

# **The Righteousness of God and its Implications for Understanding Romans 1:17 Within the Context of the Church**

**Dr. Dustin Sims**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to examine the concept of the righteousness of God throughout Scripture. In Romans 1:17, Paul points to the gospel as revealing the righteousness of God. This article surveys several Old Testament passages that mention the righteousness of God with the desire to understand what Paul meant when he stated that the gospel reveals the righteousness of God. The goal of this examination is to bring application to the church. Eight Old Testament passages are reviewed, providing discussion of the implications of each one for understanding the righteousness of God. Then, discussion of these implications for Romans 1:17 is completed before finishing with an application for the church.

**Key Words:** righteousness, theology, church

The righteousness of God is a phrase often recognized but is the subject of great debate. Does the righteousness of God demonstrate an attribute of God? Is it a forensic term which speaks of God's impartation of righteousness to a believer? Does it describe an activity of God which is displayed? There is ample evidence in support of each question. However, if one is to truly grasp the enormity of this phrase, he must trace this phrase throughout the Scriptures. There is much stated concerning the righteousness of God in both Testaments. It is important to ensure that one takes time to survey the places where this term righteousness is used in relation to God. The

purpose of this article is to trace the theme of the righteousness of God throughout the Old Testament culminating in Paul's use of the phrase in Romans 1:17.<sup>1</sup> This will be a brief survey as the length of this article does not allow for a complete examination of all passages. However, a broad survey will be completed across the Bible. Focus will be given to Gen 18:25, Judges 5:11, 1 Sam 12:7, Psalm 9:8, Psalm 31:1, Psalm 35:24, Psalm 98, Isaiah 11:1-9, and Rom 1:17. Each passage will be examined by focusing on context, use of term, and implications for its understanding. These examinations are not meant to be a commentary. Upon completion of this examination, it will be demonstrated that the righteousness of God describes both an attribute and activity of God which is completely displayed through the gospel and imparted to the believer. This display will be the focus of the last section of this article and application will be presented in the context of the writer's ministry setting.

### **Gen 18:25**

The context of this passage is the pronouncement of God's judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah because of the severity and magnitude of their sins. Three visitors come to visit Abraham and reveal to him that he will have a child with Sarah. This will be the promised child to Abraham. The visitors discuss among themselves whether they should reveal to Abraham what is about to be done to Sodom and Gomorrah. The Lord then tells Abraham what is about to happen. Sodom and Gomorrah are about to be destroyed because of their sins. Abraham then proceeds to try and intervene for the cities by asking God if he would destroy the righteous with the wicked.

The use of this term is important because it is stated so early in the biblical canon. Abraham says, "You could not possibly do such a thing: to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. You could not possibly do that! Won't the Judge of the whole earth do what is right?" (Gen

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture will be taken from the Christian Standard Bible.

18:25) This points to Abraham's understanding that God is just and could not possibly allow the innocent to perish with the guilty.<sup>2</sup> Of course, there is none found righteous in the cities so they will be judged. However, Abraham understands that God is right in all that he does. He does not do wrong.

What is important about the use of this term in this passage is that it describes a characteristic of God. God is righteous and will do what is right. Therefore, he will judge based on what is right. However, he will not allow injustice to continue. He will not sweep sin under the rug. He will judge and if the actions of others do not meet the standard of his righteousness, they will experience the wrath of God. Abraham recognized God as right in all he does.

### **Judges 5:11**

Judges 5 displays a song sung by Deborah and Barak. This song is a victory song after Israel's victory over the Canaanites. It signifies the victory of God over the enemy and presents humans as heroic participants.<sup>3</sup> It is meant to portray God's work of deliverance through his human vessels. In a sense, it is a "hymn of thanksgiving."<sup>4</sup> It provides a connection to chapter 4 and calls the reader to be familiar with what has just transpired.<sup>5</sup> This song is an emotional expression of God's deliverance and work.

It is difficult to completely narrow down the style of the song. It has prophetic significance,<sup>6</sup> is composed of different genres:

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2005), Logos Bible Software.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H Academic, 1999), 213.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert Wolf, *Judges*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 408.

<sup>5</sup> Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), Scribd, 322.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 215.

ballad, hymn, and is written in a composition which “is still not sufficiently well understood.”<sup>7</sup> Despite this difficulty, its significance is in its content. It is a beautifully composed song expressing thankfulness to God for his deliverance, remembrance of his deeds, and a celebration of his use of people (which are presented as heroes) to carry out his plans.

