

Thus, the Old Testament is substantially the record of, and God's commentary on, the Jews' perpetual unbelief and the consequences it has incurred throughout their generations. *By contrast, it is equally the record of God's abiding faithfulness, both to Himself and to His promises.* And as the oracles of the Old Testament contrast God faithfulness and Israel's unbelief, they further declare that the faithlessness of the covenant people does not at all frustrate or nullify the faithfulness of their covenant God (cf. Deuteronomy 7:1-10, 32:1-43; Nehemiah 9:1-33; Psalm 78, 89, 92, 96; Lamentations 3:1-26; Hosea 2:1-23, 3:1-5, 6:1-11, 11:1-12; etc.).

- 3) This biblical witness is the basis of Paul's resolute assertion in verse 3:4, which assertion is foundational to his entire perspective on the gospel and its relationship to the world of men. Whatever men may do - Jew or Gentile, and however they may respond to His word of promise, God remains faithful to Himself and His promise and will not fail to fulfill it according to His purpose (cf. 9:1-11:36). This is the sense in which *God is true*, though every man should be found to be a liar (cf. Psalm 116:11).

In support of his contention Paul again drew upon the Old Testament Scripture, and his use of Psalm 51 has proved problematic for many. The primary problem lies in determining how Paul viewed this psalm as pertaining to his present argument. For in context Psalm 51 finds David addressing his own sin in the Bathsheba tragedy and the righteousness of God in judging and punishing him for it. But the connection becomes apparent when the Psalm is considered from Paul's vantage point in this passage, namely, the way in which the principles of divine faithfulness and human unbelief interact in relation to God's revealed word.

- The first thing to observe is Paul's assertion of God's truthfulness - i.e. *faithfulness* - in the context of every man being a liar. His point was not that every man could possibly be found to be a liar, but that all are indeed liars, while God yet remains true. This indictment is consistent with his previous contention (1:18-25), and helps to show in what sense he was speaking. In identifying all men as liars Paul was making specific reference to their refusal to believe the truth of God's self-revelation in creation, conscience, and inspired oracle. Men are liars because they are depraved and their depravity is defined by self-idolatry. Stated simply, *they refuse to believe and submit to the truth because of the implication to their worship and service of themselves*; no man can serve two masters. Specifically, as proud self-idolaters, the truth they refuse to believe is that their righteous standing and acceptance with God can come only through their own utter humiliation - that is, being endowed with God's righteousness as a gracious gift appropriated solely through trusting, submissive, dependent, and grateful faith.

- Secondly, Paul's citation of Psalm 51:4 is joined to his argument as a subordinate purpose clause. In this way he intended to show that the reality of men being liars while God is true serves the purpose of justifying God. His statement may thus be rephrased: *Let God be true and every man a liar in order that God should be justified in His words and vindicated when He passes judgment on men.*

This grammatical nuance provides crucial insight into Paul's argument, for by it he was insisting first that the "failure" of God's oracles with respect to Israel lies with the Jews and their unbelief, not the faithfulness (truthfulness) of God. But more broadly, he was saying that the Jews' unbelief *itself* proves the truthfulness of God's words and actions. For God had revealed from the beginning that Israel would be a perpetually unfaithful covenant "son" (Deuteronomy 31:14-30), and their unbelief only proved Him true. Furthermore, God's actions in judging and "casting off" the nation were justified and could not be righteously impugned by men (cf. Psalm 78; Isaiah 5:1-7, 65:1-7; Ezekiel 16:1-34, 18:1-32, 23:1-49; Hosea 1:1-2:8; etc.). God had chosen Israel, taken them to Himself as sons, loved them as a devoted husband, and entreated them over and over through His prophets; he had promised them blessing if they would love Him and mercy and restoration if they would return to Him, and yet Israel had steadfastly refused Him.

By implication, if Israel's unbelief and rebellion under the governance of the Old Testament oracles vindicated God's words and actions in judgment, how much more did their rejection of the gospel that is the *fulfillment* of the promises set forth in those oracles? By disbelieving not merely the prophetic word but the incarnate Word who is the ultimate Prophet, they did indeed "fill up the measure of the guilt of their fathers" (Matthew 23:29-36).

It is also important to note that Paul was not here making God a third party to a dispute between two other parties. Rather, there are only two parties, and he portrays God as the second party in a judicial contention with men. It was previously argued that Paul's approach in 3:1-8 was to extend his argument concerning the Jews' unbelief (3:1-3) so as to establish and vindicate God's disputation with all men. Israel's unbelief has its own unique culpability in that they alone were entrusted with God's oracles, but the fact yet remains that all men are liars, which fact bears out the truth of God's words and actions. Mark Seifrid comments: "*Paradoxically and profoundly, the human 'lie' establishes God's righteousness in his dispute with us. It causes the truth of God to abound. Our very unbelief, which denies God, confirms that he is God, since he has already made known in his oracles that we are 'liars.'*"

He continues: *Paul does not here imagine God in the role of an impartial judge, but as a party to the dispute, who seeks vindication over against idolatrous humanity: the justification of God entails our condemnation...For Paul, the justification of human beings takes place only through God's triumph and their defeat.*" (Christ, Our Righteousness)

- This insight into Paul's perspective helps to explain his use of Psalm 51. It is not that the context of the psalm is identical to the point he was making, but the principles are the same. For David wrote this Psalm as the result of his confrontation with God's prophet, Nathan. In that confrontation God disclosed to David that he was a liar who was shrouding his unrighteousness in a pious hypocrisy (2 Samuel 12:1-7a). By God's word he was found out, condemned, and brought under divine, judicial punishment (12:7b-12). Along with the prophet David conceded that he was indeed "the man," (12:13a), and in his penitential psalm he confessed his agreement with God: "*Against you, you only, I have sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified when you speak, and blameless when you judge*" (Psalm 51:4).

- It further helps to clarify why Paul would cite a passage having a *negative* connotation in order to support what is a *positive* insistence on his part, namely, the unchanging faithfulness of God. For at face value it seems odd for Paul to attempt to substantiate God's faithfulness by quoting a context in which David acknowledges the righteousness of God's *retribution* against him. How does God's stern chastening of David prove His faithfulness?

*The answer is found in the realization that God's faithfulness has **two contrasting emphases**, both of which show Him to be true to Himself and His promises.*

As Seifrid has aptly observed, "The justification of human beings takes place only through God's triumph and their defeat." So it is that God's faithfulness to His *logia* - particularly His word of promise - presupposes and demands His faithfulness to His own righteousness that is also a part of His oracles. Men's receipt of the promise begins with their just condemnation (cf. Psalm 51:5-19).

The two aforementioned emphases of God's faithfulness exist alongside one another and are thematic in the Old Testament. The first is **positive**, and has reference to God's continual promise to bless His people in spite of their sin and rebellion. *What is crucial to note is that this promised blessing is always set within the framework of Yahweh's kingdom.*

God's promised blessing had its first tangible referent in the Israelite kingdom in Canaan. He articulated His pledge first to Abraham and the patriarchs, and later to Moses and the sons of Israel. Despite the sin and practical unbelief of the patriarchs and their descendants, God committed Himself to the preservation of Abraham's seed and their obtainment of the promised inheritance.

Later, with the decline of the Israelite kingdom the prophets began to speak of another kingdom that would follow after the destruction of the present one. This kingdom, too, would be bestowed by a faithful God according to His promise in spite of the unbelief of His people. But it was to be different in that it would be the fulfillment of the ideal only portrayed by the former theocracy. For God would Himself remove their rebellious hearts and give them hearts to love and serve Him in righteousness and faithfulness forever. This work of renewal in the establishing of the future kingdom is the focal theme of the last third of Isaiah's prophecy (40-66), and is progressively developed in the other prophets as well (cf. Jeremiah 23:1-8, 30:1-33:26, 50:1-20; Ezekiel 34:1-31, 36:8-38, 37:1-28; Daniel 2:24-45, 7:1-27; Amos 9:11-15; Micah 4:1-5:9; Zephaniah 3:1-20; Zechariah 6:9-15, 9:1-17; etc.).

At the same time, the centrality of the kingdom to God's promise reveals the **negative** aspect of His faithfulness. That is, He promised not only to redeem and bless His people and establish His kingdom, *but also to do so through the fires of judgment and destruction*. Such was the case with the Israelite theocracy, which had its founding in the desolation and destruction of God's enemies, both the Egyptian and Canaanite oppressors as well as the rebels within the ranks of Abraham's physical seed. Later, the redemption from Babylonian exile followed the same pattern of deliverance, restoration and blessing proceeding out of righteous judgment and destruction. So also the final kingdom, marked by everlasting blessedness, was to be established at Calvary through Yahweh's great indignation (cf. Isaiah 8:11-9:7, 52:1-15, 54:1-17, 60:1-22; Jeremiah 30:1-24, 46:13-28; Ezekiel 36:1-38; Malachi 4:5-6; also cf. Joel 2:18-3:21 with Acts 2:1-21), even as wrath will usher in the kingdom's consummation (2 Thessalonians 1:1-10; 2:1-12; 1 Peter 4:1-5; 2 Peter 3:1-13; Revelation 20:11-22:5).

It is this interconnectedness of the themes of *judgment/destruction and redemption/deliverance/restoration/blessing* - specifically in relation to the overarching theme of God's kingdom - that is at the forefront of Paul's thinking, and that allowed him to speak as he did. Indeed, it is precisely the failure to grasp his redemptive-historical perspective that contributes to so much confusion and misunderstanding of this passage.