

God is Not Justified by Wrath: Vindicating Paul's Use of Psalm 51 in Romans 3:4

by Jackson Wu, PhD

2016 International SBL (Seoul, Korea)

Abstract

This essay considers why Paul uses Ps 51 in Rom 3:4 to say that God is righteous. This paper agrees with the minority of scholars that Paul refers to God's *saving righteousness* in Rom 3:4; yet, it uses a basic but surprisingly unused approach. It clarifies Paul's meaning in Rom 3 by reinterpreting Ps 51:4 in its context. An exegesis of Ps 51:4 shows that David *also* speaks of God's saving righteousness. Contrary to common opinion, these two passages are not in tension. In fact, they are mutually explanatory. According to David and Paul, God is justified *because* he saves sinners.

Why is God Righteous?

In Romans, *why* does Paul say that God is righteous? In answering this question, interpreters have not given sufficient attention to Rom 3:4. Due to a misunderstanding of Ps 51:4, which Paul quotes, they fail to see the importance of Rom 3:4. Accordingly, this essay offers an interpretation of both Ps 51:4 and Rom 3:4 that clarifies Paul's perspective of God's righteousness in Romans.

As will be shown, people mistakenly *assume* the meaning of Ps 51:4; namely, God is justified in punishing David's sin. In Ps 51, God is *not* justified in his wrath. Rather, God shows his righteousness by *saving* David. This counterintuitive interpretation better explains both Ps 51 and Rom 3, where Paul seeks to demonstrate how "the righteousness of God has been manifest apart from the law" (Rom 3:21).

Although Rom 3:4 is instrumental in shaping Paul's overall argument, it is one of the most overlooked verses in his letter. Why does Paul quote Ps 51:4? In Rom 3:1–8, Paul writes,

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? *By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, "That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you judge."*¹ But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) By no means! For then how could God judge the world? But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.²

In Ps 51:1–4, David writes,³

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. 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 judgment.*

As will be seen, scholars struggle to make sense of David's words in a way that also fits Paul's context.

This article suggests a view that suits both passages and thus resolves many of the tensions that plague previous interpretations. I first review the theological and exegetical significance of Rom 3:4. Second, I survey conventional yet problematic readings of the verse. Next, I offer an integrated exegesis of both passages, showing why Ps 51:4 makes sense in the context of Rom 3. Ultimately, we seek to understand the reason God is shown righteous. The final section suggests a few implications of this interpretation.

The Significance of Romans 3:4

Why is it important to reexamine Rom 3:4? Early in Romans, Paul highlights God's righteousness as a major theme (1:16–17). The gospel reveals his righteousness. Allusions to God's righteousness reoccur in key parts of the letter (e.g. Rom 3:4–5, 21–22, 25–26; 10:3). One's understanding of this idea shapes his or her interpretation of the entire letter.

To understand Paul's view of justification, we need to know why Paul refers to the "righteousness of God." Many Protestants interpret the phrase as a gift-righteousness *from God*, a legal status imputed to believers in Christ.⁴ Others claim it refers to God's own character, either his "covenant faithfulness" or upright indignation towards sin. Some think God's righteousness highlights his reign over the world or his saving actions on behalf of his people. It is beyond the scope of this essay to review these arguments.

Scholars underestimate the importance of Rom 3:1–8, particularly v. 4, when interpreting the meaning of God's righteousness in Romans.⁵ Schreiner states,

Moreover, we should not appeal to Rom 3:1–8 as the primary text to discern Paul's understanding of righteousness, for the text is particularly difficult, and it is clear even in these verses that Paul is not giving a full answer to the questions broached. It is methodologically suspect, therefore, to define God's righteousness from this text.⁶

Limiting our understanding of God's character to *any* single text can be methodologically suspect; nevertheless, this observation does not diminish the importance of the passage for clarifying the meaning of God's righteousness. To this end, Rom 3:1–8 is a key text precisely because Rom 3:4 cites Ps 51:4. Accordingly, our interpretation can be checked against two separate contexts. Also, there is added significance in the fact that Rom 3:4 falls amid a flurry of other references to God's righteousness (1:17; 3:5, 21, 22, 25, 26).

Contradictory Perspectives on Romans 3:4

How do people typically interpret Rom 3:4? Most commentators agree that God's righteousness specifically refers to his wrath or penal condemnation of sin.⁷ That is, God is shown right by condemning sinners. This interpretation is *assumed* more often than defended due to a certain views of Ps 51:4 (50:6 LXX).⁸

A minority of scholars argues that God in Rom 3:4 is justified by his saving faithfulness. Accordingly, God demonstrates his righteousness by keeping covenant with his people despite their unfaithfulness (3:1–4a; cf. 2:12–29). Unfortunately, this position is rarely and inadequately defended.⁹ I find no one who gives a detailed exegetical and theological argument for this view in the context of *both* Ps 51 and Rom 3.

Common Problems When Interpreting Romans 3:4

I will briefly list four common problems with traditional views of Rom 3:4. These observations establish the need and framework for the reinterpretation given in this essay. First, Paul uses the phrase ὅπως ἄν, which normally conveys the idea of purpose.¹⁰ Douglas Moo summarizes the tension:

What makes Paul's quotation of this verse difficult is that the negative application of God's justice in the Psalm—God is right when he judges—is used to support what is apparently a positive revelation of God's faithfulness to his people (vv. 3–4a). It is possible, of course, that Paul uses the quotation very generally to support the notion that God is faithful. But if this were so, it is peculiar that he would include the troublesome “in order that” on the second line in his quotation.¹¹

Commentators struggle to show how *both* Romans and Psalms express purpose.¹² What is the problem with saying Ps 51:4 uses a purpose clause? David writes, “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that (וַיִּמְלֵךְ; LXX, ὅπως ἄν) you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.” However, if “so that” indicates purpose, David claims he intentionally sins in order to demonstrate God's righteousness. The absurdity of that interpretation leads people to suggest a grammatically less likely reading; namely, that ὅπως ἄν indicates result.