In verse 11 of the song, Deborah and Barak state, “Let them tell the righteous acts of the Lord, the righteous deeds of his villagers in Israel, with the voices of the singers at the watering places.” (Judges 5:11) The watering places were a gathering place for individuals to celebrate and exchange the latest gossip.<sup>8</sup> It was a place where many would stop<sup>9</sup> and it provided a great audience to speak of what God had done for Israel through Deborah and Barak. What was proclaimed were the “righteous acts of the Lord” and “the righteous deeds of his villagers.” Again, the emphasis is on God’s work and his use of individuals to carry out that work.

What is interesting here is the use of the term, “righteous acts.” If one is to understand the meaning of this phrase, one would need to recognize the deliverance of Israel from the Canaanites presented in chapter 4. In verses 12-18, the singers present the “righteous deeds” of the villagers. However, in verses 19-23, the singers sing of the “righteous acts of the Lord.” These verses present the enemy coming against the Lord but the Lord pronouncing a “curse” upon them because “they did not come to help the Lord, to help the Lord with the warriors.” (Judges 5:23) Why are these acts considered “righteous acts?” Because God is the one acting. God’s actions are right because God is righteous. He is “revealed as a God of righteousness who acts rightly in all his works and judgments.”<sup>10</sup> So, he will judge the

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<sup>7</sup> Barry Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 323.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 229.

<sup>9</sup> Herbert Wolf, *Judges*, 411.

<sup>10</sup> D.W. Diehl, “Righteousness,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 1033.

wicked and deliver those who trust in him. This song tells of that deliverance and presents God's works as "righteous acts."

What is presented in this song is that God's righteousness is demonstrated in his acts. So, his acts are righteous. This is important because it helps the reader understand that the righteousness of God is revealed. It is not just a characteristic of God but is also an action of God. What is the righteous action of God in this song? His "righteous acts" are demonstrated as he judges rightly, pours his wrath out against his enemies, and delivers his people who have trusted in him for salvation.

### **1 Samuel 12:7**

The context of 1 Samuel 12 is Samuel's final public speech to the people of Israel. He asks if there is any evidence that he has wronged the people in any way. They respond that he has not wronged them (vv. 1-5). He then presents evidence of God's work in Israel's history, calling them out for their request for a king. Finally, he charges them to "fear the Lord and worship him faithfully with all your heart ..." (1 Sam 12:24)

To truly understand this chapter, it is important to see the significance of this speech. Samuel still has work to be completed so it is not a farewell speech in the sense that they will never hear from him again. It is a transitional speech. Arnold is helpful here:

In order for us to interpret this passage for our modern context, we must first consider its role in the larger scheme of biblical theology. This chapter serves an important role in the overall structure of the prophetic history extending from Deuteronomy and Joshua through 2 Kings. The historian uses certain great speeches (or prayers of Israel's most important figures to transition from one era to another. These passages serve as the organizational framework for the entire Deuteronomistic History.

Thus, Samuel's speeches in 7:2-8:22 and 12:1-25 serve as bookends for the section explaining the origins of the Israelite monarchy and interpreting its theological significance.<sup>11</sup>

So, this transition speech is important because it provides a transition from one era to the other. In this transition, it is essential that God's character and works are remembered. For this reason, this passage plays an important role in understanding God's righteousness.

In verse 7, Samuel states, "Now present yourselves, so I may confront you before the Lord about all the righteous acts he has done for you and your ancestors." (1 Sam 12:7) Samuel then proceeds to present five different works of God from Israel's past. The point of this presentation was to remind Israel of two truths: God alone rescues his people from those who oppress, and he does so in response to their prayers.<sup>12</sup> These acts are done for his people.<sup>13</sup> Samuel demonstrates a cycle of God's deliverance, his people's rebellion, his judgment against his people, his judgment against Israel's enemies, and then God's deliverance when his people call out to him for help. Each of these are labeled as "righteous acts" of the Lord.

As in the Judges passage above, what God does is righteous. However, further understanding is given as God's "righteous acts" are presented. First, God's righteousness is demonstrated through both judgment and deliverance. This is because God is the standard of right and wrong. "In making decisions, God does follow an objective standard of right and wrong, a standard that is part of the very structure of reality. But that standard to

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<sup>11</sup> Bill T. Arnold, *1 and 2 Samuel*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), Scribd, 274.

