

I Gospel of Righteous Self-Sacrifice

I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Romans 1:16

The apostle Paul was a former Pharisee working in the wake of Jesus as God's Messiah. He was, by his self-avowed divine calling, a Jewish-Christian missionary and apostle announcing good news, a gospel (εὐαγγέλιον), from God for the salvation of all people into God's "family of faith" (Gal. 3:26, 6:10). His undisputed letters reveal that the noun "εὐαγγέλιον" is one of his favorite words, used forty-eight times, while the verb "to announce the gospel" (εὐαγγελίζεσθαι) is used nineteen times.¹

Our attention to Paul's use of "gospel" will clarify what he thought of himself, his mission, and more importantly, God. It also will lead us to see the key role of divine righteousness and self-sacrifice in his gospel, including self-sacrifice for its recipients. We begin with a summary of Paul's gospel in his Epistle to the Romans.

¹ Paul's undisputed letters providing the focus of this book are 1 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Romans, and Philippians. I thus do not give primary attention to Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, or the Pastoral letters. In the latter group, Colossians has a serious chance of originating with Paul, but I do not push that controversial idea. Out of due caution, I also avoid using Acts as a primary source for Paul's history or theology. For a careful presentation of the relevant evidence, see Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, rev. ed., trans. H. C. Kee (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1975), pp. 255–366; and Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1997), Part III. On some of the conflicts between Acts and Paul's letters, see Jürgen Becker, *Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles*, trans. O. C. Dean Jr. (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1993), pp. 12–16.

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GOSPEL SUMMARY

Paul's introduction to his Epistle to the Romans summarizes his role for "the gospel":

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel [εὐαγγέλιον] of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name.

(Rom. 1:1–5, NRSV here and in subsequent Biblical translations, unless otherwise noted)

Paul's talk of "the gospel of God," for which he is "set apart," connotes the gospel from God. This is indicated by his mention of God having promised it through the prophets in the Jewish scriptures (see also Gal. 1:1, 12, 3:8). God, in Paul's perspective, set him apart as an apostle to preach the gospel and to build churches on its basis, particularly among the Gentiles.²

In an earlier letter, Paul mentions his having received the gospel and his handing it on to others:

I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the

² I thus find it misleading for Luke Timothy Johnson to suggest that "the 'Paul' of the canonical letters is ... a pastor and moral teacher. His primary concern is with the formation of character among his readers." See Johnson, *The Canonical Paul*, Vol. 2: *Interpreting Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), p. 6. Paul's gospel, we shall see, calls for something beyond mere "formation of character" as the primary concern. It calls for a distinctive relation of faith in God on the basis of his gospel. J. Christiaan Beker claims that "Paul is essentially an *interpreter* of the gospel." See Beker, *The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul's Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 118. I suspect that Paul would prefer a self-description that includes his obedient preaching of the gospel.

scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim [κηρύσσομεν] and so you have come to believe.

(1 Cor. 15:3–9, 11)

Paul has in mind the proclaiming of “the gospel” (1 Cor. 15:1–2), and he acknowledges that he “had received” it. A natural question is: Received it from whom?

Paul reports to the Galatian Christians that his initial preaching of his gospel did not result from his conferring with other humans. “When God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me” (Gal. 1:15–17). God, according to Paul’s report, is the source of his preaching the gospel, through his revealing Christ to him. Three years after his initial preaching, however, he went up to Jerusalem: “Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord’s brother” (Gal. 1:18–19). He does not specify, however, what he learned from Peter or James.

Paul continues his autobiographical remarks: “Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up in response to a revelation. Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain” (Gal. 2:1–2). This remark calls for a distinction between Paul’s source for his gospel

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and the endorsement of his gospel by the leaders in Jerusalem. He adds: “When James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised” (Gal. 2:9). Paul does not say that the leaders in Jerusalem are the source of his gospel, but he did seek and get their endorsement of his gospel and his Gentile mission. Perhaps he received historical information about the ministry of Jesus from them, but as suggested, he does not say.

Paul received his gospel from God, by his account, although he refrains from explaining in detail how this occurred. He states, as noted, that “God was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles” (Gal. 1:15–16). He also remarks: “I did not receive [the gospel] from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:12; cf. 1 Cor. 1:17; Acts 9:5–6). In a different context, Paul reports: “Last of all, as to one untimely born, [Christ] appeared [ὡφθῆ] also to me” (1 Cor. 15:8). As a result, he asks a rhetorical question: “Have I not seen [ἐώρακα] Jesus our Lord?” (1 Cor. 9:1). Paul does not confirm all of the details of his divine calling reported in Acts 9, but he does concur with its representing him as “an instrument . . . chosen to bring [God’s] name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15; cf. Rom. 11:13).

