

# The Cross of Christ and God's Righteousness

## *The aim of this article*

Many people today think that righteousness and mercy are two conflicting aspects of God's character. It is claimed that on the one hand God's righteousness requires him to punish sin, on the other hand he is merciful and wants to forgive and not to punish the sinner. This idea of a conflict between God's righteousness and mercy has shaped the concept of salvation held by many people today. In this article we want to show that no such conflict exists within God and that Jesus was not sent to solve it. Jesus was born as a man, lived obediently, died, and rose again so as to be a perfect mediator between man and God. He came to offer us a relationship with the Father and with himself—a relationship whose seal is eternal life. The biblical expression "righteousness" or "justice" must be understood in the context of a relationship, and not as an impersonal legal principle which must be fulfilled.

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## ⚓ 1 God's Righteousness, Faithfulness and Mercy

People often associate God's righteousness with his unbiased and impartial judgments. This aspect of God's righteousness is expressed in passages such as the following:

Man is humbled, and each one is brought low,  
and the eyes of the haughty are brought low.  
But the Lord of hosts is exalted in justice,  
and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness (Hebrew: *tsedaqah*). (*Isaiah*  
5:15-16)

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness (Greek: *dikaiosyne*) by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." (*Acts* 17:30-31)

The meaning of the Hebrew word for righteousness *tsedaqah* and the corresponding Greek word *dikaiosyne*, which occur in the Bible passages above, is not limited to "unbiased and impartial judgement". This ought

to come of no surprise when we take the richness of God's being as our starting point. If we want to understand God's righteousness, we cannot neglect the fact that God is love (1 John 4:16). There is no contradiction in God's being. Therefore we cannot separate and contrast God's righteousness<sup>[1]</sup> with His mercifulness, faithfulness, goodness, grace, forgiveness—that is, with everything His love implies.

For the Jews of the biblical times these terms were not contradictory either but in their language, Hebrew, the word "righteousness" had a wider meaning and expressed various aspects of the relationship among people and between God and man. One fact is worth mentioning in this context: when the Jews translated the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek (known as the *Septuagint*), the translators rendered the Hebrew word for righteousness (*tsedaqah*) mostly as "justice" (*dikaioyne*) but occasionally also as "mercy".<sup>[2]</sup> In some other passages they also translated the Hebrew word for grace (*chesed*) into Greek as *dikaioyne* (righteousness, justice).<sup>[3]</sup> They felt free to do this because they did not regard righteousness, grace, and mercy as contradictory.<sup>[4]</sup>

By looking at several biblical examples we would like to point out how God's righteousness is connected with His help, faithfulness, goodness, and even with His mercy.

Let's look at an example from the life of a righteous man in the Old Testament to illustrate our point:

Afterwards David also arose and went out of the cave, and called after Saul, "My lord the king!" And when Saul looked behind him, David bowed with his face to the earth and paid homage. And David said to Saul, "Why do you listen to the words of men who say, 'Behold, David seeks your harm'? Behold, this day your eyes have seen how the Lord gave you today into my hand in the cave. And some told me to kill you, but I spared you. I said, 'I will not put out my hand against my lord, for he is the Lord's anointed.'" ...As soon as David had finished speaking these words to Saul, Saul said, "Is this your voice, my son David?" And Saul lifted up his voice and wept. He said to David, "You are more righteous than I, for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil."  
(1 Samuel 24:8-10,16-17)

Driven by jealousy, King Saul persecuted David into the desert. On his way Saul went into a cave to "relieve himself". He was unaware that David was hiding in the cave—a unique opportunity for David to eliminate his arch enemy and repay him righteously. David's companions prompted him to act: "And the men of David said to him, 'Here is the day of which the Lord said to you, "Behold, I will give your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it shall seem good to you."' Then David arose and stealthily cut off a corner of Saul's robe." (1 Samuel 24:4) David acted righteously, but not in the sense of punishing justly. His "heart struck him" (verse 5), and he was not willing to do Saul any harm. David was merciful and showed that he wanted the best for Saul, even though Saul did not deserve it. Faced with David's mercy, Saul acknowledged that he was "more righteous". If David, a god-fearing man, saw no contradiction in showing mercy to Saul instead of punishing him justly, how much less does it contradict God's righteousness for him, the Father of mercies<sup>[5]</sup> to have mercy on the undeserving?

