

GREAT IS THY FAITHFULNESS

Incomplete report

My friend Bill had not prepared well for the oral report on newspaperman Joseph Pulitzer in one of our college journalism classes. It was supposed to be a 10-minute presentation, but he only had about three minutes' worth of material, much of which was inaccurate. The professor, Dr. Overbeck, interrupted Bill frequently to correct him. Bill tried to stretch the report as much as possible, but he appeared to run out of material well before the 10-minute mark. When the professor asked him if he was finished, Bill rallied by mostly going over the same ground he'd already covered, with Dr. Overbeck interrupting with his customary corrections.

Finally, like a runner collapsing down the stretch, Bill gave up and said to the professor, "I'm sorry, Dr. Overbeck, I do not know anything more about Joseph Pulitzer. Would you please continue?" The professor finished the story.

Israel got the story wrong and couldn't finish it. As a whole, the Israelites thought their God was for them and them only. God had partnered with Israel to rescue the world from sin and death. Would God, like the professor, be able to somehow finish the story despite the failure of his people?

Paul has demonstrated in Romans 1:18-3:20 that all are equal in sin. In Romans 3:21-31, he will demonstrate that all are equal in salvation. The equality of all, in both sin and salvation, contributes to Paul's overall goal of uniting Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome.

If we have been tracking with Paul up to Romans 3:20, we should be feeling the weight of our sin. We must feel its weight in order to understand the strength of God's grace.

No treatment of the passage at hand can do justice to it. Not even its author did justice to it. The only one who did justice to it is the one who lived it, our Lord and Savior.

Romans 3:21-31:

²¹But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²²even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; ²⁵whom 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; ²⁶for 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.

²⁷Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. ²⁸For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. ²⁹Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of

Gentiles also,³⁰ since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.

³¹Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.

The faithfulness of God

Paul said in Romans 1:16-17 that the gospel, the story and announcement concerning the lordship of Jesus Christ, is powerful to save believers because it reveals the “righteousness of God,” the saving activity of God. Paul has left us hanging since then, waiting for an explanation of this righteousness. Finally, he gives it to us.

God has revealed his righteousness apart from the law, which he gave to the Jews. If it were not revealed apart from the law, it would have been for Jews only, and for those who became Jews by coming under the law. Paul has already shown that the Jews cannot appeal to the law, for it only demonstrates them to be guilty of sin along with the Gentiles (Romans 3:20). In fact, the law, along with the rest of the Jewish scriptures, pointed beyond itself to another solution. The phrase “the law and the prophets” was a conventional way of speaking of the Old Testament (Matthew 5:17, 7:12).

In Romans 1:17, Paul said that the righteousness of God is revealed, literally, “out of faith into faith.” God, being faithful to his ancient promises, reveals his righteousness in the gospel. Such faithfulness comes to men and women, and they respond to it in faith—and even faithfulness, or allegiance. From first to last, faith involves casting oneself on the mercy of God.

For some, the inability of the Jews to bring salvation to the world called God’s righteousness and faithfulness into question (Romans 3:1-8). The question, then, is how would God be faithful to address the problem of human sin if not through the people that he called to do precisely that? The answer, according to Paul, is that God’s faithfulness is expressed through the faithfulness of the Jewish Messiah, the representative of Israel.

Literally, in verse 22, the righteousness of God has been revealed not through “faith in Jesus Christ” but through “faith of Jesus Christ.” The faith—or in this case, faithfulness—of the Messiah to the task marked out for Israel brings salvation to the world (Romans 5:19). As in Romans 1:17, where the righteousness of God is revealed “out of faith into faith,” in Romans 3:22, the righteousness of God has been revealed, literally, “through faith [faithfulness] of Jesus Christ into all those who believe.” Faith is the appropriate human response to divine faithfulness.

