

2 Corinthians - Commentaries by Alexander Hume Rule

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Righteousness of God

A more terrible hour awaited our Lord, the last in His earthly path and life of sorrow. As the end drew on, it cast its dark and gloomy shadow over His soul, and He uttered such words as these: "My soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto death." And when the horrors of that hour were pressed upon His soul by the power of the adversary, we find Him sweating as it were great drops of blood, and crying with strong crying and tears to Him who was able to deliver. Even then He was heard—heard for His piety—and an angel sent to strengthen Him. He was still in the enjoyment of the unbroken communion with His Father: the light was still shining down upon Him from above. But the hour of deeper sorrow came, and with fixed purpose He met it. He gave Himself up into the hands of men, and presented Himself to God, to be made sin for us, a curse for those under the curse, a victim to bear the judgment of God against sin. Thus He offered Himself to God, was made an offering for sin though He knew no sin. And now the light which hitherto shone full upon Him all along His path was withdrawn. Darkness covered the land at mid-day, and His holy soul, shut out from the light of God's presence, was wrapped in the mantle of night. As a sin-offering, accursed of God, He underwent divine judgment, judgment measured by the inflexible holiness of God's nature, holiness too pure and bright to endure a single stain of sin: the light of God's face was withdrawn, and He was plunged into an abyss of infinite wrath, out of which He cried in His deep agony of soul: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" O blessed Son of God! Thou didst give Thyself up to all this for Thy Father's glory, and that poor, vile worms of the dust might be lifted up to be Thy companions in eternal glory and blessedness! O Lamb of God, slain for us! we adore Thee, and bless Thy holy name forever!

Yes, reader, the blessed Son of God underwent all this, and far more than tongue or pen can describe, in order to glorify God about man's sin so that God might be just, and justify the sinner who believes in Jesus. Having accomplished redemption, the Son of God has passed through the heavens to the very throne of God, having eternally vindicated the righteousness and holiness and majesty of that throne in the shedding of His blood, so that the justified sinner can stand in the unveiled presence of God, and behold His glory in the face of Jesus Christ, and praise and worship the Lamb that was slain, but who now lives, and is enthroned at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

"O Lord, we adore Thee,

For Thou art the slain One

That livest forever,

Enthroned in heaven;

O Lord! we adore Thee,

For thou hast redeemed us;

Our title to glory

We read in Thy blood."

Such is the basis on which God's righteousness is displayed, and announced in the gospel for the salvation of sinners. Such a work, and such devotion of heart to the glory of God on the part of Christ, could not go without a divine answer; and that answer was righteousness.

Let us look for a moment at God's righteous answer to the work of Christ. First of all, we see God raising up Christ from the dead, then setting Him in glory at His own right hand, and then justifying sinners, to bring them into the same glory. All this is righteousness on the part of God. God was glorified in Christ as Man down here, and He has glorified Christ as Man in heaven. This was God's righteous answer to the work of Christ. But there is more than this, for Christ's work in glorifying God was on behalf of the sinner, and so God justifies the sinner. This, too, is righteousness. Having been glorified in Man, God has glorified Man: this is in Christ. But the same righteousness that raised Christ from the dead, and set Him in glory, justifies the sinner, and sets him in Christ. The work of Christ deserves it, and God answers that work in righteousness. Blessed work! blessed answer! In the Man at God's right hand, we see God's righteousness completed. It was completed in setting Him there. It is righteousness accomplished for man according to the value of the Person and work of Christ. Without the blood of Christ it could not have been. By that blood God was glorified about sin: it was the ransom paid—paid to God—paid for the sinner—the redemption price. We have redemption through His blood. God has set forth Christ a mercy seat through faith in His blood. Through this redemption God justifies freely, without price at the sinner's hand. Christ has paid the price, the redemption money, His blood; and the blood on the mercy seat declares God's righteousness in justifying freely. The blood alone declares God's righteousness in justifying a sinner. Yet the whole life of Christ went up as a sweet savor to God, and if we speak of the measure of the believer's acceptance, it is according to all the sweet savor that went up to God from Christ, both in His life and in His death, only we must not forget that it was in His death, in which alone was displayed the full measure of His infinite devotedness to God, that God was glorified in all that He is, and in every attribute and moral perfection of His being, whether in the display of His righteous and holy majesty as against sin, or the maintenance of His truth and display of His love to the sinner; and it is according to the measure of this infinitely perfect work of the Lord Jesus that God's righteousness is displayed

in glorifying Christ, and justifying the sinner who believes in Him.

