

The Gospel of God's Righteousness

Isaiah 51:1-11

INTRODUCTION

When ancient Israelites did door-to-door evangelism, it was not enough to ask their Gentile neighbors, "Do you believe in God?" Everybody believed in and worshiped some god or other. The crucial issue was not whether "God" existed or was worshiped; the question was, WHICH God? Scripture answers this question more often by telling the story of God's works than by abstractly describing His attributes. His attributes (the kind of God He is) are revealed in His story (what He has done). Yahweh is the God who made promises to Abraham and kept those promises by delivering Israel from Egypt (Ex. 3:13-15; 6:2-7), and that demonstrated God's power and love. In the New Testament, the gospel is the story that identifies the living God, and in the gospel events, God has revealed His character, and in particular His righteousness.

THE TEXT

"Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, who seek the Lord: Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. . . ." (Isa. 51:1-11).

RIGHTEOUSNESS

Luther puzzled over Paul's statement that the gospel reveals God's righteousness (Rom. 1:16-17). He thought of righteousness as God's punitive justice, and (naturally) asked, "How is that good news?" For Isaiah, this posed no difficulty: Three times in our text, he speaks of "righteousness" and "salvation" as if they were virtual synonyms (Isa. 51:5, 6, 8). Evidently, Isaiah and Luther didn't mean the same thing by "righteousness."

Throughout the OT, "righteousness" and related words are covenantal and relational terms. The main idea is not conformity to a code of laws. Rules have their place, but there's more to being righteous than conforming to rules. Rather, "righteousness" means faithfulness in a relationship, and the form that righteousness takes depends on the specific contours of that relationship (cf. Gen 30:33; 1 Sam. 24:17, 19). A righteous husband loves and cares for his wife, fulfilling the obligations of the marriage relationship (cf. Hos. 2:14-20); a righteous ruler fulfills the duties of his office; a righteous servant is one who serves his master faithfully and well; a righteous man in relation to God is one who conforms to the covenant into which God has placed Him. Frequently, "righteousness" includes going beyond the defined rules: To be truly faithful in his marriage, a husband must sometimes go beyond duty. Thus, a righteous man is marked not only by his obedience to the law but by his mercy (Ps. 15; Ezek. 18:1-9).

"Righteous" in this sense is applicable to both God and man. God shows Himself righteous by performing according to the obligations that He has taken on in the covenant. There is a negative side to this: God issued threats to Israel, and shows His righteousness in carrying out those threats when Israel becomes unrighteous. But righteousness is not just punitive justice. God made certain promises to Abraham and to Israel, and His righteousness is displayed in keeping those promises to protect, deliver, and bless Israel. Israel celebrates God's "righteous deeds" because they are saving deeds (Judg. 5:11; 1 Sam 12:7ff.; Neh. 9:8).

ISAIAH'S SECOND EXODUS

This explains why Isaiah can speak of "righteousness" and "salvation" in the same breath. In context, Isaiah is prophesying about the coming Babylonian exile (Isa. 39:5-7), but more especially holding out the promise of a restoration from exile, which he describes in several places as a repetition of the exodus (43:14-21; 44:27; 51:9-11; etc.). The "salvation" that Isaiah has in view is the return from exile. And this is simultaneously a display of the "righteousness" of Yahweh. When He intervenes to save Israel from exile, He is fulfilling His promises and displaying before Israel and the world that He is faithful to His covenant. Returning Israel to the land is a "revelation of the righteousness of God."

CONCLUSION

For the same reason, Paul can rejoice in a gospel that "reveals the righteousness of God." Jesus, as the seed of Abraham, is the fulfillment of promise. Jesus, as the heir of the world, is the fulfillment of the promise of land. Jesus, as the new Moses and new Cyrus, fulfills the promise of a climactic exodus. In short, the gospel of Jesus is the revelation of God's righteousness because Jesus is the one in whom ALL the promises of God are Yes and Amen (2 Cor. 1:20).