In Romans, the phrase “all those who believe” means Jewish and Gentile believers (Romans 1:16). God’s saving activity impacts both Jews and Gentiles, just as Jews and Gentiles both are guilty of sin and, apart from God’s saving activity, “fall short of the glory of God.” The glory of God is his royal presence, which humans are created to reflect as his representatives. In their rebellion against God, humans traded “the glory of the incorruptible God” for images drawn from creation (Romans 1:23). Salvation involves the restoration of humanity as bearers of God’s image. The salvation that Paul speaks of is in the future for those who in the present believe (Romans 1:16, 5:9). Jews and Gentiles are on equal footing both in their need for salvation and the means for experiencing it.

The salvation that believers anticipate is guaranteed because God has “justified” them—meaning, he has declared them to be his people. This status came about not

because they possessed the Jewish law or adhered to it but because God granted it to them.

Redemption in Christ

God granted it to them just as he granted it to the people of Israel: by means of redemption, the rescue from slavery. Before God gave the Israelites the law, he rescued them from Egypt, bringing them to himself and calling them his people (Exodus 15:13, 19:4, 20:2). The blood of the Passover lamb was instrumental in the Exodus, as the angel of death passed over the Israelites but killed the firstborn of Egypt. Animal sacrifices continued as part of God's partnership with Israel, particularly on the annual Day of Atonement, when the blood of a bull was sprinkled on the "mercy seat," symbolic of God's throne, in the tabernacle and later in the temple (Leviticus 16:2, 15). Twelve loaves of bread, representing the people of Israel, were displayed before God's presence in the temple (Leviticus 24:5-9).

In the new covenant, God displayed not bread but the Messiah, representing Israel and the rest of humanity, as a propitiation (the Greek word for "mercy seat" and "propitiation" are one and the same: *hilasterion*). Whereas the old covenant rituals took place inside the temple, the display of Christ, and his blood, was public. Christ fulfilled the temple and became the place where God meets not just with Israel but also with all humanity. Propitiation involves the placation of God's wrath, which was shown to hang over humanity in Romans 1:18-3:20. Through Christ, God satisfies his own wrath toward human rebellion and self-destructiveness.

The first part of verse 25 reads literally, "... whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation through faith." God displayed Christ as a propitiation not, of course, by means of the faith of believers but by means of the faithfulness of Christ. Christ, the representative of Israel, thus assumed the "Suffering Servant" vocation of Israel, the representative nation.¹ Unlike Israel, Jesus was "obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). Jesus, faithful to God and his plan to rescue the world where Israel wasn't, suffered in the place of Israel and for the sake of the world (Isaiah 41:8, 53:4-6).

Justification, the declaration that identifies believers as the people of God, takes place through redemption, the rescue from the slavery of sin, and involves the once-and-for-all forgiveness of sins. The prophet Isaiah anticipated this kind of forgiveness in the new exodus (Isaiah 40:1-11). In justifying men and women who believe the gospel, God is saying, "These are the ones I have rescued from sin for myself."

The justice of God

There is another aspect to the "righteousness of God," aside from his saving disposition and activity. It concerns the justice of God, which could be challenged on the basis of his forbearance if it were not revealed in the gospel (Romans 2:4). Just because God is patient and holds back from punishing sin doesn't mean he winks at it. If God does not punish sin, he is not righteous. The gospel demonstrates the righteousness of God in showing that he punishes sin in the representative flesh of Jesus (Romans 8:3).

The gospel thereby demonstrates, in the present, two aspects of the righteousness of God: that he is just, punishing sin as it deserves, and that he is the justifier, declaring

those who believe the gospel to be his people.² Vindicated in the present, people who believe the gospel will be vindicated in the future, just as Paul said in Romans 2:13, and will be saved from the wrath of God in the final judgment.

God vindicates not only his people but also his righteousness, and he does so in two ways. First, he vindicates the saving aspect of his righteousness. Second, he vindicates the justice aspect of his righteousness. He accomplishes both through Christ. He is the righteous covenant partner and the righteous judge.

God is so beyond us that of course he will seem contradictory at times. To us, he cannot be just and the justifier. But the gospel brings together these two aspects of God's righteousness and shows them to be congruent, not contradictory. We should therefore expect that the gospel will make a sublime picture of all the clashing colors of life.

