

The Argument of Romans 9:14-16

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I. The Problem

Romans 9

14a What then shall we say?

14b There is no unrighteousness with God is there?

14c Absolutely not

15a For God says to Moses (in Exodus 33:19) "I will have mercy on whomever I have mercy

15b and I will have compassion on whomever I have compassion."

16a Therefore it does not depend on the one who wills

16b nor does it depend on the one who runs

16c but rather it depends solely on God who has mercy.

In Romans 9:11-13 Paul has asserted that God elected Jacob but not Esau and that this election was not due to any works done by them at all; in fact it was done before they were born. The purpose given why God acted this way is that his goals in creation and redemption might in no way hang on the "works" of men but might be wholly dependent on himself.

That God should have no respect to human deeds in electing men may seem to some unjust. So Paul raises this question in 9:14 and answers with a resounding NO, God is not unrighteous to act this way. Verse 15 is then given as a ground (for: *gar*) for Paul's assertion that God is righteous to act this way. Verse 16 is given as an inference (therefore: *ara oun* from verse 15. Together verses 15 and 16 support the righteousness of God in his sovereign election. How do they function to give this support?

II. The Meaning of God's Righteousness

First, we must define the righteousness of God so that we know what Paul is trying to defend in 9:14ff. Since Paul couches his doctrine of justification in Old Testament terminology and uses the Old Testament to elucidate that doctrine (Romans 1:17; 4:3, 7, 9) it is generally assumed, rightly I think, that Paul's understanding of the righteousness of God is derived from the Old Testament concept of God's righteousness.

This concept is generally defined in terms of God's relation to his people and is seen as almost synonymous with God's faithfulness. The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible IV says, "Yahweh's righteousness is his fulfillment of the demands of the covenant which he has made with his chosen nation." (p. 82) "In short Yahweh's righteous judgments are saving judgments" (p. 83). This exclusively saving character of God's righteousness is stressed by Gerhard von Rad in his Old Testament Theology vol. 1. He argues: "And this (righteousness) bestowed on Israel is always a saving gift. It is inconceivable that it should ever menace Israel. No references to the concept of a punitive can be adduced--that would be a contradictio in adiecto" (p. 377).

In support of this understanding of righteousness Psalm 143:1-2 is cited: "Hear my prayer O Lord, give ear to my supplications! Answer me in thy faithfulness, in thy righteousness! And do not enter into judgment with thy servant, for in thy sight no man living is righteous."

Notice two things: One, faithfulness and righteousness are apparently very close in meaning, being parallel. Two, note that God's righteousness does not seem to be a menace or a threat to the Psalmist even though he confesses he is a sinner. On the contrary it is the ground of his hope that God might not condemn him. From this usage of righteousness here and elsewhere in the Old Testament von Rad and others conclude that the righteousness of God is his unswerving commitment to act on Israel's behalf, that is to keep covenant.

The burden of von Rad is to show that righteousness does not consist in conformity to some external norm "since ancient Israel did not in fact measure a line of conduct or act by an ideal norm, but by the specific relationship in which the partner had at the time to prove himself true.... To some extent, therefore, the specific relationship in which the agent finds himself is itself the norm" (Old Testament Theology vol. 1, p. 371). I think von Rad is correct that "righteousness" is to be defined relationally rather than in terms of allegiance to some external "absolute ideal ethical norm." But I do not think the way von Rad and the IDB have defined righteousness goes to the heart of the matter.

Several things compel me to define God's righteousness differently. First, there are texts in the Old Testament where God is said to be righteous precisely in his judgment of Israel. For example in Nehemiah 9:33 after a recitation of how God had punished his people we read, "However, you are righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully but we have acted wickedly." So we see God's faithfulness and righteousness can and do menace Israel when Israel "stiffens their neck and will not listen." (Neh. 9:29).

Or consider Lamentations 1:19 where the fallen Jerusalem who has gone into captivity speaks: "The Lord is righteous for I have rebelled against his commands; hear now all peoples and behold my pain; my virgins and my young men have gone into captivity." See also II Chronicles 12:5, 6; Ezra 9:15; Is. 5:16. Von Rad acknowledges that these texts are problematical for his view (p. 377 note 17) but he does not adequately explain them. These passages and others prompt me not to define God's righteousness solely in terms of his "saving judgments." Where Israel is faithless the righteousness of God issues in opposition to that faithlessness.

Secondly, I notice that in Psalm 143 quoted earlier and in Daniel 9:14-19 the appeal made to God's righteousness for salvation is not so much an appeal to his allegiance to Israel as it is an appeal to his allegiance to his own name or glory. The parallelism of Psalm 143:11 is very instructive:

For the sake of thy name, O Lord, revive me,
In thy righteousness bring my soul out of trouble.

Not for the sake of Israel or any given Israelite does God act in his righteousness, but for his own sake. As Isaiah 48:9, 11 puts it,

For the sake of my name I delay my wrath
and for my praise I restrain it for you,
In order not to cut you off.
For my own sake, for my own sake I will act,
And how can my name be profaned?
My glory I will not give to another.

