God’s righteousness asserted, upheld, and broadcasted to the world! Romans 3:1-8

The book of Romans is Paul’s attempt to explain, expound, and interpret the gospel: what God has done in Christ. The letter to the Romans is Paul’s longest continuously sustained argument in the New Testament. It is focused upon expounding Paul’s gospel. Paul concluded chapter two leaving his readers with the strong impression that all humanity stands guilty before God for not living up to God’s standards. There is no one who does what God expects. All humanity will be declared guilty and condemned before God, even God’s people—the Jews—will stand condemned. Having the law and being a member of God’s covenant will not save them from being condemned. This represents a very severe indictment of the Jews and raises a major objection(s) by anyone who is a Jew. Was there or is there any advantage/value in being a Jew?

With this explicit question “What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is circumcision?” Paul adds to his ongoing argument that he began addressing us from chapter one. The alert and careful reader who is following Paul’s argument particularly his recent contribution from chapter 2 expects Paul to begin chapter three by saying explicitly: “There is no value/advantage to being a Jew, since there is no one who follows and obeys the Law.” Moreover, looking ahead to what is coming immediately following this subsection of Paul’s argument, we will discover that Paul will strongly assert once again in Romans 3:9-20 that all humanity stands condemned before God. So make sure you grasp what Paul is doing here in chapters 1:18-3:20. Paul in the beginning of his letter is strongly arguing the case that all humanity without exception stands guilty of being sinful/unrighteousness before God.

This strong indictment is interrupted by a short unit of eight verses that seem muddled, confused, and not apparently focused upon any single issue. Paul seemingly raises a series of objections that overall detract the reader from the two bracketing sections that focus upon humanity’s inability to keep God’s standards. This raises the critical question of what then is Paul’s main point in these initial eight short verses of chapter 3? Schreiner rightly asks the pertinent question “How does this section (Rm.3:1-8) advance Paul’s argument of expounding his gospel?” Does Paul want us to see something even more significant than a series of rebuttals/objections concerning his indictment of Jewish people and their standing before God? Yes I do! I think Paul does want us to see something that significantly contributes to Paul’s overall message. So what is the main issue that Paul is addressing here at the beginning of chapter 3?

Overall, in this first section chapter 3, Paul is focused upon the truth of declaring and upholding that God is Righteous! This statement of theology concerning the nature of God is not explicitly stated in these verses, nor is the this idea in the foreground of this section. Nonetheless, the issue of God being righteous is the central idea being promoted by Paul in this pivotal transitional section. Admittedly, this is not obvious. Even the NIV interpreters did not see it this way. The NIV translators entitle this section “God’s faithfulness”. While the idea of God’s faithfulness is present in this text, I do not see this as satisfactorily capturing the central idea that Paul wanted to make. The ESV version of this text is in my opinion significantly better. The ESV version entitles this section: “God’s righteousness upheld”. Please remember that Paul declared at the beginning of this letter that this idea of God’s righteousness is one of

---

1 Paul basically asserts in his argument in Ch. 2 that both the Law and circumcision have value only if a person obeys the Law.(v.25)
2 See Romans 2:23-25. Having the Law and being in God’s covenant people is only an advantage if one keeps the Law.
3 Schreiner, Thomas Romans Baker Exegetical Commentary of the N.T. p. xiii
two key main ideas of his gospel. So with this information in mind, let us look at this section in order to see for ourselves what Paul has to say concerning God’s righteousness and how this central assertion concerning God, fits into the several objections that his potential readers/hearers have towards Paul’s condemning indictment of their sinfulness.

I. God is righteous! God will keep his promises. Paul strongly defends and upholds that God is Faithful to His Promises! (vs. 1-4a)

Overall these first several verses function as Paul’s anticipated response to objections that a Jew versed in the O.T. Scriptures would voice in light of what Paul has said so far. For Paul seems to be saying that there was and is no value/advantage to being a Jew. Paul counters “this possible misunderstanding” of his argument by declaring that this is not true! I would paraphrase Paul’s statement in verse one as Paul asserting “there is something special about being a Jew and they did have advantages over non Jews as the Old Testament Scriptures attest. Paul in verse two then mentions one of those advantages: “First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God.” Now this is certainly a reference to the Old Testament Scriptures. More importantly what is the significance of this advantage! Cranfield, in his commentary, remarks: “The Jews have been given God’s authentic self-revelation in trust to treasure and to attest and declare it to all mankind.”

Fantastic insight! Yet, how does interpretation, as good as it is, fit into Paul’s argument. It doesn’t! Schreiner is more on target in his comment that the words of God primarily refers to God’s promises assuring the Jews of their salvation. Schreiner is correct in his view that the promises of God are the focus of Paul’s statement declaring that the Jews have an advantage. This seems to bring unity to these first several verses, and also identifies the main issue that Jewish hearers would raise to Paul’s argument which is multifaceted. So Paul agrees the Jews have an advantage. God has given them his promises that “He will save them”!

But this raises new objections to Paul’s argument so far! What if some or even the majority of Jews do not believe? “What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God’s faithfulness?” (vs.3) What exactly is Paul referring to by his statement this lack of faith? It could be a reference to a person’s faithfulness in keeping God’s law. Or better, I think it is a reference to the Jews not believing that Jesus is the promised Savior sent by God. Either way, the bottom line that is being raised by this objection by Jewish hearers is: does their lack of faith call into question the faithfulness of God to keep his promises. Paul uses the strongest language that he can, to insist that God can be counted upon to keep his promises. “Not at all!” Absolutely not! God is no liar. God’s truth will prevail. Paul even quotes from the O.T. Scriptures using Ps. 51:4 in order to back his claim that God will keep his word. “So that you may be proved right in your words...”.God will indeed show himself to be faithful. God will once again save his people, even in spite of their unbelief. This commitment by God to keep his promise to save Israel is not only an illustration of God being proved faithful; but, according to Psalm 51:4 God’s faithfulness to keep his promises shows God to be righteous!