<sup>12</sup> Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H Academic, 1996), 141.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald Youngblood sees these as synonymous with the magnolia Dei, the mighty acts of God for his people. See Ronald F. Youngblood, *1 & 2 Samuel*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 646.

which God adheres is not external to God – it is his own nature.”<sup>14</sup> God judges his people when they do not act in accord with his righteousness. He also judges those who treat his people in a way that is against his righteousness. Finally, he delivers his people when they repent and choose to follow in his righteousness by trusting in him. This is all presented in this passage as Samuel recalls God’s deliverance and judgment. These acts are presented as “righteous acts.”

Second, God’s righteousness does not change. He is fair in his judgment toward both Israel and the surrounding nations. Each will be judged according to his righteousness and their response to his righteousness. Again, Erickson is helpful here: “The righteousness of God also means that his actions are in accord with the law he himself has established. He is the expression in action of what he requires of others.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Psalm 9:8**

The psalms are a fruitful demonstration of the righteousness of God. The context of Psalm 9 is difficult to determine. It is obvious that it is a psalm of celebration but also of lament. There is celebration of God’s past victories and a call for God’s deliverance for a new threat.<sup>16</sup> However, the difficulty is in its connection to other psalms and the situation behind its writing. Longman sees it as connected with Psalm 10 and believes them to be a single psalm originally, forming a single acrostic poem.<sup>17</sup> VanGemeran views it as an individual lament psalm.<sup>18</sup> However, not completely disregarding Longman’s view of its connection with Psalm 10 and expanding VanGemeran’s point, Hamilton

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<sup>14</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3 ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 258.

<sup>15</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 258.

<sup>16</sup> Tremper Longman III, *Psalms*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 84.

<sup>17</sup> Tremper Longman III, *Psalms*, 83-84.

<sup>18</sup> Willem A. VanGemeran, *Psalms*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 115.

seeks to grasp the connection of the psalm to its surrounding context:

Psalm 15-24 have been recognized as comprising a unit with 15 and 24 forming an inclusio, and there are clearer points of contact between Pss 10 and 14, with both psalms referring to the way the wicked disregards God and to what the wicked says in his heart. This suggests that, while there are points of contact that bind Pss 9 and 10 together, Pss 10-14 nevertheless comprise a unit, as do Pss 3-9. The lack of superscription between Pss 9 and 10 and the use of similar language in the two psalms serves as mortar between the wider bricks of Pss 3-9 and 10-14 ... The unit of Pss 3-9 seems to deal with Absalom's revolt.<sup>19</sup>

Regardless of the exact situation, it is important to focus on what can be determined for certain in this psalm. First, David has experienced God's deliverance in the past. Second, David has learned to trust that God will act on his behalf and according to his righteousness. Finally, David is in another situation where he needs the deliverance of the Lord. He knows God will act and judge them accordingly.

David states about God in verse 8, "And he judges the world with righteousness; he executes judgment on the nations with fairness." (Psalm 9:8) This picture of righteousness relates to God's judgment. He has "vindicated his case and has also served as the one who carries out the sentence against those who have harmed him."<sup>20</sup> It is also important to see God's authority to judge. He is pictured as the judge who has the right to cast judgment but does so in relation to his nature.

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<sup>19</sup> James M. Hamilton Jr., *Psalms 1-72*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2021), 167.

<sup>20</sup> Longman, *Psalms*, 85.



Therefore, he judges with fairness. Therefore, there is hope<sup>21</sup> for those who are oppressed. They can trust God to deal with the wickedness of the world and know that he will do so fairly. This also calls the wicked to fear. It is not good news for those who have chosen to rebel against God's standard.<sup>22</sup>

This psalm is important for understanding God's righteousness in accordance with his judgment. It calls its readers to remember that because God judges righteously, he will judge the wicked no matter their identity. God does not show favoritism. Because he is the "righteous judge," (Psalm 9:4) His judgment will be consistent to his nature. It reminds the reader that righteousness is a characteristic or attribute of God. He is righteous; therefore, he is a righteous Judge who will judge righteously. One cannot separate God's attributes from his actions. That is why David can have such confidence as he calls out to the Lord.