One God, one family

The conclusion Paul draws from the revelation of God's righteousness apart from the Jewish law is that it leaves no room for Jewish boasting. Paul will address Gentile boastfulness in Romans 9-11, particularly Romans 11:17-18. Paul has already spoken against Jews who "boast in God" and "boast in the law" (Romans 2:17, 23). They boasted that they were God's people based on their possession of the law.

Faith, not the law, marks out God's people. Here, and extending through Romans 4, Paul refers not to divine faithfulness as seen in the Messiah but to responsive human faith. God declares people to belong to him when they respond to him in faith. It matters not whether they adhere to the Jewish law. Some Jews would have assumed that the law excluded Gentiles. On the contrary, faith includes Gentiles and excludes racial privilege. Faith excludes Jewish exclusiveness.

The problem, it seems, is not that the First Century Jews were trying to be God's people on the basis of works of the law. They assumed that they were already God's people based on their possession of the law. In their view, their adherence to it marked them out as God's people. They weren't doing the works of the law in order to get their sins forgiven; God's covenant with them provided for ritual sacrifices and the forgiveness of sins. Many Jews who believed the gospel allowed for the inclusion of the Gentiles but insisted that they come under the Jewish law and be marked out by its works, principally circumcision (Acts 15:5).

If justification included works of the law, then God's impartiality could be impugned, for the law was given only to the Jews. Moreover, God, though he first partnered with the Jews, is not interested in being solely the God of the Jews. If a people were to be justified on the basis of the law, then indeed, God would be "God of the Jews only"—and indeed, the Jews could boast all they wanted about being the privileged people.

But God is also the God of the Gentiles, and he is "one," not two. Paul evokes the *Shema* from Deuteronomy 6:4, which summarized the entire Jewish law: "The Lord is one." It constituted a call to worship the Lord alone instead of multiple gods. Two modes of justification would open the door for each group to develop its own concept of God and essentially worship different versions of God in isolation from each other. As one God, he justifies both Jews and Gentiles in one way, on the basis of faith.

When Paul evokes the *Shema* in Galatians 3:20, he does so to proclaim in Galatians 3:28 that "you are all one in Christ Jesus." The point of his argument in

Romans is identical: God is one, and he wants one family composed of both Jews and Gentiles. Paul will note in Romans 4:17 that God told Abraham, the first Jew, “A father of many nations I have made you.” A father doesn’t want his children living in alienation from each other. In Ephesians, Paul says that Christ has made Jews and Gentiles into “one” and has created “one new man” (Ephesians 2:14-15).³ The goal of justification by faith in Romans, not to mention Galatians and Ephesians, is to bring together Jew and Gentile believers.

Paul spoke of the law in positive terms through Romans 3:20. Some may ask if he has contradicted himself in verses 21-30. Paul’s gospel apparently provoked the charge that he was promoting lawlessness, an allegation that he will address in Romans 6. So Paul raises the question that some no doubt would be asking: Does his advocacy of faith over against works of the law amount to nullification of the law? Paul answers by claiming that faith, in fact, establishes the law.

Faith does so in precisely the way Paul has been arguing for: It moves beyond the borders of Israel. The law, identifying sin in Israel, demonstrated that faith was the way of covenant membership even for the Jew. As Paul noted in verse 21, the law bore witness that both Jews and Gentiles would respond to the saving activity of God with faith. In Deuteronomy 4:5-7, Moses declared that Jewish obedience to the law would draw the Gentiles to the God of Israel. The obedience of the Messiah, which leads to justification by faith instead of works of the law, does precisely that: It draws the Gentiles. Faith does what the law wanted to do.

The law, when seen incorrectly as national privilege, separates the Jews from the Gentiles. The law, when seen correctly as fulfilled by faith, unites them.

Where’s the hero?

The dramatic effect of this passage—particularly the first two words, “But now”—should not be lost on us. Humans rejected their Creator and chose to worship other gods. As a result, they experienced the dehumanizing effect of their choices. They have been in the clutches of sin and death with no way out.

God hinted right from the start, in his words to Eve, that he would rescue the world from the tyranny of sin and death. He revealed his plan first to Abraham and then Abraham’s descendants: He would rescue the world through the nation of Israel. In fact, he rescued Israel from the tyranny of Egypt so that it would rescue the world. Men and women could hope that God had not left them to be tortured by their own choices.