## ✚ 1.1 God's Righteousness Towards His Nation

In one of the most desperate periods of Jewish history, Daniel prayed for his nation:

To us, O Lord, belongs open shame, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against you. To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him.... Therefore the Lord has kept ready the

calamity and has brought it upon us, for the Lord our God is *righteous* in all the works that he has done, and we have not obeyed his voice. (*Daniel 9:8-9 & 14*)

He continues:

...we have sinned, we have done wickedly. O Lord, according to all your *righteous* acts, let your anger and your wrath turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy hill, because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and your people have become a byword among all who are around us. (*Daniel 9:16*)

In the Hebrew text the same word “righteous” occurs both in verse 14 and verse 16 (see underlined). Verse 14 speaks about God’s righteous judgement, while in verse 16 Daniel, who is confident of God’s loyalty to his covenant, asks for mercy in accordance with God’s righteous acts. The reason he does this is that in the Old Testament God’s righteousness is not limited to his impartial judgement. It expresses his faithfulness to his covenant and his promises. His righteousness is magnified because he remains faithful even though his people are unfaithful. He forgives them and fulfills his promises although his nation had failed.

In another passage God says the following:

Listen to me, you stubborn of heart,  
you who are far from righteousness:  
I bring near my righteousness; it is not far off,  
and my salvation will not delay;  
I will put salvation in Zion,  
for Israel my glory. (*Isaiah 46:12-13*)

Here the Jews are reproached for being stubborn-minded and far from righteousness. They were unworthy of receiving God’s forgiveness. Nevertheless, in His faithfulness and love, God grants them salvation and glory. In this passage God’s righteousness is a parallelism for his salvation and does not stand for judgement.

From the previous and several other passages we can see that for the Jews God’s righteousness was not in any way at odds with His grace and forgiveness. On the contrary—by showing mercy God confirms his righteousness because he proves to be faithful even when people are not faithful.[6]

When God made a covenant with his nation he promised to be with them, to lead them and to reveal himself to them. In return, the Jews also promised to obey him, to follow him and be faithful to him, to have no other gods beside him. This faithfulness, from both man and God, is also called “righteousness” in the Bible. It is righteous when God and man behave towards one another as they promised.[7]

## ✠ 1.2 God’s Righteousness Towards Individuals in the Old Testament

Individuals in the Old Testament testify about God’s righteousness which they experienced through his forgiveness and grace. In a psalm we read:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. (*Psalms 51:1*)

These words are a plea for forgiveness for a grave sin. The psalmist knew that, being a sinner, he has no right to demand mercy, and God's judgement is just:

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgement. (*Psalm 51:4*)

However, the psalmist, filled with regret for his sin, trusts alone in God's mercy. He knows that he cannot offer any compensation for his sin. He can only hope for the free gift of forgiveness from God:

Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.  
O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.  
For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.  
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (*Psalm 51:14-17*)

The psalmist's sure hope led him to sing joyfully of God's righteousness. When God grants grace his faithfulness is displayed and his righteousness confirmed.

Likewise, in another psalm we read that the author was deeply conscious of his numerous sins. Yet, he asks God to preserve him according to his faithfulness, lovingkindness, compassion and salvation. He proclaims these as God's righteousness as an encouragement to many:

I have proclaimed glad tidings of righteousness in the great congregation;  
Behold, I will not restrain my lips,  
O LORD, You know.  
I have not hidden Your righteousness within my heart;  
I have spoken of Your faithfulness and Your salvation;  
I have not concealed Your lovingkindness and Your truth from the great congregation.

You, O LORD, will not withhold Your compassion from me;  
Your lovingkindness and Your truth will continually preserve me.  
For evils beyond number have surrounded me;  
My iniquities have overtaken me, so that I am not able to see;  
They are more numerous than the hairs of my head,  
And my heart has failed me. (*Psalm 40:9-12, NASB*)

Psalm 103 is a song of praise for God's mercies. Verse 6 speaks of God's righteous dealings with the oppressed:

The Lord works righteousness  
and justice for all who are oppressed. (*Psalm 103:6*)

God's righteousness is also displayed in his rebuke of the sinner. However, because of his steadfast love, patience and grace, he will not keep his anger forever:

The Lord is merciful and gracious,  
 slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
 He will not always chide,  
 nor will he keep his anger for ever.  
 He does not deal with us according to our sins,  
 nor repay us according to our iniquities.  
 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
 so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him; *(Psalm 103:8-11)*

For those who fear God his righteousness goes hand in hand with his steadfast love.