This text along with others (cf. Ezekiel 36:22-32) shows that the faithfulness of God to his people was grounded in something deeper and that was his faithfulness to his own name and glory. It is this

faithfulness that provides the essential meaning of God's righteousness in the Scripture. Watch closely how Daniel grounds his appeal to God in Daniel 9:14-19:

14. "Therefore, the Lord has kept the calamity in store and brought it on us; for the Lord our God is righteous with respect to all His deeds which He has done, but we have not obeyed His voice.

15. And now, O Lord our God, who hast brought Thy people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand and hast made a name for Thyself, as it is this day -- we have sinned, we have been wicked.

16 O Lord, in accordance with all Thy righteous acts, let now Thy anger and Thy wrath turn away from Thy city Jerusalem, Thy holy mountain; for because of our sins and the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Thy people have become a reproach to all those around us.

17 So now, our God, listen to the prayer of Thy servant and to his supplications, and for Thy sake, O Lord, let Thy face shine on Thy desolate sanctuary.

18 O my God, incline Thine ear and hear! Open Thine eyes and see our desolations and the city which is called by Thy name; for we are not presenting our supplications before Thee on account of any merits of our own, but on account of Thy great compassion.

19 O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and take action! For Thine own sake, O my God, do not delay, because Thy city and Thy people are called by Thy name."

In verse 14 God is righteous to have judged Israel and sent her into captivity. But in v. 16 salvation too will accord with God's righteous acts. The unity beneath these two expressions of God's righteousness is God's unswerving will to act "for his own sake". By punishing Israel he magnified his glory by showing that idolatry is a dreadful evil worthy of destruction. By saving Israel he will magnify his name by restoring the people called by his name, so that the nations will see and know that he is the Lord -- he casts down and he raises up. And in all this his righteousness shines like the sun because he never swerves from acting for his own name's sake. Therein consists God's righteousness.

The reason a sinful psalmist can appeal to God's righteousness for salvation (Ps. 143: 2, 11) is because of what he says in 143: 8, 9: "Let me hear thy loving-kindness in the morning, for I trust in thee...I take refuge in thee." Trust is the one attitude of the human heart which gives all glory to God (Rom. 4:20) for it relies not on itself (Dan. 9:18) but wholly on God. Therefore God whose righteousness consists in always acting for his own name's sake will bless anyone who trusts in him, since otherwise he would be disregarding his own glory. God cannot be true to his own glory, i.e. righteous, if he refuses to bless a person whose basic character (faith) glorifies God.

III. The Argument of Romans 9:14-16

Paul grounds the righteousness of God by quoting Exodus 33:19: "I will have mercy on whomever I have mercy and I will have compassion on whomever I have compassion." To understand how this argues for God's righteousness in election we need to understand the Old Testament context of Exodus 33:19. Exodus 33:18, 19 say,

"Then Moses said [to God], 'I pray thee, show me thy glory!' And He said, 'I myself will make my goodness pass before you and will proclaim the name of the Lord before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion.'"

In Exodus 34:6 when the theophany actually takes place we read, "The Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious...' " What emerges from these two texts is that the essential revelation of God is not what Moses saw but what God said. God's glory was revealed in what he said about himself. In both 33:19 and 34:6 the essential element of his glory revealed was his grace or compassion, and specifically in 33:19 his freedom to have compassion on

whom he wills. Brevard Childs in The Book of Exodus (p. 596) observes that 33:19 "testifies by its tautology to the freedom of God in making known his self-contained being."

This Old Testament context along with a proper understanding of the meaning of God's righteousness is the key to the argument of Romans 9:14, 15. God's words in Romans 9:15 mean that it is an essential part of his glory that he be unbound in choosing the beneficiaries of his mercy. That is, He would be less glorious, indeed He would not be fully God if he were under obligation to any particular human distinctive. He would be dethroned if his bestowal of mercy were dependent on anything outside of Himself. If he waited to see how men "will" or "run" (9:16) before he showed mercy, he would be limited by them and therefore not all glorious. As Exodus 33:19 shows, his glory is his freedom from all human claims.

Therefore, since God's righteousness consists in his acting unswervingly for his own name's sake (=glory) and since his glory consists largely in his sovereign freedom in election, God is not unrighteous to disregard human deeds and distinctives in choosing whom he wills to bless. In fact he must pursue his purpose of election in this way in order to remain righteous, for only in his sovereign, free bestowal of mercy on whomever he wills is God acting out of a full delight in his own glory.

IV. The Place of Free Will

Verse 16 draws the obvious inference from verse 15. Whether a man receives mercy from God or not does not depend on a man's willing or his running (=efforts) but solely on God. In other words, God's merciful treatment of anyone is never initiated by or in any way ultimately influenced by the person's will. This is a necessary inference from verse 15: The all glorious God whose glory consists in his freedom to choose whomever He will cannot be determined by or obligated by anything outside himself.

If free will were defined as the native power in a man to determine his own destiny, this text shows that there is no such thing in the entire world. It not only shows free will to be non-existent, it also shows that to demand free will is an offence against the righteousness of God. For in Paul's understanding the inability of man by his willing to elicit God's mercy (9:16) is a direct inference from the glorious freedom of God (9:15) which in turn is the ground of his righteousness. If God's righteousness consists in his maintaining the fullness of his glory, and if an essential side of that glory is his absolute freedom in election from human willing and running, then to insist that man's will ultimately determines his destiny is to offend the righteousness of God.

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