### **Psalm 31:1**

Psalm 31 is a song of lament. Longman sees the situation as one in which a person is involved in some kind of warfare.<sup>23</sup> VanGemeran says that the nature of the trouble is not fully known.<sup>24</sup> What can be known is that whatever the situation, it is a situation of trouble. David is in a situation where he must trust in the Lord for deliverance because he has nowhere else to go. He needs a demonstration of God's righteousness.<sup>25</sup>

David's use of the term righteousness is directly connected with salvation. He states, "Lord, I seek refuge in you; let me never be disgraced. Save me by your righteousness." (Psalm 31:1) Why would David use this phrase? Why would he not just ask God simply to save him? Why emphasize God's righteousness? What

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<sup>21</sup> VanGemeran, *Psalms*, 119.

<sup>22</sup> Hamilton, *Psalms 1-72*, 167.

<sup>23</sup> Longman, *Psalms*, 160.

<sup>24</sup> VanGemeran, *Psalms*, 263.

<sup>25</sup> VanGemeran, *Psalms*, 264.

David was reminded of was that God's righteousness calls Him to right what is wrong. It is a term that reminds David that God cares for him because David belongs to the Lord.<sup>26</sup> David finds comfort, strength, and safety in God's righteousness.<sup>27</sup> God will redeem David precisely because he is the God of truth who faithfully keeps his promises. And when God redeems, he will do so in righteousness because he is not a God who acquits the guilty and condemns the innocent."<sup>28</sup>

As is evident from the passage, God's righteousness is associated with his salvation. David calls on the Lord to save him and to do so by his "righteousness." This is a helpful point concerning God's righteousness. It has already been mentioned that God's righteousness is associated with his judgment and deliverance. This psalm expands on the concept of deliverance by demonstrating that God provides salvation based on his righteousness. He saves because he is righteous.

### **Psalm 35:24**

Psalm 35 presents another psalm in which David finds himself in trouble. In this case, it seems that false accusations have been brought against him. Not only are there false accusations against him, but there are also witnesses who have come forward who are "malicious." (Psalm 35:24) They are not true witnesses but are only interested in presenting false evidence. They are bearing false witness. David has nowhere to turn because of all who have come against him. He cannot meet their false standard. He must call on another to vindicate him.

David's use of the term calls God to vindicate him in accordance with God's righteousness. He is calling on God to rise and defend him.<sup>29</sup> "Vindicate me, Lord my God, in keeping with your

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<sup>26</sup> VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 264.

<sup>27</sup> Hamilton, *Psalm 1-72*, 355.

<sup>28</sup> Hamilton, *Psalm 1-72*, 356.

<sup>29</sup> Longman, *Psalms*, 174.

righteousness, and do not let them rejoice over me.” (Psalm 35:24) He knows that his opponents will not give him a fair case. He knows they will present false accusations against him and provide witnesses who will bear false witness. Therefore, David calls on the Lord because he is righteous. “The righteousness of God, his Lord, the Master of the universe, is at stake.”<sup>30</sup> God’s standards are what David cares about, unlike his opponents.<sup>31</sup> He knows that God is righteous and will make right what is wrong. Essentially, David is calling God to be his witness and the judge who will make everything right.

The implications of this term’s usage in this passage calls the reader again to understand that God has a standard. God is righteous and expects righteousness. No matter the standard put forth by humanity, especially because that can change based on the situation, God’s standard is what matters. God’s standard is right because it is based off his character. David knows this which is why he calls on the Lord to make things right.

### **Psalm 98:2,9**

The importance of the context of this psalm cannot be overstated. Hamilton rightly sees this psalm as a reminder of God’s call from exile, exile from Eden in Genesis; exile from the land in Ps 89.<sup>32</sup> Longman sees it as a military victory accomplished by God. God won a victory for Israel.<sup>33</sup> VanGemeran agrees with Hamilton.<sup>34</sup> It seems best to see these views not as contrasts but compliments to one another. Certainly, it is a great victory which God has accomplished for His people in bringing them out of exile. What is most important about the context is its universality. If it is a call back from exile,

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<sup>30</sup> VanGemeran, *Psalms*, 291.

<sup>31</sup> Hamilton, *Psalm 1-72*, 390.

<sup>32</sup> James M. Hamilton Jr., *Psalms 73-150*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2021), 199.

<sup>33</sup> Longman, *Psalms*, 346.