Paul does not specify in his letters the exact information he received for his gospel through “a revelation of Jesus Christ.” As far as our evidence indicates, doing so would not have served his purposes in writing to various churches. In addition, he could have discussed any relevant details during his visits with the churches. It can be misleading, however, to think of this revelation as prompting his “conversion” to the God served by Jesus.³ That God, according to Jesus and Paul, is the God of the Jewish scriptures, and Paul was

³ I thus recommend due caution regarding the language of “conversion” found in, for instance, Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), especially chs. 2 and 3.

committed to that God at the time of his calling to preach the gospel, whatever the details of that calling, particularly regarding Jesus.

Paul's calling through "a revelation of Jesus Christ" gave him, at least by his assessment, a corrected, more profound understanding of God. It convinced him that the God of the Jewish scriptures aimed to redeem people, Gentiles as well as Jews, in accordance with the life-giving ministry of Jesus. That was a dramatic change from his earlier zealous role as a Pharisee who "persecuted the church of God" (Gal. 1:13; 1 Cor. 15:9; cf. Gal. 1:23; Phil. 3:6). His earlier support for such persecution assumed that Jesus was neither Lord nor Messiah but at best an imposter. Perhaps one may talk of Paul's "conversion" to Jesus as Lord and Messiah from God, but he puts the emphasis on his calling, through a revelation of Christ, to be an apostle who preaches the gospel from God.

Paul affirms, as suggested in Romans 1, that the gospel from God was active before the arrival of Christ, in the life of Abraham. He says: "The scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you'" (Gal. 3:8; cf. Gen. 12:3; Rom. 4:13). This gospel is inherently universal in its intended scope, going to Gentiles as well as Jews. Paul, as suggested, saw a seminal mission for himself as an "apostle to the Gentiles" in taking God's good news to them (Gal. 1:15–16; 1 Cor. 1:17; Rom. 1:14–16, 11:13). As indicated, he found this mission foreshadowed in the Jewish scriptures.

Paul saw the gospel at work not only in relation to Abraham but also in connection with the book of Isaiah. He remarks: "How are they to proclaim him [the Lord] unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?'" (Rom. 10:15–16; cf. Isa. 53:1). The book of Isaiah relates the good news to salvation from God, as does Paul: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns'" (Isa. 52:7; cf. Rom. 1:16). So, Paul thought of his "gospel of God" as having its ultimate source in God, particularly

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in God's effort of salvation for humans. He saw this gospel and this effort at work in the Jewish scriptures.⁴

The Gospels of Mark and Matthew portray Jesus as preaching good news from God, regarding God's arriving kingdom (Mark 1:15; Matt. 4:23), and the Gospel of Luke represents Jesus as applying the following passage from the book of Isaiah (61:1) to himself:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news [εὐαγγελίσασθαι] to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

(Luke 4:18–19)

Paul introduced his gospel in the wake of Jesus, but he does not cite any historical saying from Jesus to authorize his gospel. Instead, as suggested, he invokes God as its source, and he finds support in some of the Jewish scriptures.

Paul's gospel of God is, by his understanding throughout his letters, the "gospel of Christ" (1 Thess. 3:2; Gal. 1:7; Phil. 1:27; 1 Cor. 9:12; 2 Cor. 2:12, 9:13, 10:14; Rom. 1:3, 15:19). He sometimes uses "the word [ὁ λόγος] (of God)" synonymously with "the gospel" (1 Thess. 1:6, 2:13; 1 Cor. 1:17), and this use typically brings his focus to what God has done and is doing through Christ for human salvation. This divine effort, according to Paul, gets its importance from God's role in the death and resurrection of Christ on behalf of humans. So, Paul refers to the God of his gospel as the God "who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification" (Rom. 4:24–25).

⁴ Given such passages as Romans 1:16, 3:29–31, and Phil. 2:9–11, John G. Gager misrepresents Paul in claiming that he limits the focus of his gospel of God's work in Christ to Gentiles. See Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Paul offers his gospel as irreducible to mere information about God, because he holds that it includes divine power: “I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). He makes a related claim about the gospel in an earlier letter: “Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message [ὁ λόγος] about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:17–18). How could Paul’s missionary good news be “the power of God for salvation”? We need to clarify that matter in the light of divine righteousness.

A RIGHTEOUS GOD

According to Paul, “in [the gospel] the righteousness [δικαιοσύνη] of God is revealed [ἀποκαλύπτεται] through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous [δίκαιος] will live by faith’” (Rom. 1:17, citing Hab. 2:4; cf. Gal. 3:11). We should let Paul’s remarks and the material he cites clarify, at least at the start, his understanding of “the righteousness of God” and of how it “is revealed” (present tense) through faith. This interpretive strategy is more reliable than drawing from linguistic usage prior to Paul that may not bear on his understanding. The New English Bible makes an important suggestion in translating Paul’s talk of righteousness in Romans 1:17 in terms of “God’s way of righting wrong.” We shall see that this captures part of Paul’s thinking about divine righteousness.

Paul’s citation of the prophet Habakkuk is important. The original context of the passage relates the relevant kind of righteousness to God’s moral character of being “pure,” in contrast with “evil” and “wrongdoing.” Habakkuk proclaims to God:

Your eyes are too pure [καθαρὸς, LXX] to behold evil [πονηρὰ, LXX],
 and you cannot look on wrongdoing;
 why do you look on the treacherous,

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and are silent when the wicked swallow
 those more righteous than they?

