### God’s Righteousness

**1. Definitions and Terminology**

The Bible reveals that the Lord is righteous. The Hebrew term to express that idea is צָדָק (*tsadak*), which translates, “straight.” This implies that the Lord does not waver from the straight way. The word צָדָק (*tsadak*) makes up one part of God’s name יהוה צִדְקֵנוּ (*Yahweh tsikenu*), which means “Yahweh, our righteousness” (Jer 23:6). The New Testament Greek term for righteousness is δίκαιος *(dikaios*), which is rendered “observing a norm.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Correspondingly, God always conducts Himself in accordance with His standards.

In light of the meaning of these terms, we can offer a definition for God’s righteousness. Grudem expresses it well, “God’s righteousness means that always acts in accordance with what is right and is himself the final standard of what is right.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Erickson suggests a similar definition, “The righteousness of God also means that his actions are in accord with the law which he himself has established.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**2. Biblical Data**

The Scriptures abound with references to the Lord’s righteousness. Many Old Testament passages state this directly: “Righteous and upright is He” (Deut 32:4); “Yahweh is righteous, He loves righteousness” (Ps 11:7); “Good and upright is Yahweh” (Ps 25:8); “A righteous God and a Savior” (Isa 45:21); “O Yahweh God of Israel, You are righteous” (Ezra 9:15); and, “Your righteousness, O God, {reaches} to the heavens” (Ps 71:19). He rejoices in righteousness (Isa 64:5; Jer 9:24).

Correspondingly, there is no unrighteousness in Him: “Far be it from God to do wickedness, and from the Almighty to do wrong” (Job 34:10); “Yahweh is upright; {He is} my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him” (Ps 92:15), “Yahweh is righteous within her; He will do no injustice” (Zeph 3:5).

All His ways are righteous: “For all His ways are just” (Deut 32:4); “The ways of Yahweh are right” (Hos 14:9); ”Yahweh is righteous in all His ways” (Ps 145:17); “As for God, His way is blameless” (Ps 18:31; 2 Sam 22:31); and, “…the righteous acts of Yahweh” (Mic 6:5). Even the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar, after experiencing the Lord’s discipline, acknowledged, “All His works are true and His ways just” (Dan 4:37).

God’s laws and ordinances are also righteous: “…when I learn Your righteous judgments” (Ps 119:7); “Your judgments are righteous” (Ps 119:75); “Righteous are You, O Yahweh, and upright are Your judgments. You have commanded Your testimonies in righteousness and exceeding faithfulness” (Ps 119:137-138); “Your testimonies are righteous forever” (Ps 119:144); “All Your commandments are righteousness” (Ps 119:172); and, “All His precepts are sure…. They are performed in truth and uprightness” (Ps 111:7-8).

Yahweh is a righteous judge: “But, O Yahweh of hosts, who judges righteously…” (Jer 11:20); “Righteous are You, O Yahweh, that I would plead {my} case with You” (Jer 12:1); and, “God is a righteous judge” (Ps 7:11). He speaks of Himself, “It is I who judge with equity” (Ps 75:2). He is impartial in judgment and “does not show partiality nor take a bribe” (Deut 10:17). “Everyone who acts unjustly is an abomination to Yahweh your God” (Deut 25:16).

Therefore, He is righteous when He punishes violations of the Law: “You are just in all that has come upon us; For You have dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly” (Neh 9:33); “Righteousness belongs to You, O Lord, but to us open shame, as it is this day…. You have driven them, because of their unfaithful deeds which they have committed against You” (Dan 9:7); and, “Yahweh is righteous; for I have rebelled against His command” (Lam 1:18).

Righteousness characterizes not only God’s judgments, but also His kingly reign. Yahweh is a righteous King. The psalmist testifies, “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne; lovingkindness and truth go before You” (Ps 89:14); and, “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne” (Ps 97:2). The Lord’s righteous reign is the glory of His people (Ps 89:16). Messiah’s reign is also a righteous reign:

- Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of joy above Your fellows (Ps 45:6-7; сf. Heb 1:8-9).

- But with righteousness He will judge the poor, and decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; - and He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked. Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins, and faithfulness the belt about His waist (Isa 11:4-5).

We can mention other features of Yahweh’s righteousness highlighted in the Old Testament. “And the heavens declare His righteousness, for God Himself is judge” (Ps 50:6; 96:6). His righteousness is eternal (Ps 111:3; 119:142). Only in Him is righteousness (Isa 45:24). One should not challenge His ways (Ezek 18:25, 29).

Finally, the Old Testament connects Yahweh’s righteousness with the salvation of His people. On the one hand, the psalmist appeals to the Lord when he is unfairly oppressed:

You have seen it, O Yahweh, do not keep silent; O Lord, do not be far from me. Stir up Yourself, and awake to my right and to my cause, my God and my Lord. Judge me, O Yahweh my God, according to Your righteousness, and do not let them rejoice over me (Ps 34:22-24; also see Ps 71:2-4; Ps 31:1-5).

At the same time, the psalmist recognizes that he is sinful and cannot consider himself righteous before the Lord on his own merits:

Hear my prayer, O Yahweh, Give ear to my supplications! Answer me in Your faithfulness, in Your righteousness! And do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no man living is righteous (Ps 143:1-2).

Nonetheless, he anticipates God’s intervention because of His mercy and because of his personal devotion to Him as well:

For the sake of Your name, O Yahweh, revive me. In Your righteousness, bring my soul out of trouble. And in Your lovingkindness, cut off my enemies and destroy all those who afflict my soul, for I am Your servant (Ps 143:11-12).

Yahweh in His righteousness delivers His chosen people, Israel. In Psalm 98:2-3, we read, “Yahweh has made known His salvation; He has revealed His righteousness in the sight of the nations. He has remembered His lovingkindness and His faithfulness to the house of Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God” (сf. Dan 9:16). In addition, in the book of Jeremiah it is written, “In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, ‘Yahweh our righteousness.’” (Jer 23:6).

Salvation was one of the stipulations of the covenant He made with His people. Therefore, when Israel is in trouble, they had a basis for anticipating His intervention. Since God is true to His covenant, in righteousness He responds with salvation for His people.[[4]](#footnote-4) This is the reason why, after their victory in battle, Deborah and Barak rejoice in Yahweh’s righteousness (Judg 5:11). Similarly, God acted in righteousness when He exalted Cyrus to the throne for the deliverance of His people (Isa 45:13).

It is very possible that in the following passage, when the psalmist refers to the Lord’s righteousness, he is referring to His faithfulness in saving Israel from their enemies according to His covenant with them:

I have proclaimed glad tidings of righteousness in the great congregation; behold, I will not restrain my lips, O Yahweh, You know. I have not hidden Your righteousness within my heart; I have spoken of Your faithfulness and Your salvation; I have not concealed Your lovingkindness and Your truth from the great congregation (Ps 39:10-11).

In addition, the Old Testament associates Yahweh’s righteousness not only with His faithfulness, but also with His mercy: “Gracious is Yahweh, and righteous; Yes, our God is compassionate” (Ps 116:5); and, “O continue Your lovingkindness to those who know You, and Your righteousness to the upright in heart” (Ps 36:10). Therefore, the Lord’s righteousness and His mercy do not stand in contrast, but in harmony.

Finally, God’s righteousness in the sense of salvation applies not only to Israel, but also to all peoples: “By awesome {deeds} You answer us in righteousness, O God of our salvation, You who are the trust of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest sea” (Ps 65:5). We also read of an eschatological expectation that in the future Yahweh’s righteousness will bring healing: “But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings” (Mal 4:2).

The New Testament highlights still other aspects of the Lord’s righteousness. On the one hand, the teaching of God’s righteous nature remains unaltered. Jesus calls the Father “O righteous Father” (Jn 17:25) and claims that “There is {only} One who is good” (Matt 19:17). All His ways are “righteous and true” (Rev 15:3). He is the “righteous judge (1 Pet 2:23), who shows no partiality (Eph 6:9). All His judgments are “true and righteous” (Rev 19:2; сf. 19:11). In a word, Yahweh is “perfect.” (Matt 5:48).

Jesus speaks out against these who make themselves righteous before God. At the conclusion of His parable of the tax collector and Pharisee, He concludes, “I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk 18:14). Additionally, He opposes those who lay a burden of legalism on the people (Mk 3:1-5).

The New Testament, in fact, reveals a way to be righteous before the Lord independent of human achievement. In the gospel, the “righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous {man} shall live by faith.’” (Rom 1:17). Righteousness before God is attained by faith: “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy” (Tit 3:5). Paul sought to “be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from {the} Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which {comes} from God on the basis of faith” (Phil 3:9).

In the justification of the sinner, it is important to realize that Yahweh remains totally righteous because the Son of God, Jesus Christ, took upon Himself the sins of the entire world and became the propitiation for our sins. Paul taught:

But now apart from the Law {the} righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even {the} righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. {This was} to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, {I say,} of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:21-26).

The apostle John echoes the thought that, thanks to the sacrifice of Jesus, God is “faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:9). Finally, the New Testament foretells the time when the new heavens and the new earth appear, “in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet 3:13).

**3. Theological Considerations**

We need to clarify the relationship between the concepts of the Lord’s righteousness and His “goodness,” or in the Greek ἀγαθωσύνη (*agathosune*). The term “goodness” has two connotations. One relates to God’s righteousness in the sense that He does not sin. For example, in Ephesians 5:8-9, the word ἀγαθωσύνη (*agathosune*) is associated with the terms “righteousness” and “truth,” indicating proper behavior. The context of 2 Thessalonians 1:11 also connects ἀγαθωσύνη (*agathosune*) with righteous behavior. The other meaning of “goodness” (ἀγαθωσύνη) relates to God’s kindness. He supports, helps, and shows mercy. Galatians 5:22 serves as an example of this usage.

A long debated question exists about the *basis* for the Lord’s righteousness. In other words, how is right and wrong defined? Some feel that God’s righteousness is based on His will or choice – He simply decides that it is so. He could have created a different standard had He so pleased. This position is called “voluntarism.” Others believe that God’s standard is based on His nature. Consequently, He Himself does what He commands others to do and what corresponds to his nature, and forbids what is contrary to it. This view is known as “essentialism.”

The following evidence is advanced in support of voluntarism. A well-accepted axiom is that God is the “First Cause.” As the First Cause, He defines the conditions under which all things exist and act. This means that He has the authority and freedom to establish any law or order He pleases. Therefore, He could have establishes a standard different than the one now existing, since the law is based on His will.

Adherents of this theory draw a parallel between the Lord establishing His law and His act of creation. It is clear that the Lord made the world through a free act of His will. Similarly, it is assumed that He established His standards by a free act of His will as well. In addition, one must agree that God has all authority, power and dominion. Consequently, no one and nothing is greater or higher than He. Yet if, as essentialism asserts, God must keep His own law, then it seems that the law is higher and has more authority than He does. Pink comments here, “God is sovereign. His will is supreme. So far from God being under any law of ‘right,’ He is a law unto Himself, so that whatever *He* does *is* right.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

What support is offered for the theory “essentialism?” Adherents argue that the Lord’s standard is not above Him, but is an expression of His nature. God does not “submit” to some sort of external standard, but simply acts in accordance with His nature, which is expressed in His laws. The Bible states that the Lord *cannot* sin (1 Jn 1:5, Heb 6:18; Tit 1:2; Jam 1:13), which means that He cannot act contrary to the laws that He has established.

Another key passage to consider is 1 Pet 1:15-16, which states, “But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all {your} behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” His standard (“You shall be holy”) is not based on an arbitrary decision, but on His holy nature (“for I am holy”). Finally, the majority of evangelical theologians hold to the theory of essentialism. Erickson states, “The law of God, being a true expression of his nature, is as perfect as he is.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Strong concurs, “God’s being and God’s will eternally conform to each other.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Scholars also probe into the question of the relationship between the Lord’s righteousness and His freedom.[[8]](#footnote-8) Can God, who possesses total freedom, use His freedom to commit sin? In addition, if God is unable to sin, then how can we consider His perfect behavior praiseworthy, since it requires no real effort on His part?

Various solutions to this quandary are suggested. Some say that God could indeed sin, but chooses not to. Others posit that He has the power or ability to sin, but His holy nature does not permit it. Others assert that the co-existence of righteousness and freedom to sin creates a logical contradiction and, therefore, righteousness, being the higher attribute, will dominate.

Millard Erickson’s solution is preferred. Although God is not able to sin, He nonetheless is acting in freedom, since no one is compelling Him to do right. He makes a free decision to act righteously in accordance with His holy nature. Erickson thus posits a harmonious relationship between God’s will and His nature.

God’s righteousness includes the fact that He is honest. He always speaks the truth. Yahweh states, “I, Yahweh, speak righteousness, declaring things that are upright” (Isa 45:19). He hates falsehood (Prov 12:22). He is “true” (Rev 3:7), full of truth (Jn 1:14), and cannot lie (Heb 6:18; 1 Sam 15:29). All His words are righteous and true (Jn 17:17; Ps 119:142, 151).[[9]](#footnote-9)

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8. Erickson M. J. God the Father Almighty. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998. – P. 247-253. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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