(3.) What is the scope of God's righteousness? It is universal. It is not applied to all, but its bearing is toward all. It is as broad as the foundation on which it rests. The blood of Christ has glorified God in His whole character. The whole question of sin, as it affected God's character and throne, has been met—fully and blessedly met—by the blood of Christ. Because of this the righteousness of God is "unto all." This is its scope, or bearing. It is revealed in the gospel, and revealed for man. The gospel was to be preached to every creature, and where it goes, tidings of God's righteousness are announced. The claims of God have been so fully met that He declares it everywhere. It is toward all, free to all, sufficient for all. Sin is no barrier now. God has been glorified, and in virtue of the blood of Jesus He announces His righteousness for justification through faith in that blood—righteousness toward all.

(4.) To whom, and on what principle, is God's righteousness applied? It is "righteousness of God, by faith of Jesus Christ, unto all, and upon all them that believe." Here we have its scope, its application, and the principle on which it is applied. Its scope is "unto all." It is applied to believers—"upon all who believe." The principle is, "by faith of Jesus Christ." Let us look a little at these last two. It is "revealed from faith to faith," or "on the principle of faith to faith." It is not the principle of works. Had it been so, it would have been man's righteousness. But it is God's righteousness, and available for us on the principle of faith, not of works. And if it is on this principle, it is to faith; that is, wherever faith exists, there the righteousness of God is applied, whether it be to Jew or to Gentile. "On the principle of faith" shuts out law and works as a means of attaining to this righteousness. "To faith" lets in the Gentile, if he has faith, as well as the Jew. If a Jew was on the principle of law and works, he was not submitting to God's righteousness, and consequently missed it. If a Gentile came "on the principle of faith," he was justified as truly as a believing Jew. It is "by faith of Jesus Christ," not "by works of law." These two expressions are the contrast of each other. "Faith" is contrasted "with" "works;" "Jesus Christ" is contrasted with "law." "Works" take their measure and character from the "law;" "faith" takes its measure and character from "Jesus Christ." (See also Gal. 2:16.) Faith takes its character from its object; if its object be man, or man's word, it will only be human; if its object be Christ, its character will be divine. "Faith of Jesus Christ" is divine faith. It is by this faith that we have part in the righteousness of God: it is "upon all them that believe." Be it Jew or Gentile, high or low, rich or poor, the most moral, or the most degraded, there is no difference as to their standing before God. All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; but now God's righteousness is toward all; and it is upon all who believe. Does any poor sinner (no matter what has been his previous character) believe in Jesus? The righteousness of God is upon him. He is justified freely by God's grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God has set forth Jesus a propitiatory, or mercy seat, through faith in His blood, to declare His own righteousness in justifying the guilty one who believes. The blood is on the mercy-seat, and the moment the perishing sinner believes God, his sins are forgiven, and he is justified, and that blood declares that God is righteous in doing it.

Reader, is God's righteousness upon you? Have you been justified? If not, what hinders? Do you say, your sins? Your sins are no barrier now. Through the blood of Christ, God's righteousness is toward you, ready to justify, the moment you submit to have righteousness in this way. The only thing that hinders is your unbelief. God tells you the blood is on the mercy seat. Believe God, and your sins are gone, and His righteousness takes their place. It is upon all who believe. Do you believe in Jesus? Then you are justified. And remember, "It is God who justifies." Who shall condemn? It matters not who. He who condemns the justified sinner condemns God's righteousness. You can therefore challenge the universe. God has glorified Christ on high, and, in Him, man has got a place in that glory. This is righteousness. God has accomplished His righteousness in setting Him there, and in Him the believing sinner. He is the measure of the believers standing and acceptance before God. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new; and all things are of God." What is the ground of this? "He hath made him who knew no sin, to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him." (2 Cor. 5:17, 18, 21.) Christ is in glory, the Head, the Beginning, of the new creation, and we, through grace, a new creation in Him. And this is righteousness on the part of God. The old creation has met its judgment in the cross: all things are new, all things are of God, who has set Christ there, and us in Him. This is the accomplishment of divine, eternal righteousness. This righteousness will have its eternal display in Christ glorified, and in a justified and redeemed race brought to God in Him. This is what God has wrought; and it may well bow our hearts in worship before Him forever.

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The history of man under trial as a child of Adam has closed in death. "If one died for all, then were all dead." (2 Cor. 5:14.) The cross was the sad proof that all were "dead in trespasses and sins." In every way man has been tested—without law, under law, by priesthood, by kings, by prophets. What was the result? He was lawless, a lawbreaker, sacrilegious, idolatrous, a murderer of the prophets. A final test was given. "Last of all he sent unto them his Son, saying, They will reverence my Son." Instead of reverencing, they murdered Him. God was manifest in the flesh; but man hated God, and, being unable to endure His presence, sought to put Him out of the scene. "God is Light;" but man was full of darkness, and could not bear the light. Men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. "God is Love;" but man's proud self-righteous heart turned away from the grace which had its spring in that love. "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself;" but the world refused all proposals of peace. During a ministry of more than three years Christ was presenting God to man in grace. God Himself was in Christ among His own creatures, pleading with them, beseeching, as it were, that they should be reconciled. But man would not be reconciled; his heart was cold in moral death. There must be redemption and new creation, else man's heart could not be turned back to God. God's Christ was rejected, and a murderer chosen—not this man, but Barabbas! This was the end. Christ went to the cross, and died for all; and the solemn verdict God has written against man in the death of His Son on the cross is—dead in trespasses and in SINS! Awful state into which man has fallen! Oh, sinner, ponder it deeply. Is this your state before God? Has sin shut you up in the prison-house of death? Has death closed his awful door upon you, and bound you as his captive? Oh! remember this is the state of every unsaved sinner. God has spoken it. "Dead in trespasses and sins" are the words He utters. What do you say? What is the answer of your heart and conscience? Do you bow to the truth of God? Are you vainly hoping to better yourself? Or do you bow to the solemn truth of that word by which God describes your moral state—dead? Do you think to find your way back to God as best you can? or do you bow to the truth of that word by which God describes the condition of the prodigal in the far-off country—lost? Do you indeed own the truth of these two words—dead, lost?

Now let me tell you why I am pressing this question. It is that you may cease to have any confidence in yourself; for if God says you are lost and dead, what can you do? There is but one answer—nothing. Is there no hope then? Yes, but not in yourself. God announces glad tidings; but they are not concerning the sinner. God has but one verdict concerning the sinner—dead in trespasses and sins. No good news in this! But there are glad tidings, and God Himself announces them. They are concerning His Son. When man's ruin was thoroughly brought out, God's Son wrought deliverance, and the glad tidings of God are concerning Him, "concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was made of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead." (Rom. 1:3, 4.)

Let me, then, dear reader, ask you to cease all confidence in self, and turn your eye wholly to this blessed Person, the Son of God. He is the only One who can save the "lost," or quicken the "dead." And He is the One whom God has sent for this very purpose. He is worthy of your confidence. He is able to meet all your need. He has already done everything for the sinner's deliverance. Nothing remains. The Savior's work for the sinner is done, and He has gone on high, having accomplished redemption, and risen from the dead, victorious over all the power of evil.

Look, sinner, at that mighty Savior. There is life in a look. Look, and live. Look at Him in His spotless life down here: look at Him in His death on the cross; look at Him in His resurrection; look at Him now as He sits in triumph at God's right hand in glory!

(1.) Look at Him in His life on earth. He was in the midst of a scene of universal ruin and death, and the mighty power of sin was pressing Him on every hand; yet, amid all this, He was the "holy, harmless, and undefiled" One. He knew no sin. Not only so, but He was One in whom there was a power before which the effects of sin disappeared. Disease of every kind vanished at His touch. He touched the bier where lay the dead, and at His word the dead sat up, and began to speak. At the grave of Lazarus, too, He stood as the resurrection and the life, and at His command he who had been dead four days came forth from the grave. Such was He in His life, the One who lived by the Spirit in the perfection of divine holiness, proof against any taint of sin, and before whom the power of evil was forced to give way at every step. He was in the midst of a scene of death, but He was the resurrection and the life, and hence He could say, "He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but is passed from death unto life. Verily, verily, I say unto you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they that hear shall live." (John 5:24, 25.)

(2.) Look at Him on the cross. There He meets not only the effects of sin, such as disease and physical death, but sin itself as that which has dishonored God, and ruined man. He was "the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world," and He was "the Son of the living God" who came to destroy the works of the devil, and deliver those whom he had ruined through sin. He entered the dark chamber of death for the deliverance of those whom sin had bound there in hopeless ruin. In the power of the life of God He entered those gloomy chambers and grappled with the foe in his last strong-hold, and took from him who had the power of death, the keys of death and hell. Accordingly when Peter confessed Him "Son of the living God," He said, "Upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." And why should not the gates of hell—the powers of the unseen world—prevail against His assembly? Just because that power was no longer wielded by Satan. All was now in the hand of "Christ, the Son of the living God," who in death had grappled with death, and destroyed him who had the power of death. Though He passed through death, it was in the power of a life which death could not touch, and in resurrection He became the foundation, the living Rock, beyond the power of death, on which He raised a temple of living stones, a living sanctuary for God and the display of His glory, which He calls "My assembly."

"His be the Victor's name"

Who fought the fight alone;

Triumphant saints no honor claim,

His conquest was their own.

"By weakness and defeat"

He won the mead and crown,

Trod all our foes beneath His feet

By being trodden down.

"Bless, bless the Conqueror slain,

Slain in His victory:

Who lived, who died, who lives again

For thee, His Church, for thee!"

(3.) Look at Him in His resurrection. This is the proof of His power and triumph over sin and death, and proof, moreover, that God had been glorified in His death, for He was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father. (Rom. 6:4.)

God who made Him to be sin for us, and who delivered Him up for our offenses, raised Him up again from the dead. This was proof that God was satisfied and glorified in His death. On the other hand the Son of God had power to lay down His life, and He had power to take it again. He entered in at death's door, and destroyed Satan's power. He fought the battle, won the victory, took the keys of death, opened the door, and came forth, "declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead." Thus resurrection was the proof of His victory over sin, death, and Satan's power. No man had ever entered death's door, and come out again in his own power. Here is One who did. He brought Lazarus forth, too; and thus He was declared Son of God with power.

(4.) And now look at Him as the One now seated in the glory of God. He has taken His seat in heavenly glory, and this, too, when He had purged our sins, and overthrown our enemies in the depths of the sea of judgment. He ascended leading captivity captive; and thus He has opened a pathway out from the very chambers of death up into the glory of God! —a pathway for the sinner—for everyone who believes in His name.

This, dear reader, is the One concerning whom God has announced glad tidings. And is it nothing to know God has announced such a Savior in His glad tidings to ruined man? Have you heard “the glad tidings of God concerning His Son Jesus Christ?” Do you believe on the name of the Son of God? Have your eyes been opened to see that One who descended into death, who rose again, and is now seated in glory? Have you heard Him saying, “He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but is passed from death unto life?” Have you heard this word of His? It is life to Him who hears. “Hear, and thy soul shall live.” Believe God when He announces His Son as the Savior of the lost; and if you believe, know assuredly that the Son of God has taken up your cause. He has gone into the prison-house of death to release you, He has borne your guilt, He has triumphed over death for you, He has struck off your chains, He has opened the door and He bids you go free. Yes more, He has gone into the presence of God for you, and has linked you with Himself there. He has not only delivered you from death, but He has made glory sure. He has not only opened the gates of death, but He has opened the gates of heaven. He is not restoring man to the place from which he fell, but He has opened heaven for him, the paradise of God. He has gone down to man in his ruin, laid hold of him (He took hold on the seed of Abraham, that is those who believe—Heb. 2:16), and borne him up into the glory of God, for He Himself is Man, the Leader of a chosen race, and is now in the glory of God the expression of the place God has given to man. In Him man stands accepted in the presence of God—accepted in the perfection of His Person and work. Heaven is no longer closed against man; He has opened it, and in Him man has entered in. Every one who believes is one with Him in His heavenly position. He is the measure of the believer’s acceptance; He presents man to God in Himself; and He is the pattern according to which He is going to fashion every one He receives to dwell with Him in that glory! What a Savior! What a salvation! What a hope! Out of the prison-house of death, and up into the glory and paradise of God! Such are God’s glad tidings to the sinner concerning His Son Jesus Christ. Do you believe? Then all is yours.

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