(Hab. 1:13)

This is a statement about God's purity as righteous moral character, particularly God's being too morally pure to condone any evil or wrongdoing and thus any corresponding unrighteousness.

Habakkuk identifies a clash between God as morally pure or righteous and humans who are unrighteous or morally treacherous. Paul would have been aware of this contrast in the original context of Habakkuk 2:4. Sam K. Williams approaches what Paul has in mind: "Although, on the basis of Rom 1:16-17, we cannot say exactly what Paul 'means' by *dikaiosynē theou*, I think we can say that he intends for this phrase to bring to mind that aspect of God's nature which we might point to with such additional expressions as God's steadfast adherence to what is right and fitting, his constancy, his trustworthiness, and his readiness to save."⁵ Paul has in mind the righteous character of God and not merely God's acting in a righteous way.

The factor of God's moral character is explicit not only in Habakkuk but also in Romans 3 with its emphasis on the self-manifestation of the righteousness of God (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ) (see Rom. 3:21, 25, 26). Paul assumes that the manifestation arises from God's righteous character, as in Habakkuk. Apart from having a righteous character, God would not be in a position to self-manifest righteousness with integrity.

Paul thinks of God's faithfulness as an important factor in divine righteousness. He writes:

⁵ Sam K. Williams, "The 'Righteousness of God' in Romans," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99 (1980), 263. Ernst Käsemann, in emphasizing God's saving activity, neglects the previous quotation from Habakkuk 1:13 (in the context of Paul's quotation from Habakkuk); he thus gives inadequate attention to the role of God's righteous character for Paul. See his "'The Righteousness of God' in Paul," in *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans. W. J. Montague (London: SCM Press, 1969), pp. 168–82.

What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true, as it is written, “So that you [God] may be justified [δικαιωθῆς] in your words, and prevail in your judging.”

(Rom. 3:3–4, citing Psalm 51:4)

Paul's appeal to God's being “justified” in God's words assumes that God has a moral character of righteousness and faithfulness. His talk of the faithfulness of God suggests divine loyalty to God's promises and moral character of righteousness. So, Paul affirms the “righteousness of God” (θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην) in the next verse (Rom. 3:5).

It is inadvisable to understand God's faithfulness and righteousness just in terms of God's loyalty to divine covenants. Divine covenants can be variable and transitory in ways that God's character of faithful righteousness is not.⁶ God's righteous moral character, according to Paul, includes “the riches of [God's] kindness and forbearance and patience,” and it aims to lead people to turn to God in faithful obedience (Rom. 2:4–5).

Paul, as suggested, cites the last clause of the following remark from Habakkuk: “Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous [δίκαιος, LXX] live by their faith” (Hab. 2:4). Living by faith in God, according to Paul, is the fitting response to God's good news, just as it was the fitting response for Abraham to God and the divine promise to bless all nations (Rom. 4:16–17). Faith accommodates, via trust and cooperation, God's freely offered remedy for what Paul deems the human predicament of ongoing harm by two powers: sin and death. The remedy includes not only divine forgiveness but also divine power for moral improvement, in relation to God, for cooperative humans.

⁶ For discussion of the relation between divine righteousness and covenants in ancient Israel, see Ernest W. Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 201–17; and Michael F. Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), pp. 35–39. It would be a mistake to assume that divine righteousness in the Hebrew Bible functions only in the context of a covenant.

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Sin, according to Paul, arises from a human deficiency regarding trust in God: “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23). This deficiency occurs in people who “did not honor [God] as God or give thanks to him” (Rom. 1:21). So, it is not just a matter of performing wrong actions, even though sins as wrong actions typically accompany a broader human state of sin. Paul identifies sin as an obstruction to righteousness by God’s standard for every human, affirming that “all [humans], both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin” (Rom. 3:9). He remarks: “All who have sinned apart from the [Mosaic] law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law” (Rom. 2:12).

Paul adds that, owing to sin, “no human will be justified in God’s sight by deeds prescribed by the law” (Rom. 3:20). A debilitating problem here is that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23; cf. Rom. 11:32), and this problem cannot be reduced to relations between human social groups, such as Jews and Gentiles. God is in the mix for a redemptive purpose, by Paul’s lights.

Even if some people do not “see fit to acknowledge God,” according to Paul, they still can be responsible for sin by God’s standard for righteousness (Rom. 1:28–32). By that standard, Paul would affirm that the following applies even to those people: “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23; cf. Rom. 5:12, 6:21, 7:13). He has in mind sin not as an isolated act of wrongdoing but as having “presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity” (Rom. 6:19). The “impurity” in question has the defect of not being willingly guided by God’s righteousness. Paul thus talks of “when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness” (Rom. 6:20), as divine righteousness was not then an accepted guide for the people in question. Paul’s good news aims to attract people to God’s righteousness as an ongoing guide, and that prospect calls for a remedy for sin.