

RIGHTEOUSNESS

1.1.1.1. Hebrew. G. Quell provides an excellent introduction to the issues that are at the basis of the Hebrew understanding of righteousness. The concept of righteousness in the Hebrew Bible emphasizes the relational aspect of God and humanity in the context of a covenant. Among the various Hebrew word groups associated with righteousness, *šedeq* (“straightness,” “justness,” “rightness”) and *š^edāqâ* (“justice,” “straightness,” “honesty”) suggest a norm. In the LXX *dikaïosynē* (“righteousness”) is used 81 times for *šedeq*, 134 times for *š^edāqâ*, and six times it renders freely the adjective *šaddîq* (“just,” “righteous,” “honest”). There are eight instances in which *dikaïosynē* (“righteousness”) renders *hesed* (“loving-kindness,” “mercy,” “piety,” “goodwill”; e.g., Gen 19:19). Other Hebrew words meaning “genuine,” “good,” “evenness,” “purity” and “simplicity” are occasionally translated by *dikaïosynē*. *Dikaïos* (“observant of right,” “righteous,” “fair”) renders the Hebrew *šaddîq* 189 times. In sum, of the predominant Hebrew terms the root *šdq* is the only one to be rendered mainly by *dikē* (“right,” “law”) and its derivatives, especially *dikaïosynē*, while other synonymous Hebrew terms such as *hesed* are not given their due when the LXX translates them by *eleos* (“pity,” “mercy”), which introduces an emotional element not present in the Hebrew. *Dikaïosynē* would have been a more accurate rendering of these words as well.

The common Hebrew word for righteousness is *šedeq*, or its feminine form *š^edāqâ*, which occurs in the OT 117 and 115 times respectively. The Hebrew meaning of justice means more than the classical Greek idea of giving to every one their due. Usually the word suggests Yahweh’s saving acts as evidence of God’s faithfulness to the covenant. For this meaning of righteousness of God, *dikaïosynē* is not as flexible as the Hebrew word.¹

In the Tannaitic literature of rabbinic Judaism there was a theological and semantic shift restricting *šedeq* and *š^edāqâ* to proper behavior, with *š^edāqâ* being used primarily for almsgiving (Przybylski, 75). God’s righteousness was increasingly understood as God’s willingness to protect and provide for the poor. This association was already present within the Hebrew Bible; for example: “They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor; their righteousness endures forever” (Ps 112:9).²

1.1.1.2. Greek. The richness of the Hebrew usage is generally well reproduced in the LXX (Quell). Of the relatively few instances in which *šedeq*, *š^edāqâ* and *šaddîq* are not translated by *dikai-* words, *eleēmosynē* and *eleos* (“alms,” “mercy”) are employed for *š^edāqâ* (cf. LXX Is 1:27; Ziesler, 59–60). Similar evidence of this is found in the NT at

LXXSeptuagint

¹Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 828 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

²Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 828 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

LXXSeptuagint

Matthew 6:1, where the variant readings of later MSS read *eleēmosynēn* for *dikaiosynēn* (see Przybylski, 78).

1.1.1.3. *Latin.* In the Western Roman Empire, the Old Latin versions of the NT displaced the Greek NT, and Paul was consequently understood via the Latin translation. The Old Latin and later Latin Vulgate rendered *dikaiosynē* by *iustitia* (“justice”). The legal connotation of this term in Roman Law was superimposed upon the word *dikaiosynē*, which Paul had employed. The Roman legal understanding of justice was in a distributive sense: to give to each their due, the bestowal of rewards and punishments according to merit. The OT sense of righteousness as grounded in covenantal relationship was weakened, and its place was taken by the courtroom image of the sinner before God’s tribunal. Although righteousness in the OT had a legal aspect, it was that of a litigant being adjudged righteous by God before their enemies. The biblical image of the covenant between God and humanity faded into the background, while the Latin context called to mind stark legal realities of the court. The shift in language from Hebrew to Greek to Latin resulted in an alteration in theological content as the words that were employed either overlaid the earlier meaning or signified something new in the receptor language.

