmation addresses Habakkuk’s own obligation to trust God and His faithfulness as he awaited the impending, horrendous desolation to come at the hands of the Babylonian forces.

- As Habakkuk complained to God of His apparent lack of concern and even injustice in overlooking the sins of Judah, God’s reply was that Habakkuk’s perception was flawed: He was on the verge of responding to their unrighteousness in a way that would prove unbelievable to His prophet (1:1-5). For He was going to bring against them the Chaldeans - a nation of indomitable power and terrifying fierceness that would destroy unfaithful, disobedient Judah (1:5-11).
- Habakkuk’s response to this revelation was that the nation of Judah did indeed deserve to be punished, but how could God punish them with a nation more guilty than themselves? How could He look with favor on those who deal treacherously (1:12-17)?
- To this question God replied that Babylon, like Judah, would not escape His wrath. Its pride and unrighteousness would also be punished (2:4-20), but in the meantime Habakkuk was to live by faith, trusting in the Lord’s goodness, integrity, and faithfulness (2:4). Yahweh’s promise of retribution would be fulfilled against the Chaldeans, but not before He had used them to bring death, destruction, and desolation to His covenant-breaking people.

Most importantly, the destruction of Babylon would be accompanied by God's fulfillment of His promise to restore Judah from her captivity and bring her back to Canaan. But restoration presupposed desolation, and Judah's utter desolation was looming on the horizon. Nonetheless, Habakkuk was obligated to live in confident trust in his faithful God. Such faith is the mark of the righteous man, even as it was with the patriarch Abraham (Genesis 15:1-6). So it is that Habakkuk's prophecy ends with his own testimony that, as required by God, he would live out his life in faith in spite of what was to come. Habakkuk's faith is expressed by His prayer of hope (3:1-2), his psalm of praise (3:3-15), and his proclamation of unwavering confidence in His ever-faithful God (3:16-19).

This is the context of Paul's citation, and the question has often been raised as to whether he took the passage out of context. For on its face the prophecy concerns temporal, physical issues pertaining to theocratic Israel, whereas Paul's concern was spiritual and salvific. Even more, Habakkuk addresses how a man is to live in the face of calamity and temporal uncertainty, while Paul was speaking of how a man is made right with God. But when it is considered that Paul was focused upon the crucial relationship between *righteousness* and *faith*, his reference to Habakkuk is perfectly appropriate. The prophet was to understand that God is not unjust or complacent; He is fully aware of all unrighteousness and will bring it into judgment without showing partiality. Covenant Judah and pagan Babylon were alike guilty before Him and would be punished severely. *But in sharp contrast to this backdrop of universal unrighteousness and impending judgment stands the proclamation that if a man would be righteous, he must be a man of faith.* Habakkuk exemplifies that man, and thus the spotlight shines brightly upon him.

From this perspective it is easy to see how Paul could correlate God's declaration to Habakkuk with the message of the gospel. The universal unrighteousness of men has rendered the entire race at enmity with God and subject to His righteous condemnation. Yet at the same time He has promised to deliver His people and establish them in His own righteousness. These parallel themes occur together constantly in the Old Testament, and the relationship between them must not be missed: *God's deliverance of His people comes through the destruction of His enemies, for His enemies are also theirs.* This truth was reiterated and demonstrated over and over again throughout Israel's history, eventually coming to its pinnacle articulation in the concept of the Day of the Lord.

So also it is expressed in the gospel. The great enemy of God and the oppressor and destroyer of His people is not ultimately Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon; it is *sin*. This is the enemy to be conquered, and it is through its conquest that God's covenant sons are delivered and established. Yahweh is the conqueror, but men must trust in His conquest and enter into it through faith. It was true of Israel's theocratic life from the time of their bondage in Egypt; how much more is it true of those enslaved to their own natures? The righteousness of God is the glory of the gospel, and it is faith's great reward.