Second, interpreters are inconsistent in their reading of God's righteousness within Romans. Thus, in Rom 1:17, God's righteousness carries positive, *saving* connotations. Most readers suggest that God's righteousness in 3:4–5 concerns justice that *punishes* sin. On the other hand, both references to God's righteousness in 3:20–21 are naturally understood in terms of salvation. Finally, some claim that Paul, just a few verses later, reverts back to the idea of God's punitive righteousness.¹³ Within the narrow context of Rom 3:3–26, Paul alludes to God's righteousness no less than 7 times (vv. 4, 5, 21, 22, 25, 26 twice). Such inconsistency is problematic.

Third, scholars do not sufficiently integrate the purported meanings of Rom 3:4 and Ps 51:4 in their respective contexts. Scholars rarely give extended attention to the way their interpretation of Ps 51:4b functions within the psalm. Instead, people assume David speaks about

God's punitive justice, which then is imported into Romans. As will be seen, this reading of Psalm 51 needs to be reconsidered for multiple reasons.

Fourth, conventional interpretations of Rom 3:4b do not naturally fit the context. It is not apparent how v. 4b follows from the prior context. Paul's focus in 3:1–4a is unmistakable. He responds to the charge that God is not "faithful" (πίστιν) or "true" (ἀληθής) to his people Israel (v. 3, 4). Yet, appealing to God's punitive justice does not answer the objection. In fact, it restates the interlocutor's premise, i.e. God condemns rather than saves Israel.

Consider the broader canonical context of Romans. Since the objection concerns God's faithfulness to the Jews, we need to give attention to OT background. God's righteousness *specifically with respect to his people Israel* most often carries saving, covenantal connotations.¹⁴ God will be faithful to his promises. If Paul explains God's righteousness in terms of punishment against Israel, this usage would be atypical.

Why Does Paul Use Psalm 51 in Romans 3:4?

We need to compare the contexts of Rom 3:4 and Ps 51:4. First, we recall Paul's argument in Rom 2–3:4a, which sets up the quote in 3:4b. Second, we will explore the meaning of Ps 51:4 in its original OT context. One reason Rom 3:4 has been misinterpreted is that people inadequately attend to Ps 51:4 within the flow of the psalm. Next, I will demonstrate how a proper reading of Ps 51 actually makes more sense of Rom 3:4b in its context. We will see not only how v. 4b stems from vv. 1–4a; it also leads naturally to Paul's remarks in vv. 5–8. Thus, this reading resolves the problems discussed above with conventional interpretations.

In Rom 2:12–3:4, Paul critiques the Law-boasting Jew. Throughout the passage, he repeatedly uses the first-person and presses the Jew-Gentile distinction (cf. 2:12–14, 17, 23–24, 25–28). Paul considers those "who have the written code and circumcision but break the law . . . a Jew who is merely one outwardly" (vv. 27–28). Lacking the Spirit, they fail to be a light to the Gentiles (2:29–24; 3:2–3). Paul's criticism raises the question of ethnic privilege. If "a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart" (v. 29), then "what advantage has the Jew" (3:1)?

Paul's key response comes in Rom 3:2, "Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God." Most scholars agree that "oracles of God" (τὰ λόγια τοῦ θεοῦ) carries positive, salvific connotations.¹⁵ Some claim the oracles are "promises of salvation for Israel,"¹⁶ perhaps "messianic promises."¹⁷ N. T. Wright suggests Paul refers to the message given to an "emissary" since the Jews were "commissioned" and "'entrusted' with messages for the world."¹⁸ Whatever the nuance, the phrase implies a saving message. Thus, we can understand God's "truthfulness" and "faithfulness" in vv. 3–4 as God's promise of salvation.

Paul's comments might cause someone to infer mistakenly that God's faithfulness depends upon the faithfulness of the Jews (3:3). This objection leads Paul to cite Ps 51:4, as a means of vindicating God's faithfulness. Although he adjusts his wording to speak of God's "righteousness" (v. 4, 5),¹⁹ the obvious logical connection in v. 4b (ὅπως ἂν) makes clear that God's righteousness *in this context* refers to his faithfulness and truthfulness (to the "oracles, v. 2).

This is where commentators are inconsistent in their exegesis. John Murray's comments are typical of others. Murray rightly notes that 3:1–3 speak of God's faithfulness to bring about salvation. He then states, "The appeal to Scripture (Psalm 51:4) in this connection presents some difficulty because of the difference between the relationship in which David spoke these words and that in which Paul adduces them."²⁰ Concerning Ps 51, Murray says God is declared righteous because he judges David's sin. Accordingly, he determines that Rom 3:4 refers to God's "condemnatory judgment." Ignoring the logical connection between v. 3 and v. 4, he supports his interpretation using the "succeeding context."²¹

Although Schreiner notes the purpose clause in v. 4b (*ὁπωσ*), he too runs into difficulty. He states that *ὁπωσ* "introduces a purpose clause" such that "God remains true so that he will ultimately be vindicated"²² Schreiner affirms, "God being *ἀληθής* refers to his faithfulness in saving his people."²³ Yet, when talking about Ps 51:4, he says,

In the OT context the purpose clause describes God's judging righteousness, not his saving righteousness. Since David sinned against God, any judgment imposed on him is just. Paul would probably not contradict the OT meaning of the verse in citing it in Romans. . . . Therefore I conclude that he refers to the judging righteousness of God in this verse.²⁴

Verse 4 rebuts the notion that God is unfaithful to his promises. Schreiner suggests,

In verse 4b Paul introduces the theme that God's faithfulness and truth cannot be confined to his saving righteousness. God is also faithful to his promises in the judgment of his people. In other words, the saving righteousness of God does not exclude his judging righteousness.²⁵

Even if this claim is true theologically, it doesn't follow exegetically from the logic of the passage. It even appears to contradict Schreiner's own conclusion that the "oracles" in v. 2 refer to God's "promises of salvation for Israel."²⁶

Moo's thorough treatment of Rom 3:4 also fails to reconcile the tension. He calls the purpose clause in v. 4 "clear" but "troublesome."²⁷ According to Moo, it appears that Paul's citation supports "a positive revelation of God's faithfulness," although Ps 51:4 gives the line a "negative application." Because of his reading of Ps 51, Moo concludes, "We must assume, then, a transition of sorts between vv. 3 and 4" such that "the 'truthfulness' of God in v. 4a itself includes this negative aspect of God's faithfulness to his word [i.e. via judging sin]."²⁸ Once again, the inability to reconcile Ps 51:4 and Rom 3:4 leads to the assumption that v. 4b suddenly refers to God's punitive righteousness, despite the natural flow of the preceding verses.