1.1.1.4. *English.* Modern English partakes of a double portion of Indo-European languages: a Germanic base from Anglo-Saxon as well as Latinate words from the Norman Conquest. Because of this characteristic of English, one can say either “to be righteous” (from the Anglo-Saxon verb *rightwisen* meaning “to make right, to rightwise”), or “to be justified” (a verbal form derived from *ius*, *iuris* and *iustitia*, meaning “to be declared just”). The semantic ranges of the two are not identical.³

1.1.2. Worldviews.

1.1.2.1. *Hebrew.* An essential component of Israel’s religious experience was that Yahweh was not only Lord of Law but also the one who was faithful to it. God was faithful to the covenant. God’s righteousness was shown by saving actions in accordance with this covenant relationship. A person was righteous by acting properly in regard to the covenant relationship with Yahweh. One’s relationship with others reflected the relational aspect of the covenant with Yahweh. Righteousness was understood in terms of being in proper relation to the covenant rather than in terms of “right” or ethical conduct as determined by some abstract standard. When Judah says of Tamar, “She is more righteous than I,” he is referring to her being righteous in her pursuit of covenantal, familial responsibility (Gen 38:26).

1.1.2.2. *Greco-Roman.* The gods of the Greco-Roman pantheon were thought to be subject to forces beyond their control (see Religions). This understanding later degenerated into a sort of inexorable fate to which even the gods were subject (see Worship). The Hellenistic theory of universal law meant that both the gods and humanity had to comply with these overarching norms in order to be righteous. Giving others their due was the basis of righteousness; one acted in accordance with a norm (Plato). In Greek thought, righteousness was a virtue. According to Aristotle, righteousness was the correct

MSSmanuscript or manuscripts

³Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, 828 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

functioning of all the virtues. In Roman Civil Law, justice (*iustitia*) was done when one acted toward another in accordance with one's respective status established by tradition and the Roman legal corpus.⁴

1.2. OT Background. While the OT uses righteousness terminology in numerous contexts involving all areas of life, the touchstone of righteousness is Israel's covenantal relationship with Yahweh. It is based on the standard of God's covenant faithfulness. Righteousness is not primarily an ethical quality; rather it characterizes the character or action of God who deals rightly within a covenant relationship and who established how others are to act within that relationship. "Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is right?" ([Gen 18:25](#)). The covenant faithfulness of God, the righteousness of God, is shown by Yahweh's saving acts. This salvation is variously experienced as Israel's victory over enemies, or personal vindication of one's innocence before God in the presence of one's enemies, and it involves both soteriological and forensic elements (*see* Triumph).

In the classical prophets of the eighth century, there is a greater emphasis on the juridical and ethical views of *šedeq*. Amos, on behalf of the poor, associates righteousness with doing justice (*mišpāt*, [Amos 5:7, 24; 6:12](#)). Corrupt judges who do not judge rightly do not reflect the righteousness of the covenant relationship. Their oppression of the poor is the antithesis of righteousness. Hosea, emphasizing divine love, links righteousness with loving-kindness and mercy as well as justice ([Hos 2:19; 10:12](#)). Micah refers only to God's righteousness as being his faithfulness to act within the covenant to save Israel from her enemies and to vindicate the penitent ([Mic 6:5; 7:9](#)). Isaiah associates the righteousness of the people and God's righteousness with just decisions ([Is 1:26; 16:5; 26:9](#)). God's faithfulness to deliver Israel is seen in the Servant of the Lord and Cyrus as God's chosen leaders/deliverers ([Is 42:6; 45:8, 13, 19](#)). Covenant relationship is the basis of righteousness ([Is 51:1](#)). God promises to bring righteousness, which is often understood as deliverance or vindication ([Is 51:5, 8; 62:1, 2](#)). In sum, the covenant understanding of righteousness in the classical prophets relates persons to the living God and his covenantal purposes in restoring order to his creation, not to an abstract norm of conduct (*see* Scullion).⁵

2. Righteousness in Paul

2.1. *Dikaiosynē*. Paul uses this word both in relationship to God and to human beings. In the latter case its ultimate origin is without exception the character and/or action of God. The term is used in various contexts or associations.