But the rescue operation crashed in the desert. The cavalry never made it over the hill. The hero had clay feet. Israel, humanity’s only hope, proved unequal to the task. By all appearances, God himself had failed.

In the First Century, with Israel itself in the clutches of Rome, another oppressor, a Jewish teacher from Galilee began speaking and acting as if he were, in some sense, Israel. He gathered 12 disciples, the same number of tribes in Israel. He retraced the steps of Israel by going to Egypt, coming through the water in his baptism and enduring the wilderness. He retold the stories of Israel, but placed himself in the center of them. Finally, he climbed the hill that Israel couldn’t climb, carrying on his back the sins of the world.

When it looked as if sin and death would win, Jesus the Messiah embodied the faithfulness of God and rescued the world. He accomplished not only forgiveness for sins but also victory over sin, as Paul will explain in Romans 5-8. Christ finished the story.

Responding to the story

What do you do when you hear a story like that? You believe it. Believing it, you cast yourself on the mercy of God. You believe it because it was in your heart before you ever heard it. You were born waiting to hear a story about a hero who comes to the rescue when all seems lost. God has planted within the human heart sensitivity for the Messianic story. That's why stories that echo this one are told all over the world, even in Hollywood and pop music.

Consider these lyrics from "Criminal" by Fiona Apple, who is singing not of God but of a man she hurt:

*I've been a bad bad girl
I've been careless with a delicate man
And it's a sad sad world
When a girl will break a boy
Just because she can
Don't you tell me to deny it
I've done wrong and I want to
Suffer for my sins
I've come to you 'cause I need
Guidance to be true
And I just don't know where I can begin*

*What I need is a good defense
'Cause I'm feelin' like a criminal
And I need to be redeemed
To the one I've sinned against
Because he's all I ever knew of love⁴*

She goes on to sing about the consequences for her evil deeds and the need to cleanse herself until she's good enough for her man. She worries that there's hell to pay. Sometimes, the vocabulary of the gospel, which can express the longing for forgiveness like nothing else, provides the only words that will suffice, even for those who don't believe it.

Don Richardson, in his book "Eternity in their Hearts," reports on more than two dozen primitive cultures that were strangely waiting for the gospel story when missionaries arrived. In many cases, their own stories resonated with the gospel. Richardson's conclusion is that God had prepared these cultures for the gospel.⁵

Jesus made the story of Israel a story for everyone. Not only that, he made it a better story. When you believe the gospel, the new and better story of Israel becomes your story. Redemption from Egypt becomes redemption from sin, made possible by the new Passover Lamb, who is Christ. The Day of Atonement, with its hidden and perennial rituals, becomes Good Friday, openly displaying the blood of Christ for all to see and

putting forth the final sacrifice. The temple, where God met with representatives of Israel, becomes Christ, in whom God meets with all believers. Israel, the unfaithful Suffering Servant, becomes Christ, the faithful Suffering Servant.

When you believe the gospel and trust in God, you become part of the people of God. Your sins, which twisted and tortured you and provoked God's wrath, are forgiven once and for all. And you set out, along with your new companions, on a journey through the wilderness of this world, on your way to the new Promised Land, the new creation, where you will perfectly bear God's image and reflect his glory. Paul will be our guide for this journey in Romans 5-8.

The great unifier

Just as the Jews boasted that they were God's people, and sought to demonstrate it by adherence to the law, all cultures tend to have characteristics that mark them out as superior. Such attachment to cultural characteristics serves to provide a sense of security by excluding those who are deemed inferior. A culture can be as big as an entire race or as small as a collection of friends.

Sin is the great leveler, for all have sinned. The gospel is the great unifier. Sin and the gospel leave no room for any kind of superiority complex that excludes others simply because they're not like you.