On the other hand, James Dunn states that God is righteous because he faithfully keeps his covenant promises in a non-punitive sense.²⁹ Dunn does not directly address the *ὁπωσ*-clause. Instead, he presumes that Paul cites Ps 51:4 because the psalm shows God's justice via his judgment against David's "lawlessness and sin."³⁰ Dunn struggles to explain how God's righteousness in Rom 3:4 is saving or non-punitive while simultaneously claiming it has a punitive meaning in Ps 51. In short, Dunn cannot show how the quoted line functions in both Ps 51:4 and Rom 3:4.³¹

Why is God Justified in Psalm 51:4?

We turn our attention to Ps 51:4. What is the meaning of the phrase “ὅπως ἂν δικαιωθῆς ἐν τοῖς λόγοις σου” (LXX, Ps 50:6)? The ESV translates the phrase, “so that you may be justified in your words . . .” In other words, why is God is justified in v. 4b? Interpreters of Romans typically assume that God is justified in condemning David’s sin.³² After all, in vv. 3–4a, David confesses, “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.”

OT commentators also struggle to make sense of Ps 51:4. To interpret the passage correctly, we must examine the meaning of לְמַעַן in v. 4b, which normally translates “that”/“so that,” conveying purpose.³³ Paul follows the LXX, using $\delta\pi\omega\varsigma \text{ ἂν}$, expressing purpose. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger rule out the possibility that לְמַעַן indicates result.³⁴ Arthur Weiser says v. 4 conveys “purpose.”³⁵ Tate claims לְמַעַן “has stimulated a great deal of somewhat perplexed discussion” because the purpose clause “produces an extraordinary tension between 6ab and 6c: ‘I have sinned against you . . . in order that you may be justified . . .’”³⁶ He finally settles for the less common rendering of לְמַעַן , “the difficult explanations are avoided by reading לְמַעַן as an expression of consequence or result . . . This approach avoids the theologizing required by the purpose clause and still allows v. 6c to reflect an element of the doxology of judgment.”³⁷

What idea is being modified by לְמַעַן (and $\delta\pi\omega\varsigma$, LXX)? Many interpretations problematically confuse what David *says* with what he *does*. Supposing v. 4b explains vv. 3–4a, the purpose clause thus explains the reason for David’s *sinful actions*, not his confession. Verses 3–4a *are a confession* but the “so that” does not elucidate his purpose in confessing sin. A key observation is that David’s *action* (i.e. sinning) is not equivalent to his confession, as if he had said, “I confess my sin *so that* . . .”³⁸ This distinction is critical. Commentators mention David’s confession (v. 3–4a) and then attempt to explain *the confession* with the purpose clause. In fact, the purpose mentioned in v. 4b would have to describe David’s sinful action in vv. 3–4a. Grammatically, this would indicate David’s purpose for sinning is *in order that* God will be declared righteous . . .” Few if any commentators accept this idea.

In short, scholars are at a loss to explain the purpose clause. Despite claiming לְמַעַן conveys purpose, their reading of v. 4b treats לְמַעַן as a result clause.³⁹ That is, God’s judgment becomes the result of David’s sin, not its purpose. One way around this inconsistency is to attribute purpose *to God*. Seifrid thus states, “[T]he psalmist confesses that his sin effected the hidden and strange purpose of God.”⁴⁰ Yet, the problem remains that vv. 3–4b mentions David’s action, not God’s. The לְמַעַן does *not* explain God’s purpose but rather David’s.

Is there a way to preserve the purpose clause, which is a more natural reading of לְמַעַן and agrees with the LXX translation ($\delta\pi\omega\varsigma$) that Paul uses? Hossfeld and Erich Zenger list another way to understand the Hebrew syntax of Ps 51. Using Masoretic text divisions, they comment, “Verse 6c-d [v. 4b, English] is a final or consecutive clause dependent on the petitions

in vv. 3–4 [vv. 1–2, English] for God’s steadfast love and mercy; vv. 5–6b [vv. 3–4a, English] are a parenthesis.”⁴¹ Unfortunately, they do not develop this possibility.

It is precisely this syntax that enables one to interpret coherently *both* Ps 51 and Rom 3, reconciling the many problems noted above. I will diagram Ps 51:1–4 for clarity.

Ps 50:1–6, MT

[50:3]	חַנּוּנֵי אֱלֹהִים כְּחַסְדֶּךָ כְּרַב רַחֲמֶיךָ מִחַה פְּשָׁעַי
[50:4]	הַרְבֵּה כִּבְסֵנִי מֵעוֹנֵי וּמַחְטָאתַי טַהַרְנִי
[50:5]	כִּי־פָשַׁעַי אֲנִי אֶדְעַ וְחַטָּאתַי נֹגְדֵי תָמִיד
[50:6a]	לֵךְ לִבְדָּךְ חַטָּאתַי וְהָרַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ עֲשִׂיתִי
[50:6b]	לְמַעַן תִּצְדַּק בְּדַבְרֶךָ תִּזְכָּה בְּשִׁפְטֶיךָ:

Ps 50:1–4 (ESV, with LXX)

Four Requests

[51:1]	Ἐλέησόν με ὁ θεός κατὰ τὸ μέγα ἔλεός σου καὶ κατὰ τὸ πλῆθος τῶν οἰκτιρισμῶν σου ἐξάλειψον τὸ ἀνόμημά μου	[Have mercy on me, O God] [according to your steadfast love;] [according to your abundant mercy] [blot out my transgressions]
[51:2]	ἐπὶ πλεῖον πλῦνόν με ἀπὸ τῆς ἀνομίας μου καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς ἀμαρτίας μου καθάρισόν με	[Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,] [and] [cleanse me from my sin!]