<sup>34</sup> VanGemeran, *Psalms*, 627.

it seems that its significance is not just for Israel but for all the nations. The nations are able to see His righteousness (verse 2), to see His victory (verse 3), to shout to the Lord (verse 4), and experience His judgment (verse 9).

The psalmist uses the term righteousness as having been revealed. How has it been revealed? He has won a victory over his enemies (verse 2). In doing this he has revealed His righteousness plainly to all nations. He has revealed his love and faithfulness. In other words, God has kept his Word. Why? God is righteous. This is not just for Israel, but for the whole world. God's victory will have implications for all the world. "This will be an international display of God's righteousness as he keeps his word, enforces his standard, fulfills his promises, and vindicates his people by crushing oppressors."<sup>35</sup> Again, God's righteousness calls for his judgment and deliverance.

The implications of righteousness' use in this passage must be centered around its universality. This has already been mentioned but needs to be expanded briefly here. God's righteousness is displayed universally through his judgment and deliverance. In this passage, as his people return from exile, it is a call to recognize that this is not just for the people of Israel, but for all nations. This moves the reader to think of the universal nature of the Abrahamic promise. God's righteousness will be displayed for all the nations to see. It is visible through Israel's return from exile, but it would seem this is partial demonstration of God's righteousness. It will be demonstrated fully in a later and greater way.

### **Isaiah 11:5**

Isaiah 11 is a passage of Scripture revealing great hope for a future Davidic king. It is impossible to discuss all its implications. That is beyond the scope of this paper. The purpose of listing this passage is to understand how the term

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<sup>35</sup> Hamilton, *Psalms 73-150*, 199.

righteousness is used. To move beyond this is to engage in discussion which will follow a path of great length.<sup>36</sup>

There is not much in the way of historical information to provide a proper date for this passage, although it would seem to be during a trying time for Ahaz.<sup>37</sup> Ahaz has failed to trust in Jesus, presenting a pattern of overall disobedience from the Davidic line in his person.<sup>38</sup> However, God will remain faithful. In this passage, He reveals that he will bring about a Davidic king who will be faithful to all that God requires.

This new hopeful section returns to the theme of God's kingdom provisions and the messianic hope for the world, corresponding to the initial discussion of this theme in 9:1-7. Although the audience may presently suffer under adverse conditions as a consequence of Ahaz's sins and Assyria's oppression, they should trust God because of what he will do in the future ... A Davidic king who rules with justice and gathers people from the far reaches of the world will replace the proud Assyrian tyrant who destroys and scatters many nations.<sup>39</sup>

The term righteousness is used as a description of this Davidic king. It is stated concerning him: "Righteousness will be a belt around his hips; faithfulness will be a belt around his waist." (Isaiah 11:5) In its most general sense, the Davidic king will do what is right because his character is right.<sup>40</sup> However, this description goes much deeper than that because of how it is presented. Grogan is helpful here: "In the Near Eastern dress

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<sup>36</sup> For further study of this passage see: Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1-39*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Isaiah*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), or John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003),

<sup>37</sup> Gary Smith, *Isaiah 1-39*, 268.

<sup>38</sup> John Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 186.

<sup>39</sup> Gary Smith, *Isaiah 1-39*, 267.

<sup>40</sup> Gary Smith, *Isaiah 1-39*, 273.

styles, the belt or sash was the garment that gave stability to the whole ensemble; and to gird the loins was to prepare for work.”<sup>41</sup> What is presented here is at the very core, you will find righteousness and faithfulness is the identity of this David king. “When you strip away everything else, what do you find? A continuing concern to be right with all that is right and to be true to all that is true in God’s universe.”<sup>42</sup>

What are the implications of righteousness’ use in this passage? It has clearly been demonstrated that God’s righteousness is associated with his judgment and deliverance. It is also an attribute of God. In this passage, we see that the Davidic king will clearly exhibit this righteousness in his character, deliverance, and rule. In the Davidic king, God’s righteousness that he desired for all those who would follow him is clearly and fully revealed. This is a king who will be righteous as his very core.

### **What do these passages reveal about the righteousness of God?**

From the above discussion, one can now analyze what has been stated concerning the righteousness of God. First, the righteousness of God is an attribute of God. Second, the righteousness of God is revealed in his actions which are righteous acts. Third, the righteousness of God entails his judgment. Finally, the righteousness of God entails his deliverance and salvation.