How so? The logic of this first part of Psalm 51:4 “so that you may be proved right (righteous) in your words” is simply a declaration that being true to one’s word is an aspect of God’s righteousness.

---

4 The gospel is the power of God bringing salvation to all who believe and in the gospel a righteousness of God is revealed. R.1:16-17
5 Schreiner p.149
6 Romans 9:1-5 Paul lists several advantages.
7 Cranfield, C.E.B. Romans vol. 1 International Critical Commentary. T & T Clark p.179
8 Schreiner p. 149
9 See Cranfield p. 180-181, Schreiner p. 149-151
The way by which God shows himself to be righteous is that He keeps his word. So in spite of the apparent unfaithfulness of the Jews to believing the message to salvation through the gospel; God will nonetheless, vindicate himself and his word and save Israel.

II. God is righteous! God does and will condemn sin/wrong doing! (vs. 4b-8)

In light of the first 3 and ½ verses, the thoughtful reader should be impressed with a number of ideas which help to keep one of Paul’s main concerns - the truth of God being righteous - in the forefront of our thinking. This for Paul means that God will be faithful to his promises to save Israel. This means that God in spite of the failure of the Jews to believe, God will make sure that his promises to save Israel are fulfilled. What I think is fascinating about Paul citing Psalm 51 is how Paul uses this Psalm 51 as grounds and support for the points that he is trying to make. Paul used the Psalm in the context of Romans not primarily for supporting his assertion that God will be faithful to keep his promises. For in the original context of the Psalm 51, in verse four, David declared that God is faithful in the judgments that he brings against people. David is in so many words declared God to be just in the judgments that he makes. This is precisely what Paul is saying in Romans 4b. “God is not only right in his words, but prevails or triumphs when he judges. This quotation of Psalm 51b is a brilliant stoke by Paul affirming the righteousness of God as expressed by God’s unbending commitment to save Israel, and expressed by God’s unbending commitment to condemn and oppose evil and wrongdoing of any sort.

Both God’s judgment against wrongdoing and his faithfulness to keep his promised stem from the fundamental fact of God’s nature. God is righteous. Verse 4b is an amazing swivel point in this first section of chapter 8. Ok. God is righteous. We and his hearers see this. Now in the remaining four verses Paul will elaborate or expound upon the theme of God’s righteousness being brought out by sin. Specifically, these four verses focus upon objections that his hearers might have to what Paul has just declared: That God is righteous and justified in bringing his condemnation against us for our sin. Let us take a closer look to see Paul’s answer to the question of whether or not God just/righteous in bringing his wrath on us in response to our sin?

The first thing I want the class to notice is that this section has a unified focus. The focus is whether or not God is just and justified in bring his condemnation against us for our sin. While the text initially appears to be so confusing and disjointed, it should be seen upon careful reflection, as more focused and dominated by one concern than first appearances might otherwise so indicate. For I believe that Paul in verse 5 and verse 7 is “basically raising the same objection toward Paul’s declaration of God being righteous and being justified in his judgments against sin. Paul uses different words synonymously to raise the same objection. Take a look! “But if my unrighteousness brings out God’s righteousness more clearly.” Paul restates this again substituting unrighteousness with the term falsehood. (vs.7) Would Paul object to this statement? No! Clearly, Paul wants us to see that the Gospel is a proclamation of God’s righteousness. (Rm. 1:17) But can a person then argue as Paul does in these verses as to whether or not God is being just, fair, or even righteous for condemning a person whose falsehood or evil only brings greater attention to “God’s righteousness”?

Now this is the hard part of this text. Paul does not explicitly answer the question directly. What does Paul do? The obvious answer: of course not is found in verse six. “Certainly not!” Paul then goes on

---

10 Septuagint Ps 51:4b “ so that you are proved right (righteous) when you speak and justified (blameless) when you judge.”

11 Psalm 51:4 “Against you only have I sinned... so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.”
to state explicitly the consequences to the objection raised against Paul’s insistence that God is righteous in judging unrighteousness. So the answer to the objection as to whether or not God is being just in condemning sin since the God’s action of condemnation ultimately functions to draw attention to and magnifies God’s own righteousness! This is a challenging and potentially a valid objection since a greater good ultimately occurs from evil/unrighteousness. My understanding of Paul on this matter is of course God is just and righteous in condemning sin and bringing his wrath upon both sinners and sin. Why? He is a righteous God. He hates sin. Sin is contrary to God’s very nature! 12 Paul says this in so many words in verse 6. God could judge the world only if he is righteous and just. A belief in God being totally good, righteous, just, and fair is essential to holding forth that God’s judgments will be likewise fair and right.

Finally, how do we understand the concluding verse of this section? “Why not say —as we are slanderously reported as saying and some claim that we say—Let us do evil that good may result”? First of all let us realize that Paul never said this in his preaching or teaching. Other people who perhaps wanted to discredit Paul, asserted these as lies and slander against him. Paul, however, uses this blatant falsehood used by other against him in order to demonstrate the error of thinking which questions God’s righteous condemnation and judgment of sin and wrongdoing. God is just. God must condemn sin. He must judge and oppose sin/wrong doing/falsehood/evil/injustice/corruption of any kind. If I understand Paul correctly whether or not “my falsehood increases his glory by showing forth in contrast his righteousness is not the main point. The main point is that God is righteous! He must be faithful to himself as being totally good and righteous and thus condemn sin in any form.

12 Quoting David Freeman Lesson on Romans 1:16-32.