Explanatory Clauses

[51:3]	ὅτι τὴν ἀνομίαν μου ἐγὼ γινώσκω καὶ ἡ ἀμαρτία μου ἐνώπιον μου ἔστιν διὰ παντός	[For] [I know my transgressions] [and my sin is ever before me.]
[51:4a]	σοὶ μόνῳ ἤμαρτον καὶ τὸ πονηρὸν ἐνώπιον σοῦ ἐποίησα	[Against you, you only, have I sinned] [and done what is evil in your sight]
[51:4b]	ὅπως ἂν δικαιωθῆς ἐν τοῖς λόγοις σου καὶ νικήσης ἐν τῷ κρίνεσθαί σε	[so that] [you may be justified in your words] [and blameless in your judgment]

Psalm 51:1–4 form a unit of thought. David uses four imperatives in 51:1–2 that collectively petition God to save him (“have mercy,” “blot out,” “wash me,” “cleanse me”). In vv. 3–4a, he gives the *occasion* for his request. Verse 4b states the *purpose*, according to David, that God should answer his petition. Essentially, the two clauses (3–4a, 4b) are two different answers to the question “why?” Why does David need God’s mercy? Because he sins against God (vv. 3–4a).⁴² Why should God cleanse him from sin? Because, in so doing, God will be shown righteous (v. 4b).

Why is God regarded righteous for showing mercy to David? As others also note, God’s righteousness in the OT carries positive, saving connotations more often than not.⁴³ Seifrid estimates, “references to God’s saving righteousness appear roughly four times as frequently as those to his retributive justice.”⁴⁴ Psalm 143 thus reasons, “Hear my prayer, O LORD; give ear to my pleas for mercy! In your faithfulness answer me, in your righteousness! Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you” (vv. 1–2). It is precisely because God is righteousness that David asks God *not* to judge him, even though “no one” is righteous before God (David included). Verse 11 reinforces the point, “For your name’s sake, O LORD, preserve my life! In your righteousness bring my soul out of trouble!” (cf. Ps 31:1).

David appeals to God in this way because God made covenant that David’s offspring will reign forever as God’s son (2 Sam 7:12–14). Psalm 89 directly recalls God’s faithfulness and righteousness relative to his covenant with David (vv. 1–4, 14–21, 24–29, 33–37, 49). David’s entreaty in Ps 51:1–4 is similar to Exodus 32:11–14, when Moses evokes God’s covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as reason not to wipe out Israel after they worshipped the golden calf. In Ps 111:3, the Lord’s “righteousness endures forever,” which is explained by v. 5, “he remembers his covenant forever.” In this way, “He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered” (111:4).⁴⁵

We find confirmation for this reading in Ps 51 itself. David again appeals to God’s righteousness in v. 14. He asks, “Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.”⁴⁶ This time, however, he cuts out the occasion for his request, i.e. his sin (vv. 3–4a). Verse 14 reiterates both the petition and purpose from 51:1–2, 4b. If God’s righteousness in v. 14 is punitive, following typical readings of v. 4, then David’s words become incoherent. In effect, he would be saying, “Save me and I will praise you loudly for your wrath against my sin.”⁴⁷

Echoing the language of Ps 51:1–4, Ps 6:1–4 says,

O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath. Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing; heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is greatly troubled. But you, O LORD—how long? Turn, O LORD, deliver my life; save me for the sake of your steadfast love.

These verses share elements found in Ps 51:1–4.⁴⁸ The order is simply switched around. In verse 1, the two verbs, “rebuke” (תּוֹכִיחַ) and “discipline” (תִּיַּסֵּר), indicate David’s view that his circumstances stem from his own sin. The same two terms are used in Ps 38:1, where he explicitly blames his sin for his troubles (v. 3–4, 18).

In Ps 6:2, 4, David strings together a flurry of petitions: “Be gracious to me” (אֲנִי), “heal me” (רַפֵּא), “deliver me” (הַצֵּלָה), “save me” (הוֹשִׁיעַ). We again find David uses syntax similar to Ps 51. Following a request for help, he uses לְמַעַן, conveying the *purpose* why God should rescue him: “for the sake of your steadfast love” (אֲדַרְשֶׁנָּה לְמַעַן; ἕνεκεν τοῦ ἐλέους σου, LXX).⁴⁹ God’s “steadfast love” (אֲדַרְשֶׁנָּה, ἐλέους) is routinely linked to his righteousness in the OT (cf. Ps 51:1, 4).⁵⁰ Finally, amid his petition, David inserts the clause “for I am languishing” (Ps 6:2). The sentence construction and function resemble that found in Ps 51:3. He uses כִּי to introduce the *occasion* for his request.

One might object that a כִּי clause (v. 3–4a) separates the purpose clause (v. 4a) from the request (vv. 1–2). This is not a problem. Similar grammar patterns exist elsewhere. In what follows, I offer a few clear examples.⁵¹

First, Deut 16:3 says, “You shall eat no leavened bread with it. Seven days you shall eat it with unleavened bread, the bread of affliction—for [כִּי] you came out of the land of Egypt in haste—that [לְמַעַן, ἵνα, LXX] all the days of your life you may remember the day when you came out of the land of Egypt.” The כִּי-clause separates the purpose from the imperative. Each clause in its own way answers *why* Israel eats the Passover sacrifice with unleavened bread.

Second Chronicles 6:30–31 and 1 Kings 8:39–40 have the same construction as Ps 51:3–4. The author of Chronicles writes,

[30] then hear from heaven your dwelling place and forgive and render to each whose heart you know, according to all his ways, for [כִּי] you, you only, know the hearts of the children of mankind, [31] that [לְמַעַן; ὅπως ἂν, LXX] they may fear you and walk in your ways all the days that they live in the land that you gave to our fathers.

Verse 30 contains Solomon’s request to God followed by the conjunction כִּי, which grounds the petition. Verse 31 states the purpose of the request in v. 30a, not the explanatory statement in v. 30b. In other words, Solomon does *not* claim that God knows hearts in order that “they may fear you and walk in your ways.”

The prayer in Ps 125:1–3 is subtle but similar. The psalmist writes,

Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, the LORD surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore. For [כִּי] the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, lest [לְמַעַן; ὅπως ἂν, LXX] the righteous stretch out their hands to do wrong.