First, the righteousness of God is an attribute of God. This is clear from Psalm 35 mentioned above. David calls on God to vindicate him because he knows God is righteous. Therefore, God has a standard which is based on himself. God’s law is a true expression of who He is because it flows from his nature.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Geoffrey Grogan, *Isaiah*, 88.

<sup>42</sup> John Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 188.

<sup>43</sup> Milliard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 258.

God is righteous; therefore, everything he does flows from that righteousness. It is the basis of his activity.<sup>44</sup> “God’s righteousness moves him to act in ways that are consistent with his righteous character, and there is no injustice with God.”<sup>45</sup>

Second, the righteousness of God is revealed in his actions. As has been stated, God’s acts are presented as “righteous acts” (Judges 5:11, 1 Sam 12:7). God, because he is righteous, intervenes.<sup>46</sup> This intervention, whether through judgment or salvation, will be consistent with his character. Not only will it be consistent with his character, but it will also be revealed to all the nations (Ps. 98:2). Thus, there is suggestion that the revelation of God’s righteousness, which points to something greater than the call back from exile for Israel, will have implications for people of every nation.

Third, the righteousness of God entails his judgment. In 1 Sam 12:7, mentioned above, Samuel presented the “righteous acts” of God to the people of Israel. In this presentation, he reveals that God had judged the nations which were oppressing the people of Israel but also that God judged the nation of Israel as well because of their rebellion. Because God is righteous, he will not change his standard. Therefore, those who do not keep his standard and trust in him, will be judged.

Finally, the righteousness of God entails his deliverance and salvation. In that same passage in 1 Sam 12:7, Samuel speaks of God’s deliverance when his people cried out to him for delivery. When they trusted in the Lord, he provided. One could easily look at the passage of Psalm 31:1 when David calls out

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<sup>44</sup> David G. Peterson, *Romans*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 105-106.

<sup>45</sup> David Peterson, *Romans*, 62.

<sup>46</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 73.

to the Lord to save him. He was to save David by his “righteousness.”

### **Romans 1:17**

From the brief survey of biblical passages above and discussion of what they reveal, it is evident that the Old Testament speaks much concerning the righteousness of God. What has been presented brings one to Romans 1:17. In this passage, the culmination of what has been stated concerning the righteousness of God is revealed. For context, verses 16 and 17 should be quoted. Paul states, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, just as it is written: The righteous will live by faith.” (Rom 1:16-17)

What is clear from the quote above, Paul states that the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel. When the term “revealed” is used, it is used in an eschatological sense in which what was previous unknown or unclear, is now revealed.<sup>47</sup> However, it must be asked, how is this possible? There are four ways which will be mentioned briefly here and then discussed on their own. First, the righteousness of God is revealed because the Davidic king mentioned in Isaiah is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Second, the righteousness of God is revealed because in the gospel the judgement of God is poured out. Third, the righteousness of God is revealed because in the gospel deliverance and salvation are provided. Finally, as the righteousness of God is fully revealed, there are significances for all nations as righteousness is imputed to those who believe.

First, one must understand the promised Davidic king in Isaiah is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one who will judge the poor righteously and deal righteously with those in the land. This was demonstrated as he called his disciples from many walks

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<sup>47</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 69.



of life, healed many who were oppressed with diseases, forgave sins, revealed the heart of the law, and died for the sins of the world. As one who is righteous, he met and lived the standard of God, did not compromise on that standard, preached that standard, took God's judgment upon himself, and provided deliverance through his death and resurrection.

Next, in the gospel the judgement of God is poured out. God is both just and the justifier of all who believe in Christ (Rom 3:24-26). Jesus went to the cross and took the judgment of God upon himself so that those who believe in him would not face the wrath of God. In doing this, God's standard is not compromised. Jesus demonstrated and lived the standard of God on behalf of humanity so that those who believe in him would have that righteousness imparted to them (more will be discussed below). God did not push aside his judgment; his judgment was poured out on Christ.

Third, the righteousness of God is revealed because in the gospel deliverance and salvation are provided. It has already been mentioned that God's "righteous acts" included his salvation. This is demonstrated most clearly in the cross of Christ. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, those who believe can be saved. Kruse is right when he speaks on this passage: "Accordingly, we could say that the righteousness of God is his saving action whereby he brings people into right relationship with himself."<sup>48</sup> It is through the gospel that salvation is presented. God delivered in the past, pointing to the ultimate deliverance through the Davidic king who would come and be righteous at his very core. Judgment and deliverance were displayed in the cross of Christ. "For the glory of his name,

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<sup>48</sup> Colin G. Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 71.

for in the cross of Christ both the saving and judging righteousness of God are manifested.”<sup>49</sup>

Lastly, the righteousness of God is imputed to those who believe. Paul says:

But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, attested by the Law and the Prophets. The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, since there is no distinction. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God presented him as the mercy seat by his blood, through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his restraint God passed over the sins previously committed. God presented him to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so that he would be just and justify the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:21-26).

This righteousness is through faith and is imputed to those who believe in Christ. It is found in “the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel.”<sup>50</sup> God has always called his people to live righteously. In the Judges passage above, those who follow the Lord are those who commit “righteous deeds.” (Judges 5:11) The problem was that God demanded perfection in living righteously. No one could accomplish this. The people were to provide animal sacrifices for their sins which pointed to the once for all true Sacrifice (Heb 9:28). Righteousness is obtained through Christ by placing one’s faith in Christ, trusting in his

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 2 ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 76.

<sup>50</sup> Mark A. Seifrid, “Romans,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 609.

work, and receiving in him a righteousness. (Rom 9:30) Longenecker sums it up well:

For the righteousness of God that Paul speaks of in these passages is a righteousness that is both (1) an attribute of God and a quality that characterizes all of his actions and (2) a gift that God gives to people who come to him by faith. It is a type of righteousness that enables God to be both just and justifier, as the confessional material of 3:24-26 affirms at its close in verse 26b.<sup>51</sup>

### **Application**

As has been demonstrated, the righteousness of God is an attribute of God which is demonstrated in his actions of judgment and salvation, which is then imputed to those who believe. With this understanding, there are six applications that will be presented. These are as follows: the preaching and teaching ministry of the church; the congregations' understanding of salvation; appreciation of salvation; the need to share the gospel faithfully; appreciation for the whole council of God's Word; and thankfulness. Each of these will be discussed below.

The first application is in the preaching and teaching ministry of the church. Understanding the righteousness of God helps in bringing out various aspects of God's Word. When preaching on the wrath of God being poured out or the deliverance of God for his people, it is important to appreciate the connections these events have to Christ. It will help in bringing the Old and New Testament together as they should be read and preached.

It is also helpful in knowing that because God is righteous, his Word is true and right. This is especially needed when difficult

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<sup>51</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 301.

passages are next in line for preaching (this is assuming that one preaches expository through books of the Bible). If there are phrases and terms used which seem to contradict or are not fully understood, knowing that God is right and that his Word is true encourages one to press forward and press deeper through study, prayer, and discussion so that one can rightly handle the Word of God and not neglect preaching any passage of Scripture. Paul says, “Be diligent to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who doesn’t need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth.” (2 Tim 2:15)

Finally, one must see the expectation that God would have for those who are stewards of his Word. If God has revealed his Word, then he would expect those who handle his Word to handle it accurately. God is righteous and has set his standard. He has provided that standard in his Word. One must recognize God’s expectation as the Righteous One in preaching and teaching his Word.

The second application is the congregations’ understanding of salvation. This may seem to be an unusual application, but it is important to mention. Often, in contemporary culture, the concept of salvation being only through Christ is seen as narrow and hateful. However, one must understand that God’s standard does not change. Salvation is not based on man’s standard or what man thinks is right. Man’s thoughts and standards often change. God’s does not. He is righteous. He has set the standard. God has made it plain that those who do not meet his standard will face his judgment and wrath.

The church is not exempt from this fault. Often, salvation is believed to be through Christ but often treated as optional. This does not mean that Christians do not believe salvation is through Christ alone. It is more of a misunderstanding of God’s righteousness. God’s wrath will be poured out on those who do not believe in Christ. Discussion of God’s wrath is neglected. It is not that it is not important, it is just not mentioned when discussing salvation other than from the pulpit, if then.

Another way this is demonstrated is in how family members and friends are viewed in the community by those inside the church, especially in a family-oriented area. This close connection can often hinder the urgency of the gospel. It seems that many think their family members and friends will be just fine. They will not experience the wrath of God because of their identity. Maybe they made a profession of faith when they were young but show no evidence of that salvation in their life. Maybe they think that because of their status in the community, everything will be fine. Often when someone dies, one hears testimony from family members which point back to some event or activity in the church in which the deceased was involved. The testimony seemed to be indicating that their family member was fine because of that participation.

The third application is appreciation of salvation. This is connected to the previous application but needs to be explained. Appreciation for salvation is what moves believers to serve. It is perhaps one of the greatest traps believers can fall into. For example, because salvation is a gift from God through Christ which does not have to be earned, believers can take it for granted. What Christ has done for believers loses its focus in the lives of Christians. Christ has taken on the wrath of God. God has provided salvation through Christ and imparted a righteousness to those who believe. Christ met the standard that no sinful human being could meet. This should not lead to neglect but appreciation. Paul stated, "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" (1 Cor 15:56-57)

An atmosphere of appreciation could be provided by setting aside a small amount of time during the worship service to share testimonies. These testimonies could provide an atmosphere of appreciation as Christians recall their life before Christ, how he saved them, and what their life is like now. This could be a great reminder of what Christ has done for them. It will also be a witness for those in attendance who do not know

Christ. Taking time to remember what Christ has done is important.

Another area where appreciation can be fostered is through the Lord's Supper. Believers are called to take the Lord Supper "in remembrance" of Christ (1 Cor 11:24). Often, the Lord's Supper is placed at the end of the service with very little time to focus on what Christ has accomplished. There seems to be very little remembrance. Instead, the congregation could focus the whole service around the Lord's Supper. Doing this will help believers to remember what Christ has done.

The fourth application is seeing the need to share the gospel faithfully. Again, this builds off of the previous application. If one does not understand the righteousness of God, one may not have the urgency to share the gospel. If one thinks everybody will be fine, there is no need to take time and share the gospel. Understanding the righteousness of God calls one to understand his wrath. God will judge and he will judge rightly. He will judge according to his standard and no one can meet that standard. That is why there is a need for a Savior. Christ is the Savior. There is salvation in no one else (Acts 4:12). If one does not believe in Christ for salvation, he will experience the wrath of God.

Believers are called to take the gospel to all the world (Acts 1:8). However, there is very little urgency to share the gospel in today's church. Often, outreach opportunities are met with initial enthusiasm only to fade out after a few weeks. There is often a lack of urgency to share the gospel. This could be because most professed believers do not have a sense of the righteousness of God.

The fifth application is appreciation for the whole council of God's Word. This is important and connects to the preaching and teaching ministry of the church. If one were to read Rom 1:17, it would be very easy to read over and have a general understanding of salvation. However, as one studies the

concept of the righteousness of God from a whole biblical understanding, it enriches what Paul says in that verse. When one studies the Old Testament passages mentioned above (and there are many others that were not discussed)<sup>52</sup>, one better understands the need for a Savior and how the gospel reveals the righteousness of God fully. It is only in the cross that the judgment of God and the salvation of God are poured out which results in a righteousness imparted for the believer. One does not get this understanding from reading that verse alone.

The sixth application is thankfulness. This is not different than appreciation for salvation but is more general. Thankfulness is important for the believer. When one considers what God has accomplished by studying his Word, it generates thankfulness within the believer. It is also important to be thankful because it moves the focus off the individual and puts the focus on the Lord. God often reminded his people of all that he had done for them. Believers have the whole council of God's Word that reveals his works. Finally, it is important to be thankful because thankfulness is God's will for believers. Paul says, "Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in everything; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (1 Thess 5:16-18)

## **Conclusion**

What has been presented in this article is a survey of the righteousness of God through the Old Testament culminating in Rom 1:17 with application for the church. What is evident is that God's righteousness is an attribute of God. He is righteous and is right in all he does. He sets the standard which flows out of his character. His righteousness is demonstrated in his works. They are righteous acts. The works are demonstrated through his judgment and deliverance. It is in the cross of Christ that God's judgment and deliverance are most clearly displayed. Christ took upon himself the judgment of God and

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<sup>52</sup> Other passages of interest are Psalm 89:5-17, Psalm 103:6, Isaiah 51:4-8, and Jeremiah 23:5-6.

provided salvation to all who believe. Because Christ accomplished this, those who believe have his righteousness imputed to them. It is not earned but given through Christ. There is much application for the church today.

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