2.1.1. *Righteousness Declared.* A distinctive usage is found where Paul states that righteousness in believers is the result of a word, or declaration, of God. In [Romans 4](#), where Paul interprets Abraham's relationship with God as a scriptural foundation for his understanding of believers' "justification by faith" (explained in [Rom 1–3](#)), righteousness

⁴Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 829 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

⁵Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 829 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

is said to be “reckoned to” (RSV) or “credited to” (NIV) Abraham by God on the basis of Abraham’s believing/trusting in God (Rom 4:3, 5, 6, 9, 11, 22), rather than on the basis of his works. In Galatians 3:6 Abraham’s faith in God is “reckoned to him as righteousness.” Here, Abraham’s trusting submission to God is evaluated as “righteousness.”

2.1.2. *Righteousness as Gift.* Closely related are those usages where righteousness is stated to be a gift of God reigning in the believer (Rom 5:17, 21). Here it is seen as a new reality which dominates or directs the life in Christ (cf. Rom 8:10). According to Galatians 2:21, this righteousness results from God’s grace, for if it were possible to achieve it via obedience to the Law, Christ’s death would have been in vain. In Galatians 3:21 righteousness (in us, or as our new situation “in Christ”) is equated with life, which the Law is powerless to produce.

2.1.3. *Righteousness of Faith.* Righteousness, based on God’s word and work in Christ, a gift of God’s grace, comes to believers in the context and through the instrumentality of faith. Where righteousness and faith are related by Paul, it is almost always contrasted with a legalistic, or Law-oriented, righteousness. Thus in Romans 4:11, 13–14 the “righteousness of faith” is said to be based neither on circumcision nor on the deeds of the Law. In Romans 9:30–32; 10:4–6, 10 the righteousness that comes by faith is contrasted with that which is based on the Law and the doing of the works of the Law. Only the former leads to life, to salvation. Philippians 3:9 speaks of the righteousness that results from faith in Jesus, rather than “my own righteousness” based on Law. This righteousness by faith is of course the righteousness from God, “which depends on faith.” This conviction is affirmed by Paul in contrast to his own former experience where, on the basis of Law-based righteousness, he judged himself as “blameless” (Phil 3:6). Such moral perfectionism as that which Paul had by pedigree and personal endeavor does not, however, bring one into right relationship with God. According to Titus 3:5 believers are saved, not because of deeds done in righteousness (here righteousness means “legal obedience”), but by God’s merciful, atoning work in Christ.

2.1.4. *Righteousness of Obedience.* A final context is the use of righteousness in an ethical sense, characterizing the life of obedience of those who have been justified. Romans 6:13, 18, 19, 20 contrast lives/bodies as instruments or slaves of wickedness with lives yielded to God as instruments of righteousness. What is clearly in view here is the expected result of life lived in relationship with Christ, right living that is in keeping with God’s purposes. Righteousness (together with peace and joy) is that which marks the believer’s relationship with others (rather than judging or offending others) and is the result of God’s reign.

This view of righteousness is expanded in a number of Pauline passages. In 2 Corinthians 6:7, 14 it is given as a mark of the Christian life (acting rightly, justly, morally), in contrast with evil, falsehood, inequality (see Ethics). Righteousness is that quality of life which bears fruit in generous giving (2 Cor 9:10) or in purity and blamelessness (Phil 1:11). In Ephesians 4:24 righteousness is paired with holiness as resembling God, in contrast to corrupt, deceitful living. It is one of the marks of those who are “children of light” in distinction from those who perform “unfruitful works of darkness” (Eph 5:9). In

RSV Revised Standard Version

NIV New International Version

the Pastorals there are the exhortations to “aim at righteousness” (1 Tim 6:11; 2 Tim 2:22) and to receive “training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16); the context is clearly that of moral, ethical living. Finally, on the basis of faithful service, “the crown of righteousness” is granted at the eschatological judgment by God, “the righteous judge” (2 Tim 4:8).⁶

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2.3. *Dikaioō*. The verbal form of the noun *righteousness*, (*dikaioō*, “to justify” RSV, NIV, NEB; “to put right” TEV) is used almost always to describe that divine action which affects the sinner in such a way that the relation with God is altered or transformed (either ontologically, as a change in nature; or positionally, resulting from a judicial act; or relationally, as one who was alienated and is now reconciled [see 3 below]). Everywhere this action of God, emerging from his nature as the righteous one, is seen as an act of grace and takes place in the context of the exercise of faith, or trust or believing in Jesus.

Romans 3:21–31 is the most thorough statement of this distinctive Pauline theme. Its validity is grounded by Paul in the story of Abraham (Rom 4). Further reflection is given to it in such central theological texts as Romans 5:1, 9 and Galatians 2:17; 3:8, 24. The negative formulation of this truth is in the contrasting affirmation that no one is justified “by the Law.” In Romans 3:20; 4:2 and Galatians 2:16; 3:11 Paul states categorically the impossibility of receiving this justifying action of God by means of successfully keeping the requirements of the Law.

There are several texts where this action of God is addressed not to the sinner but to those who are already “justified.” The setting for this action is always eschatological judgment (Rom 2:13; 8:33; Gal 5:4–5). The issue in these instances is not salvation (either by works or by faith). Rather, those who have been justified (by grace through faith) appear before “the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Cor 5:10) where “the empirical reality of one’s life before God as ‘works’ will be revealed and evaluated”⁷

2.4. *Dikaiosynē Theou*. The concept of God’s righteousness, its nature, function and result, is central to Paul’s teaching on the justification of the sinner. The genitive construction *dikaiosynē theou*, “righteousness of God” (Rom 1:17; 3:5, 21, 22; 10:3; 2 Cor 5:21), or *dikaiosynē autou*, “his righteousness” (Rom 3:25, 26), or *hē ek theou dikaiosynē*, “righteousness from God” (Phil 3:9) are found ten times. Most of these are located in Romans, Paul’s fullest discourse on God’s redemptive work in Christ.

Romans 1:16–17 is foundational for understanding the meaning of this concept. For Paul the gospel—the event of the life, death and resurrection of Christ—is the historical manifestation of divine redemptive power. In that gospel “God’s righteousness is revealed.” Here God’s righteousness and the gospel (God’s saving work in Christ) are

⁶Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, 830 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

RSV Revised Standard Version

NIV New International Version

NEB New English Bible

⁷Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, 831 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

virtually synonymous (with the revelation of the saving righteousness of God being contrasted with the revelation of the wrath of God in [Rom 1:18](#)). Faith responds to God's act of righteousness and life results.

In contrast to human faithlessness and wickedness ([Rom 3:3–5](#)), God remains faithful, and in that faithfulness his righteousness is manifested. This faithfulness (or righteousness) is given its historical particularity (according to Paul's sustained presentation in [Rom 3:21–31](#)) in the sacrificial atonement of Christ's death ([Rom 3:24–25](#)). It is explicitly stated that in this redemptive act God's righteousness has been manifested ([Rom 3:21, 25, 26](#); *see* Death of Christ).⁸

3. History of Interpretation.

A. E. McGrath's study of the history of the doctrine of justification is instructive for discerning some of the reasons why the West has understood Paul's theology of God's saving action in Christ largely in terms of justification rather than relying on the varied richness of the biblical understanding of salvation in Christ. Several complex reasons for this include the interest in Paul evidenced by the rise in Pauline scholarship during the theological renaissance of the twelfth century, especially the use of Pauline commentaries as vehicles of theological speculation. Coupled with this, the Western church had a high regard for classical jurisprudence, which made possible the semantic relationship between *iustitia* (justice) and *iustificatio* (justification), and allowed theologians of High Scholasticism to find in the cognate concept of justification a means of rationalizing the divine dispensation toward humankind in terms of justice. Luther interpreted the scholastics as understanding the righteousness of God as that by which God punishes sinners ([WA 54.185.18–20](#)). Therefore, Luther could not see how the gospel revealing the righteousness of God could be “good news.” Luther's “discovery” of the free imparting of the righteousness of God to believers is instructive in explaining why the Reformation came to be perceived as inextricably linked with the doctrine of justification. The Roman Catholic desire to establish a Catholic consensus on this issue resulted in the discussion at the Council of Trent of the reconciliation of humanity to God under the aegis of the doctrine of justification.

3.1. Patristic-Medieval: East. In the East Paul's concept of the righteousness of God and the justification of the sinner was not a prominent means for understanding God's saving acts in Jesus Christ.⁹

3.2. Patristic-Medieval: West. In the Latin fathers and Origen, the righteousness of God is understood as **distributive justice**: God gives to all their due, rewarding the good and punishing the wicked. The Reformers turned to Augustine for his views on the righteousness of God.

3.2.1. Augustine. Augustine thought the righteousness of God was not the righteousness characterizing God's nature, but rather that by which God justifies sinners. His idea of faith involved an intellectual aspect: to believe is to affirm in thought.

⁸Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 832 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

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⁹Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 832 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

Augustine coupled faith with love (Augustine *Serm.* 90.6; 93.5; *Ep.* 183.1.3). The love of God is the theme dominating his view of justification, whereas the Reformers would coin the slogan *sola fide* (“by faith alone”) to characterize justification and their understanding of the righteousness of God. In his work *On the Trinity*, Augustine makes the statement that true justifying faith is accompanied by love (*De Trin.* 15.18.32). In his comments on [1 Corinthians 13:2](#) he remarks that genuine faith always works through love (recalling [Gal 5:6](#): see Crabtree). Augustine, along with some Greek fathers, underscored the gift aspect of justification. He believed that one’s nature was changed through this gift.¹⁰

3.2.2. Roman Catholicism. In the Roman tradition the righteousness of God was understood more as that which was demanded by God. The medieval understanding of the nature of justification referred not merely to the beginning of the Christian life, but to its continuation and ultimate perfection, in which the Christian is made righteous in the sight of God and the sight of others through a fundamental change in nature (McGrath). The prevailing pre-Reformation view in the West of the righteousness of God was that of a distributive justice whereby God judges justly according to God’s holiness. A common theological position was that righteousness of God was a subjective genitive, God’s holiness being the norm by which all would be judged. Luther’s personal struggle with the inexorable righteousness of God resulted in an understanding of the righteousness of God that was deeper than his tradition had grasped. In Catholic thought, justification was not considered something in the present as much as a process leading to the ultimate future judgment.¹¹

3.3. The Reformation. Generally the Reformers and their theological heirs have interpreted the righteousness of God as a so-called objective genitive (see 1 above) in all instances in Paul’s writings, with the possible exceptions of [Romans 3:5](#), [25](#), [26](#). The righteousness of God was understood from the viewpoint of the individual, as that righteousness which God gives to people, and on the basis of which the sinner is approved by God. The theocentric OT meaning of the righteousness of God in the sphere of covenant relationship was displaced by an anthropocentric focus. The reformers and their successors often interpreted the righteousness of God from the human aspect because they had replaced the biblical basis of covenant relationship with the Hellenistic theory of universal law which both God and humanity had to fulfill in order to be regarded as righteous. The emphasis on the individual under universal law rather than in covenant relationship contributed to the later “legal fiction” theory whereby those who believe in Jesus are justified, deemed righteous, even though they are not actually

Ep. Cyprian, *Epistulae*, or
Jerome, *Epistulae*, or
Pliny (the younger) *Epistolae*

¹⁰Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 833 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

¹¹Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 833 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

righteous. In this view faith in Jesus takes the place of actual righteousness.¹²

3.3.1. Luther. Luther's concern was personal and pastoral. The fine theological distinction maintained by the Roman Catholic magisterium did not "trickle down" to village parishes. Luther interpreted the righteousness of God distinctively as a so-called objective genitive, rendering the Greek term *dikaiosynē tou theou* in **Romans 1:17** as righteousness "which counts before God." Luther states the righteousness of God is the cause of salvation, and thus it is not the righteousness by which God is righteous in himself but the righteousness by which we are made righteous by God. This happens through faith in the gospel. Luther points to Augustine for the sense that the righteousness of God is that by which God imparts and makes people righteous. Luther emphasized the immediacy of justification. A person is at once just and unjust: this suggests a composite view of Luther's new understanding of the righteousness of God, in addition to the traditional understanding of the distributive justice of God.

For Luther works are the result of the righteousness given by God. Sanctification is a process that will not be consummated in this life. Luther clearly separated justification from regeneration and sanctification. This perspective gave rise to the understanding of justification as a new status before God: "Thus in ourselves we are sinners, and yet through faith we are righteous by God's imputation. For we believe Him who promises to free us, and in the meantime we strive that sin may not rule over us but that we may withstand it until He takes it from us" (WA 56.271). In Catholic thought, God responds to those who do what they can by giving them enabling grace which then leads to saving grace. Luther broke with this tradition in that he found that God provided the preconditions for justification (see Watson).

3.3.2. Calvin. Calvin in his *Commentary on Romans* presents his understanding of the righteousness of God in **Romans 1:17** as that which is approved before God's tribunal. Calvin associated sanctification with justification and described sanctification in terms of being in Christ. According to Calvin, God communicates his righteousness to us. In a nearly mystical sense, through faith Jesus communicates himself to those who believe. Works have no place in the justification of sinners. Calvin refutes the notion of a fiction involved in the justification of sinners. God provides all that is necessary. He cautions not to understand righteousness as a quality; we are righteous only in so far as Christ reconciles the Father to us. Calvin, more so than Luther, emphasizes the relational aspect of the righteousness of God. Luther's view of the righteousness of God seems to contain the aspect of acquittal. Calvin emphasizes the marvelous nature of the communication, or imparting, of God's righteousness to us.

3.4. Post-Reformation. Just as the Western Church experienced the scholasticism of the twelfth century, Protestant Orthodoxy shifted from Calvin's christological emphasis to other matters, such as predestination, federal theology and the perseverance of the saints. Lutheranism shifted its emphasis from justification of sinners and the righteousness of God to deal with these developments within the Reformed camp. The Pietist movement within Lutheranism was a reaction against a strictly forensic

¹²Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 833 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

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understanding of righteousness. The pastoral aspects of Pietism later influenced Lutheranism to emphasize practical aspects of righteousness, reflecting an interest in promoting personal piety.

John Wesley argued for the Pietist position in his emphasis on personal righteousness subsequent to justification. In his sermon on “The Lord Our Righteousness” he adheres to imputation but understands the Holy Spirit to have a sanctifying aspect upon the believer. The believer’s basis of justification is the righteousness of Christ “implanted in everyone in whom God has imputed it.” He maintains there is no true faith—justifying faith—which does not have the righteousness of Christ for its object. Wesley sees faith in Jesus’ death, and hence the imputation of his righteousness, as the cause, end and middle term of salvation.¹³

4. God’s Righteousness as Relation-Restoring Love.

The history of interpretation, including the recent perspectives sketched above, reveals two facets; (1) that the understanding of the righteousness of God has been largely dominated by Greek and Latin categories, where righteousness as a quality of God’s character is either given to us and makes us righteous, or is the basis for God’s judicial pronouncement, declaring us righteous; (2) that the more recent discussion, in seeking to take more seriously Paul’s grounding in the OT, has found the earlier understanding to be an inadequate explication of Paul’s meaning. Particularly important has been the insistence on the OT covenantal context of the righteousness of God as an interpretive background for the Pauline formulations.

Within that OT context, and beside other meanings and nuances (Brunner), the idea of God’s righteousness appears prominently in salvation texts, where God’s redemptive action toward his covenant people is defined by this term. It is God’s righteousness which saves from enemies, from threatening situations, from the state of alienation from God. In such settings God’s righteousness is frequently defined by the terms “steadfast love” and “faithfulness” (e.g., [Is 11:5](#); [16:5](#); [Ps 5:7–8](#); [89:13–14](#); [98:2–3](#)). These relational attributes are in some contexts virtually synonymous with “righteousness” and “salvation” (e.g., [Ps 85:7–13](#)). Thus, God’s righteousness may be rendered as “saving deed” or “relation-restoring love.”

Paul’s use of righteousness of God may best be understood against the background of this particular OT concept. For Paul “unrighteousness” results from disobedience, whether of persons generally, who refuse to acknowledge God ([Rom 1:28](#)), and obey unrighteousness and disobey truth ([Rom 2:8](#)), or of God’s people who refuse to acknowledge God, and are disobedient within the covenant relationship ([Rom 3:3–5](#); [10:21](#)).

It is the reality of alienation, defined synonymously as “faithlessness” ([Rom 3:3](#)) and “unrighteousness” ([Rom 3:5](#)), which Paul knows to have been addressed by the revelation ([Rom 1:16–17](#)) or manifestation ([Rom 3:21–26](#)) of God’s righteousness. In both texts the concrete historical expression of “God’s righteousness” is the event of Christ: defined in [Romans 1:16](#) as “the gospel” and “the power of God for salvation”; and

¹³Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 833 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

in [Romans 3:24](#) as “the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.”

Paul contends that God is faithful to his creation/covenant relationship ([Rom 3:3–4](#)), his action is righteous ([Rom 3:26](#)), and it is this action in response to his rebellious creation which Paul therefore calls the righteousness of God. The term designates that act of God which restores the broken relationship. “Righteousness” in this context is not an attribute of God, but designates God’s forgiving love and redemptive intervention in the world through Christ.

The righteousness of God understood as God’s relation-restoring love is central to Paul’s argument in [Romans 3:21–26](#). The incarnation of the righteousness of God in the redemptive work of the cross leads to forgiveness; and forgiveness restores broken relationships. Because this is purely the act of God, Paul calls it a gift. Since a gift is ineffective unless appropriated, it must be “received by faith.” The result of this gracious act of God is the justification (“setting right”) of the sinner. The passage says nothing about an essential or judicial transaction; rather, it declares the restoration of the divine-human relationship through what Christ did by his death (*see* Expiation, Propitiation, Mercy Seat).

The language of “submitting to the righteousness of God” in [Romans 10:3](#) confirms Paul’s understanding of it as God’s relation-restoring intervention. The attempt to establish one’s own righteousness—one’s own position before God—is a rejection of the coming of God’s righteousness in Christ, God’s way of saving the world. For to submit means to acknowledge one’s severed relation with God and to confess the lordship of Christ ([Rom 10:7](#); *see* Lord).

The difficult expression of [2 Corinthians 5:21](#), that in (relationship with) Christ “we might become the righteousness of God” further underlines a relational rather than a judicial or ontological meaning. The text is concerned with reconciliation to God in and through Christ (*see* Center; Peace, Reconciliation) and calls those who are reconciled to become instruments of that reconciling work ([2 Cor 5:18–19](#)). In that context, the phrase “to become God’s righteousness” means that believers become participants in God’s reconciling action, extensions of his restoring love.

For Paul, then, God’s righteousness is God’s saving deed. In continuity with OT expressions of God’s righteousness as God’s faithfulness and steadfast love toward Israel, Paul sees this divine action finally expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The acceptance of that divine condescension through the act of faith justifies us (makes us right) with God. Righteousness is present in this restored relationship when life is lived in conformity with God’s purposes.¹⁴

¹⁴Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 836 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).