Although לְמַעַן (v. 3b) explains God’s protection of his people (vv. 1–2), the psalmist interjects a כִּי to explain further why God surrounds his people.

In Hos 2:2–3, the LXX lodges the occasion between a petition and its purpose.⁵²

[positive petition, v. 2a]	Plead with your mother, plead—
[occasion, v. 2b]	For [ὅτι] she is not my wife, and I am not her husband—
[negative petition, v. 2c]	That [καὶ] she put away her whoring from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts;
[purpose, v. 3]	lest [ὅπως ἂν, LXX] I strip her naked and make her as in the day she was born, and make her like a wilderness, and make her like a parched land, and kill her with thirst.

The use of ὅτι and ὅπως ἂν parallels that found in Ps 51:3–4.

How Psalm 51 Interprets Romans 3:4

The context of Ps 51 corresponds perfectly with Rom 2–3. Paul not only draws from David’s sin. In keeping with the concern of Paul’s interlocutor, he also echoes the psalm’s central idea—*God is faithful and righteousness to keep his saving promises, even when his people sin against him.*

There are multiple echoes of Ps 51 within Rom 2–3. Whereas David says to God, “you delight in truth [ἀλήθειαν, LXX],” Paul says, “Let God be true [ἀληθής]” (Ps 51:6; Rom 3:4).⁵³ Both passages prioritize the importance of a right heart and spirit (Ps 51:10–12, 17; Rom 2:15, 29). Accordingly, David confesses, “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” (Ps 51:16–17). There is hardly a more suitable passage for Paul to use against those Jews who “rely on the law and boast in the law” (Rom 2:17).

David becomes the perfect rebuke to counter the Jewish interlocutor’s objection in 3:1–3. In confessing his sin, David does not trust in the Law. He explicitly disavows the notion that God delights in sacrifice more than a pure heart. David puts his hope in the God who, according to his steadfast love and righteousness, will deliver him from sin. God will not spurn David nor his promises. To paraphrase Rom 3:3, “Does David’s faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means!” If this is true for ancient Israel’s quintessential king, then Paul’s contemporaries should take notice and repent of their own presumption.

What about Rom 3:5–8? Paul writes,

But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) By no means! For then how could God judge the world? But if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

Verse 5 is key to understanding the rest of the section. Logically, it serves as a rebuttal to Paul's conclusion in v. 4. When speaking in a "human way," Paul temporarily takes on the interlocutor's voice.

Why pose this question? Some speculate that Paul's opponents use his conclusion as a license for unrighteous living.⁵⁴ It is unlikely that Paul thinks his Jewish opponents (described in ch. 2–3:3) will suddenly swing to antinomianism based on 3:4.⁵⁵ Others suggest that v. 5 represents a false inference drawn from v. 4. According to this faulty logic, v. 4 leads to the conclusion that God cannot rightly condemn sin since human unrighteousness actually glorifies God.⁵⁶ If sin ultimately brings God glory, why does he punish us?⁵⁷

Compared to typical interpretations, the view given in this essay simplifies the meaning of vv. 5–8. Verse 5 is a natural response, a rhetorical question put in the mouth of Paul's opponent. The interlocutor poses the question to show the absurdity of Paul's argument. Verse 8b makes clear that 3:5, 7–8a are not sincere objections; in other words, they do not actually suggest, "Let us do evil that good may come." Rather, they "slanderosly charge" Paul with implying these ideas. In Paul's explanation, God overlooks David's sin in order to be faithful to his saving promises. David's transgression serves as a foil for God's righteousness. In that sense, unrighteousness, via contrast, magnifies God's glory, which spurs the reply in v. 7.

This interpretation differs from the views above. The key issue is not simply about sinning or not sinning.⁵⁸ In v. 5, God is still shown righteous *via salvation* (as in v. 4), not judgment.⁵⁹ More fundamental is the role of the Law in view of God's righteousness.⁶⁰ In light of Paul's comments in ch. 2, Rom 3:3–4 seemingly casts the Law aside. To Jewish ears, he verges on blasphemy.

Verse 5 can cause confusion if not careful. The hypothetical objection in v. 5 directly responds to v. 4. The implicit point of v. 4, taken from the context of Ps 51, is finally made explicit in Rom 3:21—God demonstrates his righteousness apart for the Law. After all, David transgressed the Law and did not face wrath. God reveals his righteousness by saving the lawbreaker. In other words, God saves David precisely when he lived, as it were, apart from Law. Given ch. 2, it should not be surprising that the Law (not mere morality) is the focus of the objection in 3:5, 7–8. Paul does not yet respond to this concern about Law, implicit in v. 5, 7–8. Instead, he remains focused on the righteousness issue before returning in 3:31 to ask, "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?"

The traditional interpretation of Rom 3:5 literally contradicts the standard reading of v. 4. Both verses speak about God's punitive righteousness against sin. However, notice the assumption of Rom 3:5. What does the objection deduce from Paul's retort in 3:4? Paul's interlocutors "slanderosly charge" him with implying v. 5 (and the sequence of questions that follow; cf. v. 8). Paul is accused of saying that God would be unrighteous to pour wrath on sin.

This accusation makes no sense of v. 4 *if* in fact the verse claims that God demonstrates his righteousness via punitive wrath. Verse 5 would cease to make sense as a retort. There is no way that the traditional view of v. 4b (God is righteousness in punishing sin) could infer the attributed slander of v. 5 (that Paul implies, "God is *unrighteousness* in punishing sin). By analogy, if I say, "He is right to buy that house," no one would think to disagree by saying, "So you're implying that he is *wrong* to buy the house."

What does Paul mean in v. 6 when he says, “By no means! For then how could God judge [κρίνει] the world”? Interpreters assume this judgment is primarily punitive, probably due to its proximity to “wrath” (ὀργήν) in v. 5. Certainly, divine judgment involves the condemnation of God’s enemies.⁶¹ Nevertheless, wrath is only one facet of judgment both in the OT and in Rom 3.

Some writers neglect to emphasize sufficiently the positive dimension of the judgment conveyed by the word κρίνω.⁶² God’s judgment regularly carries a positive, non-punitive meaning.⁶³ For example, Ps 25:1 (LXX) uses Paul’s verb from Rom 3:4b, 6 (κρίνω): “Vindicate [κρίνον] me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.” In the OT, God’s judging of the world is the hope of salvation.⁶⁴

This judgment in v. 6 is an immediate echo of 3:4b, “. . . and prevail when you judge [κρίνεσθαί].”⁶⁵ If v. 4b highlights God’s *saving* righteousness, we expect the judgment in v. 6 is also a saving judgment. What then does v. 6 say? If God wants to “judge” (i.e. set right) the world (3:4b, 6), then how ever could Paul imply what people slanderously accuse him of saying (i.e. vv. 5, 7–8a)? If God never inflicts wrath on human unrighteousness, how could he ever restore the world to righteousness?

“Let God be true though every one were a liar ,”	(3:4a)
“But if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory”	(3:7a)
“That you may be justified in your words ,”	(3:4b)
“the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.”	(3:2)
“That you may be justified in your words, . . .”	(3:4b)
“if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God ”	(3:5a)
“if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory ”	(3:7a)
“and prevail when you are judge .”	(3:4c)
“how could God judge the world?”	(3:6)

The logic of Ps 51:1–4 and Rom 3:4 reflects the flow of thought in the larger context. First, Paul announces God’s righteousness, manifest in salvation (Rom 1:16–18). He then introduces the occasion that necessitates a need for salvation; this is signaled by the “because” [γάρ] in Rom 1:18 (parallel to Ps 51:3–4a). By ch. 3 (vv. 1–4, 21ff), Paul’s transition mirrors the purpose clauses found both Ps 51:4b and Rom 3:4b. He introduces the “oracles of God,” by which God will righteously save both Jew *and* Gentile. The “oracles of God” (Rom 3:2) thus should not be contrasted with the words by which God is justified (Rom 3:4). Both ultimately speak of salvation, those promises given to Israel for the sake of the world.

Romans 3:24–26 explain how God does for all his people what David prays in Ps 51:1–2. Through Christ, God shows mercy, blots out transgressions, washes away iniquity, and cleanses his people from sin. Why does he do this? Recalling Rom 3:4, Paul repeats twice that Christ’s death is *in order to* “show God’s righteousness” (3:25–26).⁶⁶

Psalm 3:4 is the pivot point in the passage. It plays a key role in transitioning Paul's discussion from human unrighteousness (1:18–3:3) to God's righteousness, revealed in the gospel (1:16–17), apart from the Law (3:21–22). God's righteousness in v. 21–22 unambiguously denotes salvation. We should not be surprised to see that Christ's sacrificial death in v. 24 demonstrates God's righteousness (v. 25–26). As a result, vv. 27–30 recall the Gentiles whom Paul first had in mind back in Rom 2:12–16, 26–29. Verse 31 picks up the implicit question he never directly answers in Rom 3:5, 7–8. "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?" Hence, at Rom 3:4, the discussion splits into two broad issues—God's righteousness and the Law. Romans 3:5–26 focus on the former. Rom 3:27–30 finalize the original point argued in ch. 2. The Law problem is taken up in 3:31 and discussed in detail in ch. 4.

Implications and Application

The above reading of Rom 3:4 resolves many problems found in common interpretations. One need not alternate back and forth between a "negative and "positive" sense of God's righteousness in 3:4–26. Likewise, we can make better sense why Paul cites Ps 51, which itself now gains greater internal cohesion. What are a few implications of this fresh reading of Rom 3:4? Space allows only for a few suggestions.

First, the foregoing discussion gives new impetus to ongoing debates related to the New Perspective on Paul (NPP), particularly the meaning of "righteousness of God" in Romans. Romans 3:4 is one of the few places relatively untouched by NPP exegetes. The interpretation above gives good reason to reevaluate the assumption that Rom 3:4 reinforces the view that 3:25–26 refer to God's punitive righteousness.

Second, Paul's use of Ps 51 suggests we rethink his flow of thought in Rom 2–4. Some people presume that Abraham, in Rom 4, is the lynchpin example of someone justified by faith. However, it appears Paul already uses David to make a similar argument in ch. 3!⁶⁷ Thus, Rom 2–3 primarily explains *how* people get justified in order to explain *who* can be justified in ch. 4. Justification is not by way of the Law; it is through Christ because of God's righteousness.

Beginning in Rom 3:31, Paul answers a key objection spurred by 3:4 concerning the Law. In fact, Rom 3:1 foreshadows the discussion of ch. 4, "Or what is the value of circumcision?"⁶⁸ In ch. 4, circumcision typifies the Law and contrasts faith. In view of 3:27–30 (a critical but often neglected transition), we see that ch. 4 discusses the Law in order to answer the question, "*Who* can be justified?"⁶⁹ Rom 3:27–30 shows that Paul never fully departs from his initial focus on Jews and Gentiles in Rom 2:12–29. That is, he does not broaden the conversation to "humanity" (in general). Instead, he has always thought in two categories—Jew and Gentile—both from whom are Abraham's offspring. According to some readings of Rom 3:27–30, Paul seems suddenly to return to the Jew-Gentile distinction after having left it in 3:10.

Third, expositors should elucidate God's righteousness in terms of his faithfulness, not merely his wrath against sin. In fact, this passage clearly adjoins God's wrath and his saving faithfulness. People should not feel compelled to minimize one aspect in order to affirm another. This essay in no way minimizes the importance of God's wrath in Paul's thought. In fact, God faithfully keeps his saving promises to his people *by* judging their/his enemies. Punitive judgment is a means; salvation is his ultimate goal (cf. Rom 8:1–4ff).

One should not be content to affirm one aspect of Paul's teaching (e.g. God punishes sin) at the expense of another, particularly when the latter is the main idea of a passage. When pastors and scholars properly emphasize the main idea, students and laypersons are better equipped to interpret the Bible more faithfully. By confusing exegesis and theology, one compromises Paul's gospel by settling for truth.⁷⁰

Fourth, this interpretation has application for matters like ethnicity, cultural pride, and collective identity. By not reading Rom 3 with a universal moralistic lens, we see the immediate relevance of Romans for non-western cultures, where honor, shame, symbolism, ritual, and group identity are paramount concerns. Therefore, non-Westerners need not get the impression the gospel necessitates they think in legalistic or individualistic categories, which effectively means assuming a more Western worldview. Faith in Christ challenges people to reconsider whom they regard as "insiders" or "outsiders." Christ's followers should forsake any sense of cultural superiority that obstructs church unity.

Fifth, the above discussion highlights afresh the importance of the interpretive process. One should pause whenever tension or a seeming contradiction appears between OT and NT contexts. We have to reconsider how our cultural presuppositions might influence the way we read the text. I suspect it is due to cultural presumption that people regard God's righteousness and judgment as most basically about wrath such that they tend to overlook any saving connotations. What assumptions might lead to other misreadings like that of Rom 3:4 and Ps 51:4?

Conclusion

This essay has argued that scholars struggle to make sense of Paul's logic in Rom 3:4 because they routinely misinterpret Ps 51:4. Contrary to common opinion, these two passages are not in tension; rather, they are mutually explanatory. The view offered in this paper clarifies Paul's meaning by reinterpreting Ps 51:4 in its own context. Both passages affirm the *saving righteousness* of God. This reading makes better sense of both texts. According to David and Paul, God is justified *because* he saves sinners.

Bibliography

Achtemeier, Paul J. "Righteousness," ed. George Arthur Buttrick, *IDB*. New York, N.Y.: Abingdon, 1962.

———. "Romans 3:1–8: Structure and Argument," in *Christ and His Communities: Essays in Honor of Reginald H. Fuller* (ed. Arland J. Hultgren and Barbara Hall; ATRSup 11; Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, 1990).

Bird, Michael. *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies on Paul, Justification and the New Perspective*. New York, N.Y.: Wipf & Stock, 2007.

———. *Romans*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2016.

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1938.

Byrne, Brendan. *Romans*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1996.

Bruce, F. F. *Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2008.

Campbell, Douglas. *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009.

Cranfield, C. E. B. *Romans: A Shorter Commentary*. New York, N.Y.: Continuum, 1985.

Cottrell, Jack. *Romans*. Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 2005.

Demarest, Bruce. *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of God*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2006.

Dunn, James D. G. *Romans 1–8*. vol. 38; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1988.

Eaton, J. H. *The Psalms: A Historical and Spiritual Commentary with an Introduction and New Translation*. New York, N.Y.: Continuum, 2003.

Goldingay, John. *Psalms, Volume 2: Psalms 42-89*. vol. 2; Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2007.

Grieb, A. Katherine. *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God's Righteousness*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

Gundry, Robert H. *Commentary on Romans*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2011.

Hill, David. *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1967.

Hossfeld, Frank-Lothar and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*. Trans. Linda M Maloney; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2005.

Jewett, Robert. *Romans: A Commentary*. Edited by Eldon Jay Epp; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2006.

Kasemann, Ernst. *Commentary on Romans*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994.

Kruse, Colin G. *Paul's Letter to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012.

Kuyper, Lester Jacob. "Righteousness and Salvation," *SJT* 30, no. 3 (1977).

Lange, John Peter, Philip Schaff, F. R. Fay, J. F. Hurst, and M. B. Riddle. *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Romans*. Bellingham, Wa: Logos Bible Software, 2008.

Leske, Adrian M. "Righteousness as Relationship," in *Festschrift: A Tribute to Dr. William Hordern*. Edited by Walter Freitag; Saskatoon, Canada: University of Saskatchewan, 1985.

Price, James Ligon. "God's Righteousness Shall Prevail," *Int* 28, no. 3 (1974): 259–80;

Longman, Tremper and David E. Garland, *Romans–Galatians*. Revised.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2010.

Lust, Johan Karin Hauspie, and Erik Eynikel, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint, Revised Edition*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003.

Martin, Lynn Larry. *The Righteousness of God in Romans: A Study of Paul's Use of Jewish Tradition*. PhD Dissertation. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University, 1991.

Moo, Douglas J. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996.

Morris, Leon. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988.

Mounce, Robert H. *Romans*. *TNAC* 27; Nashville, Tenn.: B & H, 1995.

Murray, John. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997.

Neyrey, Jerome H. *Render to God: New Testament Understandings of the Divine*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2004.

Onesti, K. L. and M. T. Brauch, "Righteousness II: Paul," ed. Daniel G. Reid, *The IVP Dictionary of the New Testament: A One-Volume Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2004.

Piper, John. *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1983.

Reumann, John. "Righteousness," *ABD, O–Sh*. New York, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1992.

Ridderbos, N. H. "Psalm 51:5–6," in *Studia Biblica et Semitica: T. C. Vriezen Festschrift*. Edited by M. A. Beck; Wageningen: Veenman & Zonen. (1966): 307–9.

Ross, Allen P. *A Commentary on the Psalms*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Academic, 2011.

Ryken, Leland, Jim Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman, eds., "Letter to the Romans," *DBI*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1998.

Schreiner, Thomas. *Romans*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 1998.

Seifrid, Mark. *Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification*. New Studies in Biblical Theology 9; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2000.

———. "Paul's Use of Righteousness Language Against Its Hellenistic Background," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Paradoxes of Paul*. Edited by D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark Seifrid; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004.

———. "Romans," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. Edited by G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2007.

Smith, Philip C. "God's New Covenant Faithfulness in Romans," *ResQ* 50, no. 4 (2008): 242–44.

Tate, Marvin E. *Psalms 51–100*. vol. 20; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1990.

Turner, Geoffrey. "The Righteousness of God in Psalms and Romans," *SJT* 63, no. 3 (2010).

VanDerMerwe, Christo H. J., Jan H Kroeze, and Jackie A Naudé, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998.

Vickers, Brian. *Jesus' Blood and Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Imputation*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2006.

Wallace, Daniel B. *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996.

Waltke, Bruce K. and Michael Patrick O'Connor. *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990.

Weinfeld, Moshe. "'Justice and Righteousness': *Mshpt Wtsdqh* the Expression and Its Meaning." Pages 228–46 in *Justice and Righteousness*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992.

———. *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*. Publications of the Perry Foundation for Biblical Research in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Minneapolis, Minn.: Magnes Press, 1995.

- Weiser, Artur. *The Psalms: A Commentary*. Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1962.
- Williams, Jarvis. “Penal Substitution in Romans 3:25–26,” *PTR* 13, no. 2 (2007): 78–80.
- Williams, Sam K. “The ‘Righteousness of God’ in Romans,” *JBL* 99, no. 2 (1980).
- Wright, Christopher J. H. “The Obedience of Faith Among the Nations,” in *First the Kingdom of God: Global Voices on Global Mission*. Edited by Daniel K. Darko, Beth Snodderly. Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey International University Press, 2014.
- Wright, N. T. “Righteousness,” ed. Sinclair Ferguson, J. I. Packer, and David F. Wright, *New Dictionary of Theology*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1988.
- . “The Letter to the Romans,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*. Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2002.
- . *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013*. Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 2013.
- Wu, Jackson. “Paul Writes to the Greek First and Also to the Jew: The Missiological Significance of Understanding Paul’s Purpose in Romans,” *JETS* 56, no. 4 (2013): 765–79.
- . *One Gospel for All Nations: A Practical Approach to Biblical Contextualization*. Pasadena, Calif.: WCL, 2015.
- Zaspel, Fred G. “Four Aspects of Divine Righteousness,” *Reformation and Revival* 6, no. 4 (1997).
- Ziesler, J. *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul: A Linguistic and Theological Enquiry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1972.

ENDNOTES

¹ I read κρίνεσθαι as having a middle (“to judge”) rather than passive voice (“be judged”), although that decision has little consequence on the argument presented in this paper.

² All Scripture citations come from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise stated. Also, citations will use English divisions unless stated.

³ For conciseness, this article refers to David as the speaker, following tradition.

⁴ For a defense of this view, see Brian Vickers, *Jesus’ Blood and Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Imputation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2006).

⁵ Among many possible examples, cf. Lester Jacob Kuyper, “Righteousness and Salvation,” *SJT* 30, no. 3 (1977): 247. In an ironically titled paper, Price’s exegesis of Rom 3:21–31 does analyze 3:4. Verses 3–6 are mentioned once on pp. 271. See James Ligon Price, “God’s Righteousness Shall Prevail,” *Int* 28, no. 3 (1974): 259–80; Philip C. Smith, “God’s New Covenant Faithfulness in Romans,” *ResQ* 50, no. 4 (2008): 242–44.

⁶ Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 1998), 69.

⁷ Cf. Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), 155–56; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 190. Robert H. Mounce, *Romans* (TNAC 27; Nashville, Tenn.: B & H, 1995), 105; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 95–96; Schreiner, *Romans*, 151–59; N. T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2002), 453. Again in N. T. Wright, *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2013), 492. F. F. Bruce, *Romans: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 101–2. Tremper Longman and David E. Garland, *Romans–Galatians* (Revised.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2010), 63. A. Katherine Grieb, *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God’s Righteousness* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 33–34. John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1983), 127. Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (ed. Eldon Jay Epp; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2006), 246–47. Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012), 177–78. David Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 158; Mark Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Justification* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 9; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2000), 58. John Peter Lange, Philip Schaff, F. R. Fay, J. F. Hurst, and M. B. Riddle. *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Romans* (Bellingham, Wa: Logos Bible Software, 2008) 111; Jack Cottrell, *Romans* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 2005), 131; Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2006), 367; Jerome H. Neyrey, *Render to God: New Testament Understandings of the Divine* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2004), 112. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1938), 370; Leland Ryken, Jim Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman, eds., “Letter to the Romans,” *DBI* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1998), 735.

⁸ Turner says the passage’s “unspoken assumption must be that God will inflict his wrath on us” See Geoffrey Turner, “The Righteousness of God in Psalms and Romans,” *SJT* 63, no. 3 (2010): 296.

⁹ For examples, see James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (vol. 38; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1988), 134; Brendan Byrne, *Romans* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1996), 109. Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2011), Loc 610–10 (Kindle Edition).; Sam K. Williams, “The ‘Righteousness of God’ in Romans,” *JBL* 99, no. 2 (1980): 268–70. Williams’ “brief look” at 3:4 never analyzes Ps 51. P. J. Achtemeier, “Righteousness,” ed. George Arthur Buttrick, *IDB* (New York, N.Y.: Abingdon, 1962), 94. However, he seems to take a more conventional view in Paul J.

Achtemeier, “Romans 3:1–8: Structure and Argument,” in *Christ and His Communities: Essays in Honor of Reginald H. Fuller* (ed. Arland J. Hultgren and Barbara Hall; ATRSup 11; Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, 1990), 87. K. L. Onesti and M. T. Brauch, “Righteousness II: Paul,” ed. Daniel G. Reid, *The IVP Dictionary of the New Testament: A One-Volume Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2004), 965. Perhaps, J. Ziesler, *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul: A Linguistic and Theological Enquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1972), 190. Cf. Lynn Larry Martin, “The Righteousness of God in Romans: A Study of Paul’s Use of Jewish Tradition” (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University, 1991), 174–196, 333–375. Bird simply says that Rom 3:3–5 is an “instance where God’s righteousness is umbilically related to God’s faithfulness” Michael Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies on Paul, Justification and the New Perspective* (New York, N.Y.: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 37.

¹⁰ Cf. William Arndt et al., “ὁπῶς” in *BDAG*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996), 676. Also note Johan Lust, Karin Hauspie, and Erik Eynikel, “ὁπῶς” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint, Revised Edition* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003). Among commentators, see Morris, *Romans*, 156 fn #22; Schreiner, *Romans*, 151–52; Moo, *Romans*, 187. Mark Seifrid, “Romans,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2007), Kindle Loc 23107.

¹¹ For example, Moo, *Romans*, 187. Jarvis Williams, “Penal Substitution in Romans 3:25–26,” *PTR* 13, no. 2 (2007): 78–80. Bruce, *Romans*, 113–14. C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary* (New York, N.Y.: Continuum, 1985), 74–75.

¹² