

The Righteousness of God Revealed

Paul told us in Romans 1:17 that in the Gospel “the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith.” I think the “through faith” part is explained in Romans 3:22: “the righteousness of God through faith of Jesus Christ.” The translations say “in” but the Greek is “of”. Let’s stick with the Greek “of” and then realize that the righteousness of God is first revealed through the faith of Christ to the Father in fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham. Paul then unpacks in Romans how the believing Jews and Gentiles together believe “by faith” and not by works of Torah, the Jewish Law.

God’s righteousness means, in part, that God is faithful to the covenant he made with Abraham and his descendants. Let’s see how this gets worked out and how it applies to us today.

Remember Genesis 12:1-4—

Genesis 12:1 Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Throughout the rest of history, God is faithful to do what he promised. Think first of God coming to save the Israelites.

Exodus 2:23 After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. ²⁴God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ²⁵God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

God redeemed Israel from slavery, gave them his Law, and then (after 40 years of wandering) brought their children into the Land where they were to live out God’s new way of being human. The Law could be summarized as love God and love neighbors. The point is that God judged the sinful people (the Canaanites) that were in the Land (see e.g., Lev 18:24-30) and placed his people Israel in the Land to live out lives of faithfulness to their covenant God. They refused to live faithfully in the Land, and so God finally sent them into Exile—according to his faithfulness! That is, he guaranteed them that if they refused to return to him (repent) and follow him as King (believe), that he would send them into Exile.

But God did not give up on his promise to Abraham. When Elizabeth was pregnant with John the Baptist and Mary was pregnant with Jesus, Mary and Elizabeth’s husband saw the coming birth of Jesus as God remembering his covenant promise to Abraham and his descendants—

Luke 1:54 [Mary said] He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.’

Elizabeth’s husband Zechariah contemplated the birth of Jesus and came to that same conclusion—

Luke 1:67 Then his [John’s] father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:
⁶⁸Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
⁷²Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
⁷³the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness

before him all our days.

And so we come to King Jesus. Close to the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote:

Romans 15:8-9a For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. (Cf. Rom 1:16 "...to the Jew first and also to the Greek")

In his faithfulness, God remembered his covenant with Abraham... and so he sent Jesus to redeem the world—the Jew first and also the Gentile. This is the righteousness of God. God had to punish sin and so he sent his Son to deal with it on the Cross.

Romans 3:21 But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in [lit. of] Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his [God's] righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

This adds needed depth to our meaning of John 3:16.

John 3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷ Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

What does it mean that God loves the world? It means nothing less than God's faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham to redeem the world. Again, that is what God's righteousness is about: covenant faithfulness. And how much is God committed to redeem the world? So much so, that he sends his Beloved Son into the world, to suffer, die, but also be raised from the dead to bring with him the New Creation that is now open to Jew and Gentile alike.

Christ came to create One New Humanity (out of believing Jews and Christians alike), the Church, of which he himself is the Head. But there's more!

Christ also sent his One New Humanity back into the world as his agents of reconciliation! Thus God shows his faithfulness to redeem the world by sending his Church. In Christ we are the righteousness of God! See what Paul wrote below.

2 Corinthians 5:17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him [Christ] we might become the righteousness of God.

In summary, we have this in Jesus's great prayer to his Father before he went to the Cross:

John 17:18 "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them [his disciples] into the world."