But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him,  
 and his righteousness to children's children. *(Psalm 103:17)*

In God's righteousness they see hope for salvation:

In you, O Lord, do I take refuge;  
 let me never be put to shame;  
 in your righteousness deliver me! *(Psalm 31:1)*

The psalmist knew that because of his sins he did not deserve the help he received.

...my strength fails because of my iniquity,  
 and my bones waste away. *(Psalm 31:10b)*

His hope rested on God's faithfulness which he experienced through his grace.

### ⚓ 1.3 God's Righteousness in the New Testament

The New Testament also teaches us that God is faithful and righteous and that he forgives.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. *(1 John 1:9, NASB)*

God does not need to give an account to anyone when he generously shows mercy. This is expressed in the parable of the workers in the vineyard when the owner of the vineyard says:

Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you.  
 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? *(Matthew 20:14-15)*

According to human standards it would appear unrighteous to pay the same wage to the man who worked for one hour as to the man who worked for twelve hours. But God is not bound by human standards. His generosity, goodness and love surpass all human expectations of righteousness and rewards.

Jesus teaches us to be ready to forgive without receiving any compensation or satisfaction.

Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.”

“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” (*Matthew 18:21-35*)

The debt owed to the king was impossible to pay.<sup>[8]</sup> But no-one would accuse the king of being unrighteous for freely forgiving his debtor. When we hear of the king’s mercy our hearts burn with joy and we confirm—yes, this is righteous, this is good.

Jesus also taught us to pray:

...and forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors. (*Matthew 6:12*)

If God demands of us to forgive freely, is He not able to do the same? The parable of the king who settles accounts with his servants demonstrates that the king is able to forgive without requiring compensation and that he also does it.

## ⚓ 2 Who Can Be Forgiven?

If God can freely forgive why doesn’t He forgive everyone? Isaiah teaches us that an unrepentant person would abuse God’s grace if he received it:

If favour is shown to the wicked,  
he does not learn righteousness;  
in the land of uprightness he deals corruptly  
and does not see the majesty of the Lord. (*Isaiah 26:10*)

If a wicked person received forgiveness he would continue in his wickedness. Forgiving him would only lead to the abuse of this forgiveness. God does not forgive such people because He does not want to support evil. He does not forgive everyone.

...but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (*Matthew 6:15*)

...but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. (*Matthew 12:32b*)

He forgives those who humble themselves, confess their sins, and want to learn to live upright lives, which is the right response to His grace.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, (*Titus 2:11-12*)

Jesus' aim was to draw us closer to God and to arouse in us regret for our sins and love for God. This is what happened to the woman in the following story:

One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

"A certain money-lender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning towards the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." (*Luke 7:36-47*)

She had become entangled in sin and lacked the strength to change her situation. Scorned by her fellow Jews, there seemed to be no hope for her. She had probably heard Jesus speaking and through her encounter with Jesus she was filled with the longing for pure love and life, which she did not hesitate to express. She did not want to sin anymore and expressed her readiness to repent. As a result she received forgiveness. The same offer is valid for all of us. If we accept the call of Jesus, as this woman did, we too can experience his forgiveness.

## ⚓ 3 Did God Forsake Jesus?

A wide-spread explanation of salvation today is that it is impossible for God to be both righteous and to leave sins unpunished. But God, in His love for us, wanted to save us from this punishment, choosing instead to punish his own Son by abandoning him in his most difficult moment on the cross, regarding him as sinful instead of us. This explanation of Jesus' death was strongly formed and, with some variations, promoted by theologians like Martin Luther [9] and John Calvin [10]. In many religious groups nowadays salvation is explained in terms of a court case in which the judge is obliged to stay within the laws of the state and would be guilty of injustice if he just freely forgave severe crimes. We have already shown that God's righteousness is different and does not require punishment when a sinner regrets his sin. Now we would like to discuss some passages which are often used to support the idea that Jesus was forsaken by God and experienced condemnation as a punishment for our sins.

