

The Righteousness of God

[Romans 1:16-17](#)



We are looking at Paul's introduction to the book of Romans which covers verse 1 thru 17. This is the longest introduction of Paul's. This introduction divides into three parts: [1-7](#) is the salutation, which we looked at for several weeks. Last week we looked at verses [8-15](#) in which Paul is giving thanks to God for the Romans and tells them of his prayer for them and about Paul's travel plans. Today we are going to look at verse [16-17](#), which tells us that the gospel unveils God's righteousness.

So, he has discussed his message, he has discussed himself as the messenger and now he crystallizes the thesis of this epistle which will unfold in the remaining chapters.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH." Romans 1:16-17 NASB

I believe these two verses form the theme and the thesis for the epistle to the Romans. The whole epistle is really an expansion of verses 16 and 17. And so it is essential that we get a proper perspective on these two verses.

"For"—this is the Greek word "*gar*". When Paul says **"for"** he is explaining what has just gone before.

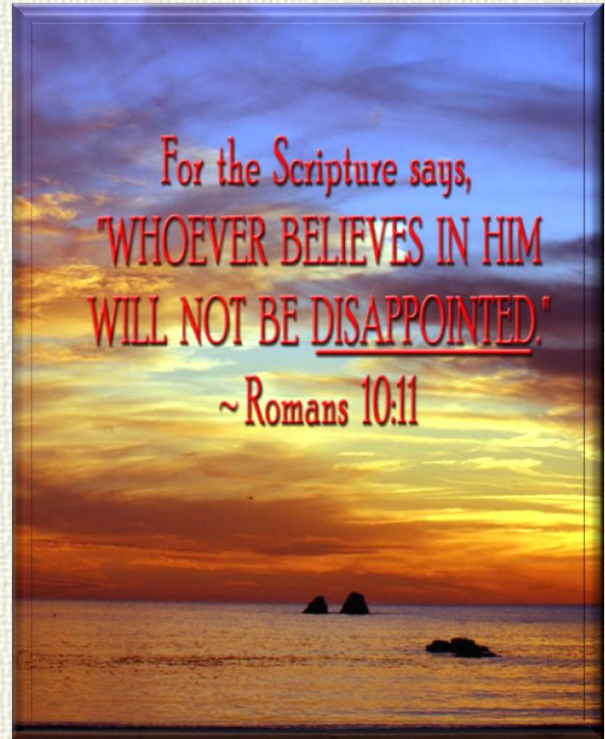
So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. Romans 1:15 NASB

Paul was eager to preach the gospel in Rome **"because"** he was not ashamed of the gospel. In the Greek of these two verses Paul uses "*gar*" three times, and the final explanatory clause expresses the deepest thing Paul wishes to say.

"For I am not ashamed"—we have to understand Paul's use of **"ashamed."** The dictionary defines **"ashamed"** as being **"affected by shame,"** and shame is defined as a painful emotion excited by a consciousness of guilt, disgrace, or dishonor. I think that is how most people today view the word ashamed.

But this is not the biblical definition of **"shame."** The biblical understanding has to do with disappointment. According to Scripture, the person who is not ashamed is the person whose trust is not misplaced and who, therefore, is **never disillusioned.** The word **"ashamed"** comes from two Greek words. One is *epi*, which means **upon**, but it really is **an intensifier.** The other word is *aischunomai*. I think it is best translated **"disappoint."**

When you look up a word in Strong's or Young's Lexicon, they will give you the etymology of the word. That is the dictionary definition of the word. **Often times that is not how it is used in the Bible.** There is another way to find out what a word means and that is by its usage. How is the word used in Scripture? **In exegesis, usage always takes precedent over etymology.** The reason for this is because word meanings change. So what we want to find is usage. The way to find out usage is to get a Greek concordance and look up how the word is used in the Bible. As you find its usage, you can determine its meaning. The work is well worth it.



This meaning of **"disappoint"** for the Greek word [aischuno](#), is unmistakable at several important places in the Bible.

and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. Romans 5:4-5 NASB

What does hope and ashamed have to do with each other? The word **"disappoint"** translated "ashamed" in the KJV is [kataischuno](#), a strengthened form of *aischuno*. Thayer's Greek\English Lexicon translates this, **"does not disappoint."** Phillips correctly paraphrases, **"a steady hope that will never disappoint us."** Kittle, in his theological dictionary of New Testament words, says, **"Extra-biblically the word 'ashamed' was often used for disillusionment."**

just as it is written, "BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED." Romans 9:33 NASB

The word **"disappointed"** here is translated "ashamed" in the KJV it is the word *kataischuno*. No one who believes in God will be disappointed.

For the Scripture says, "WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED." Romans 10:11 NASB

Same Greek word again [kataischuno](#). The idea is, **"No one who trusts in God will ever be disappointed."**

For this reason we have been comforted. And besides our comfort, we rejoiced even much more for the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. For if in anything I have boasted to him about you, I was not put to shame; but as we spoke all things to you in truth, so also our boasting before Titus proved to be the truth. 2 Corinthians 7:13-14 NASB

The word here for **"put to shame"** is [kataischuno](#) and would be better translated "disappointed." Paul is saying, Titus found you to be just what we told him and I am not disappointed at all.

For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day. 2 Timothy 1:12 NASB

The word **"ashamed"** here is [epaischunomai](#) as in [Romans 1:16](#) and should also be translated "disappointed." Paul wasn't disappointed for the very reason he knew that God was going to deliver him through all his suffering. This is a banking metaphor. Paul is saying, "God has the power to keep that which I have deposited with him and I am not disappointed at my suffering."

So in our text in Romans 1:16, Paul is saying that **he has never been disappointed in the gospel**. Some scholars suggest that Paul used a literary device in this statement known as ["litotes"](#), which uses a negative to state the positive assertion. In this case, by means of litotes, Paul implied that he gloried in the gospel.

"The Gospel"—Remember what Paul has already said about the gospel; it was **"promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures"**, it was **"concerning His ... who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead."**

To a Jew in Paul's day the word **"Gospel"** looked back to Isaiah. It was **"good news"** to Jerusalem of deliverance from Babylon and the personal return of YHWH to deliver them from exile. So, to the Jews, the Good News was of the arrival of Messiah, Israel's anointed king, to bring God's people back from exile. Remember what we said previously, that Paul's gospel is **"Jesus Christ is Lord."** The Jewish messiah, Jesus Christ, is the Lord of the world. Caesar is not Lord, but Jesus is!

"For it is the power of God"—here we have another **"gar"**, so here Paul explains why he is not disappointed in the gospel. He is not disappointed because the gospel itself is God's power for salvation. Power is the word [dunamis](#). That is the word from which we get **"dynamic," "dynamo" and "dynamite."** The announcement that Jesus is Lord, is the power of God that brings deliverance.

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1 Corinthians 1:18 NASB

The following context of 1 Corinthians 1 clarifies that the power of the gospel lies in its effective work in calling the elect to salvation.

but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 1 Corinthians 1:23-24 NASB

The gospel is not about potential salvation. It's about the power of God for salvation. The preaching of the gospel does not merely make salvation possible but effects salvation in those who are called. The connection between the power of God and election is also seen in:

knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5 NASB

Paul knows the Thessalonians are chosen because the gospel came to them in power.

“Salvation”—when Paul refers to salvation, he especially has in mind the saving promises made to Israel in the First Testament. So the salvation that is available in Paul’s gospel involves the fulfillment of the promises made to Israel.

Salvation here is from *soteria*, this and *sozien*, (to save) usually have a future sense, denoting deliverance from the eschatological judgment of God. I think Paul has in mind the final triumph of the gospel in bringing believers to eternal safety and joy in the presence of a holy and glorious God. We see this future sense in [Romans 5:9-10](#), Paul talks about this future salvation as rescue from the final wrath of God:

Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. Romans 5:9-10 NASB

Twice here Paul says, **“we shall be saved”**. In other words, the full experience of salvation, in Paul’s thinking, is still future.

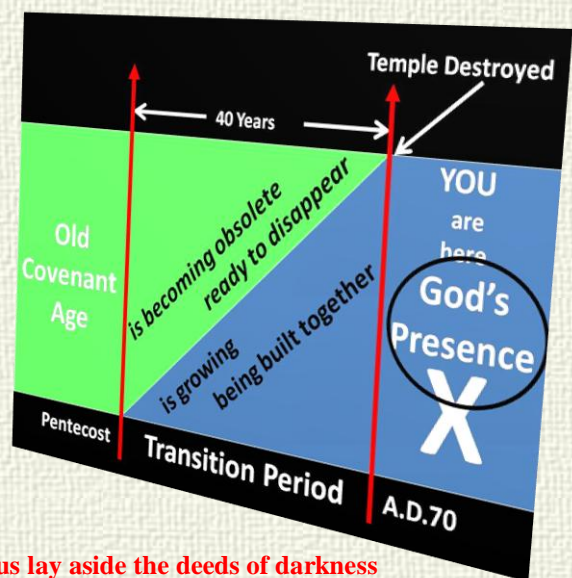
Most commentators explain salvation by saying that there is a past, present, and future dimension to "salvation." They would say, **Past**—points to our **justification**—that our standing with God has changed through the power of the gospel. No longer are we condemned or even looked upon by God as unrighteous. **Present**—points to our **sanctification**—so that the gospel continues to work in our lives, purifying us from the pollution of sin and delivering us from its power. **Future**—points to **glorification**—that we live with the anticipation of eternity with Christ; hope characterizes us as we wait for THE day that we are totally delivered from the presence of sin to dwell forever in Christ's presence.

So are we looking forward to a future tense of Salvation? Paul certainly was:

Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. Romans 13:11 NASB

Salvation was not a completed event in the lives of the first century believers, it was their hope, they looked forward to its soon arrival. Notice what Paul says next:

The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Romans 13:12 NASB



He equates their salvation with the “day” which is referring to the New Covenant, the Old Covenant was night. **“Knowing the time”** is the Greek word *kairos*, it means: **“season, a special critical strategic period of time.”** It is used of a season of great importance in redemptive history. The completion of redemptive history was at hand, and with it would come salvation.

We need to understand that, all through the New Testament, we see **two ages** in contrast. **“This age,”** and the **“age to come.”** The understanding of these two ages and when they changed is fundamental to interpreting the Bible, and to understanding eschatology.

The New Testament writers lived in the age that they called “this age.” To the New Testament writers, “the age to come” was future, but it was very near because “this age,” the age they lived in, was about to end. We now live in what the Bible calls “the age to come” which is the New Covenant age. The forty year period, from Pentecost to Holocaust, was a time of **transition** from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. In this transition period, the New Covenant had been inaugurated but not consummated. It was a time of “already but not yet.” We live in the New Covenant, our salvation is complete.

So when Paul says in Romans 1:16 that the **“gospel is the power of God unto salvation,”** I take him to mean that the gospel is the only message in the world that powerfully can bring a person to everlasting safety and joy in the presence of a holy and glorious God.

“To everyone who believes”—Salvation’s power operates only through faith, that’s all. The importance of believing is emphasized here. Where there is faith there is the power of God operative in salvation. John Calvin stated, **“The gospel is indeed offered to all for their salvation, but the power of it appears not everywhere”** [Calvin’s Commentaries, XIX, 62].

Believing is our response to the gospel of Christ. Faith, which is the noun form for believe, is not something that we work up by strenuous effort. Faith is “an evangelical grace,” it is a gift of God that comes through the regenerating work of the Spirit so that we might lay hold of what God has done for us through Christ.

In response to the question, “What is faith?”, John MacArthur writes,

Faith is believing. You all live by faith ... everyday of your life. You turn on your faucet, fill the glass and you drink it. That's faith. You don't know what's in there. You have no idea whose been playing in your pipes. I remember reading in a Reader's Digest about a city in Kansas that had a great big water tank and their water was fed to them through this tank. It was pumped up through a well and filled the tank and then it came out of the tank into the town. And they converted to a piped-in system and drained the tank and they found all kinds of strange creatures in the bottom of the tank. They all got retroactive dysentery. They have been living by faith but they had their faith in the wrong thing.

Those things are not faith! That is simply putting into practice what is called the law of mathematical probability. You are saying to yourself, “Well, thousands of people do this everyday and everything is all right, so I’ll do the same.” I’ve grown up seeing people drink out of the faucet—that is not faith.

Faith is always intelligent and it knows what it’s doing. Biblically defined, **FAITH IS: UNDERSTANDING AND ASSENT TO A PROPOSITION.** If you were to ask me, “Where is my money?” And I said to you, “The check is in the mail.” Now, you are either going to believe me, which is faith (you are trusting in what I said), or you are not.

yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. Romans 4:20-21 NASB

Abraham believed what God told him which is faith. No matter what the subject, whether it is God or cars, the psychology or linguistics of belief, it is identical in all cases. Believing that 2+2=4 is arithmetic. Believing that asparagus belongs to the lily

family is botany. Botany is not mathematics, but the psychology or linguistics of believing is identical. Christ's promises of salvation are vastly different from the propositions of botany. But believing is always thinking a proposition is true.

When it comes to faith, there aren't different "hows", there are only different "whats." It is **WHAT** you believe that matters. You cannot believe in the wrong way. Faith is understanding and assent to a proposition. You can't believe in the wrong way, you can only believe in the wrong thing. Paul is calling both Jews and Greeks to believe that Jesus is Lord!

"To the Jew first and also to the Greek"—Jews have priority because ***"salvation is from the Jews."*** Notice what Jesus says to the Samaritan woman at the well:

"You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. John 4:22 NASB

All salvation is salvation through God's covenant with Abraham! The Greek here reads, ***"to the Jew first and also equally to the Greek"***. There is a temporal priority for the Jews but the Gentiles are not second class citizens. In the Church of Jesus Christ Jews and Greeks are on equal footing. Our faith makes us sons of Abraham.

Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. Galatians 3:7 NASB

Why is the gospel the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes? Paul explains. He says in the 17th verse,

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH." Romans 1:17 NASB

The word ***"for"*** is again the Greek word *gar*. When Paul says ***"for"*** he is explaining what has just gone before. In other words, the gospel is the power of God unto salvation because it is through the gospel that the righteousness of God is revealed. We must strive to understand Romans 1:17 because it sets the context, the theme for the whole letter.

"The righteousness of God"—this phrase, which dominates Romans, has been taken in two different ways in the history of the Church. In Greek the phrase is simply, ***"God's righteousness"***. The trouble with this phrase is that Greek genitives can go one way or another. For example the phrase, "the love of God"—does this mean God's love for us, or our love for God? Is this a subjective or an objective genitive? Is it God's own love— the subjective genitive, or our love for God— the objective genitive? So scholars have debated whether the phrase "the righteousness of God" is God's own righteousness or whether it is a righteousness that God gives.

The mainstream view is that this righteousness that Paul speaks of here is not God's own righteousness, but is a righteousness "from" God, the righteousness which God gives on the basis of faith. The righteous status they have because of Christ-imputed righteousness. The Bible does teach us about the righteousness that is from God, for example in Philippians 3:

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, Philippians 3:7-9 NASB

Paul says that this righteousness is ***"from"*** God. But in Romans Paul does not use this phrase "the righteousness 'from' God" but says, ***"the righteousness of God"***. If you trace this phrase back to its Jewish roots you'll find it has many different connotations but is never used of a righteous status which is a gift of God. And in [Romans 3:21-31](#), a righteousness from God doesn't make sense.

I think Paul is speaking here of God's righteousness; His character. God is a righteous God. Certainly, the Scripture acknowledges God as righteous. Even Pharaoh confessed, ***"the LORD is the righteous one, and I and my people are the wicked ones."*** (Ex. 9:27). ***"God is a righteous judge"*** (Ps. 7:11).

For the LORD is righteous, He loves righteousness; The upright will behold His face. Psalms 11:7 NASB

Righteous are You, O LORD, And upright are Your judgments. Psalms 119:137 NASB

Our God truly is righteous. But seeing that meaning in Romans 1:17 really bothers some people. One commentator writes, *“Some identify this as a reference to God’s character. But if that is what Paul means, then this is a most fearful statement!”* Only the upright can see His face (Ps. 11:7). If we are not righteous then we cannot face Him. His righteousness then becomes a dread.” I would agree that to someone who will not come to the obedience of faith a righteous God is a terror. But Paul is saying that the good news reveals the righteousness of God. And I guess that’s why they want to see this as a righteousness that comes from God.

Martin Luther describes his encounter with this term as he studied the book of Romans:

But up till then it was not the cold blood about the heart, but a single word of Chapter 1:17, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed,” that had stood in my way. For I hated that word “righteousness of God,” which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner. Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God... [Bernhard Lohse, Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 90, quoted from Luther’s Works, vol. 34, pp. 336-37].



I think that Luther’s problem was that he didn’t understand what “God’s righteousness” meant. There are several scholars including Williams, Dunn, Kaylor, Davies, O’Brian, and Wright, who suggest that the term *“righteousness of God”* is referring to God’s covenant faithfulness. In other words, His saving actions are rooted in his faithfulness to the covenant enacted with his people. That the righteousness of God involves His loyalty to the covenant is shown in many First Testament passages:

For the choir director. A Psalm of David. In You, O LORD, I have taken refuge; Let me never be ashamed; In Your righteousness deliver me. Psalms 31:1 NASB

Wright describes this righteousness of God as having three levels of meaning. 1. **Covenantal**. Speaking God’s faithfulness to the covenant with Israel. In Isaiah when the prophet celebrates the righteousness of God he continually goes back to God’s covenant faithfulness:

“I bring near My righteousness, it is not far off; And My salvation will not delay. And I will grant salvation in Zion, And My glory for Israel. Isaiah 46:13 NASB

Righteousness is the faithfulness of God in fulfilling his promises.

“I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, In lovingkindness and in compassion, And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the LORD. Hosea 2:19-20 NASB

When the phrase *“the righteousness of God”* occurs in biblical and post-biblical Jewish texts, it always refers to God’s own righteousness. Or we could say “God’s own faithfulness to the covenant.”

The covenantal meaning is first and primary. Secondly the word *“righteousness”* is also shaped by the Second Temple Jewish setting of the **lawcourt**. Jewish law court forms the background for Paul’s forensic use of the *dikaiosisune* theme. Many Jewish writings of this period tell the story of Israel and the pagan nations in terms of a great cosmic lawsuit. In the Old Convent law court, all cases were what we would consider civil. An accuser and defendant pleaded their case before a judge. When the case has been heard, the judge finds in favor of one party and against the other. Once that has happened, the vindicated party possesses the status “righteous”—a statement of how things stand in terms of the now completed lawsuit.

For the judge to be righteous, it is necessary that he try the case fairly, refuse bribes or other favoritism, uphold the law, and take special note for the helpless.

In the covenant it is God who is the Judge, and Israel His oppressed people is vindicated and the wicked are judged. In Daniel 7, we see God as the Judge vindicating Israel His oppressed people and judging the wicked who have been attacking her.

Law court imagery is appropriate because God is the God of justice, who is bound to keep his promises with the means by which He will do so, from Genesis 12 onwards, is through the covenant He has made with Abraham. And the reason God established the covenant with Abraham was to undo the sin of Adam and its effects and thereby to create for Himself a people. God sits as Judge and will vindicate His true people.

We have to understand that the law court is not the main emphases of *dikaiousune*, the main emphases is covenantal. God is in covenant with Israel, and He will be true to that covenant.

In the first century as Paul writes, this has not yet happened so the third element is **eschatological**. So the **“righteousness of God”** is God’s own covenantal faithfulness, He will judge the nations justly, but He hasn’t yet done it, it is something that He will do from the perspective of first century readers. God will redeem His people. God will one day justify his people. How will He do this? He will raise them from the dead. The resurrection of the dead, the restoration of Israel, the return from exile, the forgiveness of sins is in law court and covenant terms justification.

God’s *dikaiousune*, is that aspect of his character because of which, despite Israel’s sin and consequent banishment, God will remain true to the covenant with Abraham and rescue her none the less. This righteousness is a form of justice; God’s covenant is binding upon Him, and through this covenant He has promised to save Israel.

So what we have in [Romans 1:17](#) is that in the gospel God’s covenant faithfulness is *being revealed*—this is in the present tense. The covenant faithfulness of God is presently being revealed in the preaching of the gospel.

“From faith to faith”—this is difficult and we can’t be certain of exactly what it means but from:

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; Romans 3:21-22 NASB

Its most natural meaning seems to be “from God’s faithfulness to human faithfulness.”

“BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH”—In the prophetic book of Habakkuk, he mourned the problems of Israel brought on by their sin with no justice in sight ([1:1-4](#)). So God tells the prophet that He is raising up the Chaldeans to execute justice on them ([1:5-11](#)). But that bewildered the prophet! What in the world is God doing? This is a questioning of the righteousness and justice of God. To answer this, the prophet is given a vision of the future:

“For the vision is yet for the appointed time; It hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; For it will certainly come, it will not delay. “Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; But the righteous will live by his faith. Habakkuk 2:3-4 NASB

At that moment God’s people must live by faith, trusting that God will eventually punish the wicked nation and bring salvation to Israel. And Paul in quoting Habakkuk is saying, God will be faithful to His covenant with Israel, His judgment of the nations and salvation of Israel will come. They must live by faith that God will be faithful to His covenant.

Believers, our God is a faithful God, He keeps his promises:

“Know therefore that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments; Deuteronomy 7:9 NASB

God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. 1 Corinthians 1:9 NASB

To emphasize the concept of God's faithfulness, Paul places this word first in the Greek sentence: literally translated it reads "faithful is God." Faithful means trustworthy therefore God is trustworthy, and we can depend upon Him. The faithful God has called us into a union or partnership with his Son; He is trustworthy when He promises that this union is permanent. We will be blameless because God is faithful. Eternity lays not in my actions, but in God's faithfulness.

The modern gospel portrays God as being lonely and in need of our companionship than righteously angered by our sin. **Man is not represented as a rebel under the wrath of God and destined for eternal judgment, but rather as one who could use a little assistance in making his life more fulfilling and satisfying. In this kind of gospel, we defame the righteousness of God, rather than declare it.**



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