The gospel is so powerful that it not only draws people of different cultures to it but also binds them together in the same family. The gospel is the story we all believe. The Israel story is the one we all live. If we are attentive to the gospel story, in all its magnificence, with an ear toward how it inspires unity, we will embrace the notion that God's family is marked out by faith and nothing else. Faith includes all who believe the gospel and excludes exclusiveness based on tribalism.

Like the father in the Prodigal Son story who wanted both his sons together in his house, God wants all his children together in his family—yes, and different kinds of children together in the same church. Without compromising the integrity of the gospel, we are compelled to respect and even celebrate different cultural expressions.

It is the road less traveled by. It is far easier to be a church where uniformity, rather than diversity, is celebrated. For evidence of this, count the number of churches that orient themselves around ethnicity. You'll be counting for a long time. It is by no means easy to live side by side with people whose cultures are different from yours. When you rub elbows with them, they can rub you the wrong way—and show you that you were far less free of prejudice than you imagined. In the movie "Crash," a fascinating morality play, each character's racial prejudices emerge when destiny provokes emotionally charged confrontations.

It is by no means easy to distinguish between what to reject, because it compromises the gospel, and what to embrace, because it doesn't compromise the gospel. Such is the challenge before us. But God gave us the gospel, the book of Romans and the Holy Spirit to help us face into it.

A Benedictine induction ceremony asks an applicant, "What is it you seek?" It's a good question, isn't it? What, after all, are we seeking, and what are we looking for in a faith community? The expected answer goes like this: "The mercy of God and fellowship in this community." The gospel grants us the mercy of God. But his mercy beckons us to

fellowship in his community. Gospel and community go together. And if it's a gospel of mercy, his community is open to all.

Weight of guilt

God has been—astoundingly—faithful. The Messiah got the story right and finished it.

In the movie “The Mission,” Rodrico Mendoza, played by Robert DeNiro, enslaves and kills natives in a South American jungle and even murders his own brother. Wracked with guilt, he tells a priest, played by Jeremy Irons, “For me there is no redemption. . . . There is no penance hard enough for me.” The priest convinces him to choose his penance, so Rodrico decides to carry behind him an enormous net containing his armor and weapons, the instruments of his sins. Along the way, another priest, so dismayed by Rodrico’s burden, cuts the rope that was attached to the net, but the determined penitent reattaches it.

Rodrico wades upstream against a mighty river and finally scales a cliff, in the face of a waterfall, in order to reach the plateau where he had tormented the natives. When he reaches the top of the falls, the natives recognize him and surround him. One runs to him and puts a knife to his throat. The chief of the tribe barks an order. Instead of slashing Rodrico’s throat, the tribesman cuts the rope and rolls the ball of armor and weapons over the falls. Rodrico releases his guilt and weeps for joy. When the priest cut the rope, it had no effect on Rodrico. The chief, the one he had sinned against, was the only one who could free him.⁶

It’s over. The never-ending quest—in which you have attempted to make up for your sins on the one hand or justify and prove yourself on the other—has come to an end. The only one worth proving yourself to has already proved himself to you. If you’ve been carrying around a net of guilt, the gospel tells you that God himself has cut the rope and rolled it away. Let it go, and weep for joy.

To God, and to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, be the glory.

Scott Grant / 2-12-06

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¹ Paul makes liberal use of Isaiah in Romans, and the “Servant Song” of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 never seems far from his mind. It appears in an allusion in Romans 4:25, which concludes the first major section in Romans: “he who was delivered over because of our transgressions.”

² In verse 26, God justifies, literally, “the one out of the faith [faithfulness] of Jesus.” Paul, it seems, is speaking of one whose status derives from the faithfulness of Jesus.

³ God justifies Jews “out of” faith and Gentiles “through” faith. In using different prepositions, Paul may be indicating the sequence of faith, as he does by use of different prepositions in Romans 1:17 and 3:22. The Jews, the original covenant people, believed first, then the Gentiles. Gentiles are affirmed, and Jews are reaffirmed.

⁴ *Criminal*, © 1996 by Fiona Apple.

⁵ Don Richardson, *Eternity in their Hearts*, © 1981 by Regal Books, Ventura, Calif.

⁶ *The Mission*, © 1986 Kingsmere Productions Ltd.