### ⚓ 3.1 The Last Words of Jesus on the Cross

Some of the last words Jesus spoke while hanging on the cross are found in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark:

■ My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? (*Matthew 27:46*)



Jesus quoted these words from Psalm 22. The context of the whole Psalm will help us to understand their meaning. In verse 1 the Psalmist cries, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?”

He remembers the Jewish fathers who experienced the miraculous help of God: “In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them” (verse 4). Yet he does not share the same experience: “But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people” (verse 6). He experiences severe persecution at the hands of evil people: “For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet” (verse 16). He asks God to deliver him: “Deliver my soul from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dog!” (verse 20), and God listened to his prayer: “For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him” (verse 24). The psalm finishes with the praise of God. In the context of the psalm we can see that (a) being forsaken does not mean being forsaken spiritually but being exposed to suffering, and (b) the words “why have you forsaken me?” are not a desperate cry without a response but a prayer which was heard. In a situation in which, from a human point of view, it could seem that he had been left alone, Jesus prayed this prayer full of trust in God’s deliverance. His words show that the undeserved suffering of righteous people is a recurring theme in the Bible—and that as the ultimately Righteous one he experienced suffering in agreement with the message of the Old Testament. Jesus did not have the physical strength to quote the whole Psalm but those who listened knew the context of these words. They knew that with these words Jesus actually claims that he is righteous and deserving of God’s salvation. This becomes even clearer when we compare these words with the last words of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke which are full of confidence in God.

Father, into your hands I commit my spirit! (*Luke 23:46*)

The centurion standing at Jesus’ cross observed the way he died and testified about him.

And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (*Mark 15:39*)

A man forsaken by God would not have been recognized by the centurion as the Son of God. Had he been forsaken, Jesus would not have been able to give such a testimony. In the parallel report in the Gospel of Luke, the centurion attested that Jesus was a righteous and innocent man (*Luke 23:47*). This also shows that Jesus did not die as a sinner abandoned by God.

Briefly before his death Jesus himself expressed that the Father would not forsake him.

Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. (*John 16:32*)

## ⚓ 3.2 He Bore Our Sins

Jesus fulfilled the prophecy found in the book of Isaiah:

Yet He Himself bore our sicknesses,  
and He carried our pains;  
but we in turn regarded Him stricken,

struck down by God, and afflicted.  
 But He was pierced because of our transgressions,  
 crushed because of [11] our iniquities;  
 punishment for our peace was on Him,  
 and we are healed by His wounds. (*Isaiah 53:4-5, HCSB [12]*)

This passage belongs to Isaiah's four prophecies (Isaiah 42:1-9, Isaiah 49:1-13, Isaiah 50:4-11, Isaiah 52:13-53:12) in which the prophet calls the Messiah "the Servant of the Lord" (42:1, 49:7, 50:10, 52:13). Step by step the character and mission of the Servant is revealed. In his final Servant song, from which we quoted above, the Bible speaks for the first time about the fact that the Messiah will bear our iniquities and griefs. Bearing the sins of mankind, however, does not describe a spiritual separation from God. The words of the Servant in his previous song show that God is near to him even in his sufferings:

But the Lord God helps me;  
 therefore I have not been disgraced;  
 therefore I have set my face like a flint,  
 and I know that I shall not be put to shame.  
 He who vindicates me is near.  
 Who will contend with me?  
 Let us stand up together.  
 Who is my adversary?  
 Let him come near to me. (*Isaiah 50:7-8*)

Those who observed his suffering from the outside "regarded Him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted" (Isaiah 53:4). But the prophecy itself reveals that this interpretation is wrong. God is not the one who wrathfully crushes his servant, but the one who exposes him to the wickedness of the people by sending him into this corrupted world with a good aim. The next verse expresses it in the following words:

All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to encounter [13] Him. (*Isaiah 53:6, NASB*)

Our iniquities are not transferred from us to the servant in a magical way. There is a more direct effect of the people's sins on the servant. He comes into our world in order to reconcile us with God, but in this way he is also confronted with and exposed to the wickedness of people.

When Isaiah 53:6 says that "the Lord has caused" it, the prophet wanted to express that the Lord fully accepted and allowed the sins of people to have an influence on His servant. Nothing on earth happens without God's knowledge and permission. In a similar way Paul expressed that God will allow the coming of the lawless one: "Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false..." (2 Thess 2:11). To the 21st century western mind, this way of expressing God's activity sounds rather foreign. However, it is a fact that the Hebrews sometimes used an active form to express that God allowed something to happen, while at the same time the situation was not taken out of His hands.

Matthew quotes Isaiah 53 in his gospel in the context of Jesus' healings.

When evening came, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed; and He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were ill. This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: “He himself took our infirmities and carried away our diseases.” (*Matthew 8:16-17, NASB*)

Jesus’ healings and miracles were meant to be a sign that God’s kingdom had come near and expressed the spiritual renewal of fallen man. God is not indifferent to our suffering. He bowed down to us by becoming a man and serving us. This is meant here with the words, “Yet He Himself bore our sicknesses, and He carried our pains...” (Is 53:4, HCSB). He did not become ill, nor did he become a sinner, but he left his glory and came close to us in order to set us free from suffering and death.

Jesus’ solidarity with mankind went even a step further. Although he was not a sinner he accepted treatment as the worst of them. In spite of his innocence, he was executed like a criminal and a transgressor of the law. Isaiah describes this with the words, “...upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace...” (Isaiah 53:5). Jesus was punished by the people in a way that he appeared as somebody who was stricken by God’s wrath. But this punishment did not come from God. Just the opposite: God turned the evil that was committed by men to good. His suffering serves for our well-being (or peace).[14] Paul expressed a similar thought in the letter to the Galatians:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.” (*Galatians 3:13*)

Paul referred to the Old Testament passage of Deuteronomy 21:22, 23 which deals with the law concerning the execution of dangerous criminals. The passage in Deuteronomy says, “a hanged man is cursed by God.” Paul omits the words “by God” because Jesus was not cursed by the Father on the cross, but was near to him in his suffering. He did not become a sinner but suffered like a sinner. In its Old Testament context, the quoted passage from Deuteronomy presupposes that the executed person was condemned righteously—which was not true of Jesus.

Some Jewish false teachers tried to influence the Galatian Christians to keep the law, although as Gentiles they had been accepted by God through faith in Christ without the law. Paul warns them that if they now start keeping it they will have “fallen away from grace” (Galatians 5:3–4). In this context Paul speaks about the law as about a set of rules which “is not based on faith” (Galatians 3:12). The law, taken in this narrow sense, condemns everybody “who does not keep everything written in it” (Galatians 3:10), and also everybody “hanged on a tree”, including Christ.

To sum up, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by accepting the cross, which was a death of a cursed criminal. Despised by people and even “condemned” according to the quoted verse, he showed us what it means to live by faith and set us free from the law. The Galatians who were tempted to find their confidence in the law must have been ashamed at reading this. While bearing the unrighteousness of people Jesus did not forfeit his own righteousness.

...by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,  
make many to be accounted righteous,  
and he shall bear their iniquities. (*Isaiah 53:11*)

Jesus never lost God’s favour and presence in his life. Without the support of God, if he had been forsaken in his most difficult moment to fight alone, he could be considered a hero, but not a man of faith. This was

never His intention. Jesus' testimony was that with God and **only with God** can we withstand any temptation or trial. How could Jesus have fought with God's strength to accept and enter a very difficult situation in which he knew God would forsake him? Jesus said:

And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him. (*John 8:29*)

Wouldn't it be the greatest injustice to forsake a completely innocent person?

For the Lord loves justice;  
he will not forsake his saints. (*Psalms 37:28*)

Should God's righteousness be displayed in the greatest act of unrighteousness? In the Old Testament God revealed his abhorrence of human sacrifice (Jeremiah 7:31). The idea that Jesus' suffering and death satisfied God's righteousness, that God even forsook him, comes close to this pagan practice and thought.

### ⚓ 3.3 Why Did Jesus Suffer?

If God was always with Christ in his sufferings, why did He allow them at all? Why was it God's will? In the Bible the death of Christ is described as a consequence of people's wickedness and rejection of his call (John 1:10-11, Matthew 21:33-41). In this fallen world it is not possible to live in the truth without suffering (2 Timothy 3:12).

God would have been strong enough to protect Jesus from all the evil people, yet he knew this was not the best for us. An evil intention (to kill Jesus) itself can never bring about anything good (salvation), but the response of Christ—the way He bore his suffering and death—opens up the way back to God for us.

In his suffering Jesus went through a very difficult fight. He did not avoid this fight, but through his humility and prayer God gave him the strength to bear up under it.

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him. (*Hebrews 5:7-9*)

Through his resurrection and glorification Jesus now helps us to have the same attitude in our fights—to admit our weaknesses and with his help to be able to endure in them.

For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (*Hebrews 2:18*)

As Christians we sometimes experience pain but with him it is not an unbearable burden. The fact that Jesus suffered so much and overcame all difficulties is a comfort for us and strengthens our trust in him—the trust that he is always with us, even in our most difficult times. He invites us:

Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (*Matthew 11:28-30*)

The New Testament contains many passages which express that Christians die together with Christ (Mt 16:24, J 12:24-26, Rom 6:3-4, Gal 5:24, Phil 3:10, Col 2:12):

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (*Galatians 2:20*)

The death of Christ was not in vain. The crucified and risen Christ guides us through the process of dying to our sins and worldly aims and on to the joyous new life which nobody can take away from us.

And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.... (*Acts 16:23-25*)

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. (*2 Corinthians 5:14-15*)

Read more about Jesus' death in our article: ["Jesus' Death For Us: A Sacrifice"](#).

## ⚓ 4 Seen As Righteous or Made Righteous?

In the beginning of the previous section "Did God forsake Jesus?", we briefly described the concept of salvation propagated by some historically influential people. It is our experience that this way of thinking influences many people today and has formed their understanding of God and repentance. If Jesus suffered, died, and was separated from God as a result of God's own righteous demand for punishment, then it turns out that Jesus' task was to change the way God sees and treats us rather than to cause a real change in our lives. [15] In other words, the consequence is not that we are *made righteous* but only *seen as righteous*, as if God now sees us through a different set of lenses.

The Bible, however, testifies of a real visible change of life caused by salvation through Jesus. As Christians we cannot continue to live in grave sins:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practise homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (*1 Corinthians 6:9-11*)

Jesus did not come to save us "in our sins" but "from our sins" (Matthew 1:21). He wants to purify not only

our deeds but also our thoughts and motivations so that we can live a life of love and devotion.

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. *(Acts 2:41-47)*

So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgement, because as he is so also are we in this world. *(1 John 4:16-17)*

Without experiencing a deep change in our life and without love we cannot be truly confident of eternal life. The source of our confidence is not our deeds but our relationship with Christ.<sup>[16]</sup> But if we do not practise righteousness we can neither have nor maintain this relationship with him.

And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practises righteousness has been born of him. *(1 John 2:28-29)*

Jesus said:

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. *(John 15:5-7)*

Jesus described the relationship with him as "abiding in him". To abide in Christ means to be saved. Not to abide in him means to be thrown out and "to burn". In a similar way John the apostle wrote:

If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practise the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. *(1 John 1:6-7)*

A sincere purifying relationship with Jesus is only possible if we walk in the light. Being in the light is not about being perfect but striving for holiness in all areas of our life, confessing our sins to God and to one another, and turning away from them. **This is the indispensable effect of salvation in our life. Salvation is a free gift found in Christ. If we accept it we cannot continue our old, evil lives because this would make it impossible to be in fellowship with him—to be in him.**

And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption. *(1 Corinthians 1:30)*

Jesus rose from the dead and continues his mediatorship. Everyone who approaches God through him receives all he needs to change his life, to persevere and to arrive at the goal.

## 📌 5 Conclusion

The Bible says many times and in various ways that Jesus died for our salvation. However, as we have already shown, the wide-spread interpretation which implies that God had to punish an innocent person in our place in order to be able to forgive us while not compromising his righteousness, is not part of the Holy Scripture and raises serious problems. Instead,

- the Bible testifies of a loving God who freely forgives everyone who honestly repents;
- the Bible does not teach that Jesus was spiritually separated from the Father, but describes the affliction he had to bear as the consequence of mankind's sins;
- and last but not least salvation is not something that Jesus arranged between himself and God. It is more closely connected with our lives.

The centre of the biblical message is the restoration of the relationship between man and God which has been broken as a result of man's sin. By drawing near to us, God, in Jesus, enables us to draw near to him.

Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them.... *(2 Corinthians 5:18-19, NASB)*

By becoming man Jesus took on our nature, becoming like us in our weakness, temptations, and afflictions. His identification with our weakness meant that he even accepted suffering and crucifixion when he was rejected by those he came to help.

For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings. *(Hebrews 2:10, NASB)*

Now he invites us to walk with him on the same path he took: accepting the weakness of our perishable human nature, yet being strong through faith, love and humility. As the one who rose from the dead and is exalted with the Father, he unites us with God and grants forgiveness with all we need to reach eternal life.

Though there is much more to say, it would go beyond the scope of this article. We would be glad to hear your thoughts and questions, and would welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter in more depth with you in person.

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## Footnotes

1. The Hebrew lexicon (Koehler, Ludwig, and Walter Baumgarten. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament. [Volume III]*. New York: Brill Publishers, 1996. 1003.) gives us four definitions for the word “righteous” (צַדִּיק—*tsaddiq*, the adjective form of *tsedaqah*) in regards to God (יְהוָה—*Yahweh*):
  1. just (judging or punishing)—Psalm 7:12; 129:4; Job 34:17.
  2. just, establishing or setting up justice—Zephaniah 3:5; Psalm 119:137.
  3. upright, in the right in the face of accusations—Exodus 9:27; Jeremiah 12:1; Lamentations 1:18; Daniel 9:14; Nehemiah 9:33; 2 Chronicles 12:6.
  4. loyal, in the sense of helpful and faithful—Deuteronomy 32:4; Isaiah 45:21; Psalm 11:7; Psalm 116:5 (parallel to gracious: חַנּוּן—*channun*) Psalm 145:17 (parallel to kind: חַסִּיד—*chasid*) Ezra 9:15; Nehemiah 9:8.
2. Psalm 24:5, 33:5, 103:6, Isaiah 1:27, 28:17, 56:1, 59:16 (as well as Daniel 9,16 in Theodotion).
3. Genesis 24:27; 32:10; Exodus 15:13; 34:7; Isaiah 63:7.
4. According to the opinion of some scholars (e.g. McGrath, Alister E. *Iustitia Dei: a History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 1–16.; Goppelt, Leonhard. *Theologie des Neuen Testaments. [Part 2, Vielfalt und Einheit des apostolischen Christuszeugnisses]*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1980. 465–471.; Buber, Martin. *Zur Verdeutschung des letzten Bandes der Schrift*, section 1, 5–6. Appendix to: *Die Schrift*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1992. Vol. 4.), which we find interesting, in Hebrew culture the biblical term *righteousness* (and other key terms, such as grace or sacrifice) was understood largely in the context of the relationship (i.e. covenant) with God. That is why words like righteousness, faithfulness, mercy and grace had a closely connected meaning for Jewish authors and expressed various aspects of the relationship between God and man. The Greek and Roman cultures, into whose languages the Bible was translated, were not shaped by the concept of a relationship with God. For the Greeks, society was the measure and judge of what is just and unjust. For the Romans it was the law. This fact made it quite difficult to find a suitable equivalent for the Hebrew *tsedaqah* (צַדִּיק—*righteousness*) in Greek and Latin.
 

For the first two centuries of Christianity Greek was the language of the church, and Greek versions of the Old Testament produced by Jewish authors were in use. From the 2nd century onward the church in the Western part of the Roman Empire began increasingly to communicate in Latin, and Latin translations of the Bible were made. The expressions “righteousness” and “to make (someone) righteous” were translated into Latin as *justitia* (justice) and *justificare*, (to justify) respectively—both of which are terms with strong legal overtones. The way of thinking of many Latin church fathers was formed by legal thought, which was the base of Roman education. Over the centuries in the West, the comparison with a court case became the central picture for explaining salvation (comparing sin with a crime, the sinner with a guilty offender, grace with the acquittal of the offender, justice with the punishment of the guilty). In this context Jesus’ death on the cross eventually took on a role in the West which it did not have in the East.

Greek church fathers were free of this influence and preserved a non-judicial view of salvation, explaining it as an encounter with God who took on our human nature in order that we may be changed into his likeness. In this view, the incarnation and resurrection are the key elements. For example, Irenaeus and Athanasius of Alexandria understood salvation in Christ as being effected through his incarnation, and the crucifixion as an integral part of the incarnation (Irenaeus: *Against Heresies*, Book III, Chapter 18; Athanasius of Alexandria: *On the Incarnation of the Word*).
5. 2 Corinthians 1:3.
6. However, God’s faithfulness does not mean that He always forgives. There are also numerous cases in the Old



Testament when He did not overlook the sins of the people. For example, concerning the God-fearing king Josiah we read: “Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him. Still the Lord did not turn from the burning of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him.” (2 Kings 23:25–26) The reason that the righteousness of the king did not turn away the wrath of God is that, in spite of the king’s goodness, the hearts of the people did not change. Concerning the same period of time we read in Jeremiah: “Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretence, declares the Lord.” (Jeremiah 3:10).

7. The Holman Bible Dictionary says: “We understand righteousness to mean ‘uprightness’ in the sense of ‘adherence or conformity to an established norm’. In biblical usage righteousness is rooted in covenants and relationships. For biblical authors, righteousness is the fulfillment of the terms of a covenant between God and humanity or between humans in the full range of human relationships.” (Holman Bible Dictionary, Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1991. See online at [StudyLight.org-Holman Bible Dictionary: Righteousness](http://StudyLight.org-Holman Bible Dictionary: Righteousness) (17. 06. 2020.).
8. 1 talent = 6,000 denarii, 1 denarius = 1 day’s work.
9. Lectures on Galatians (1535), Chapters 1–4, in Luther’s Works, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen, 55 volumes (St. Luis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1958–1986), 26:28.
10. Calvin wrote in the Institutes, ‘there is a perpetual and irreconcilable disagreement between righteousness and unrighteousness’ (II.XVI.3). It was necessary for Christ ‘to undergo the severity of God’s vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his just judgement.’ (Institutes, II. XVI.10. Cf II.XII.3.).
11. Here we follow the Holman Christian Standard Bible as the more literal translation. The Hebrew preposition מִן /min/ used here describes the origin (from/by) or the reason (because of).
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13. According to the footnote in the NASB the literal translation of this word is “encounter” and we quote this version. The basic meaning of the Hebrew word פָּגַע (paga’) is “encounter, meet, touch”. When the Jews translated the Old Testament into Greek (i.e. in the Septuagint) they wrote “and the Lord gave him over to our sins”.
14. Isaiah 53:10 “Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him” can be translated differently: “But the LORD took pleasure in his crushed one.” This translation shows the spiritual reality. The servant was ready to be crushed. God was well-pleased in this attitude of love and devotion. This is confirmed by the verses that follow: “The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I turned not backward. I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting” (Isaiah 50:5–6).
15. Following in his footsteps, several protestant movements represent the same opinion as Luther in this point: “A Christian person is not made up of his outward conduct; Nor does he behave according to the external situation, but according to the inner one. That is to say, it is a different heart, a different courage, will and mind, which does the same works as another does without this kind of courage and will. ...so that *you will not notice his Christianity*, as Christ says in Luke 17:20 f., ‘The Kingdom of God cometh not with outward show. Neither shall they say, “Lo, it is here!” or “Lo, it is there!” For behold, the Kingdom of God is within you.’” (emphasis ours, Weihnachtspostille 1522: Luther deutsch, Erg.Bd. Lutherlexikon, p. 57f cf. WA 10I1,137,18–138,5); “*A Christian cannot be discerned according to his external life. For it is no less impure and dilapidated than the life of a non-Christian.* That is why they must daily pray, ‘Forgive us our sins.’” (Hauspostille 1544, Von der Frucht der Auferstehung Christi: Luther deutsch, Erg.Bd. Lutherlexikon, p.58, cf. WA 52,251, 18–24).
16. See also our article “[Faith and Works](#)”.

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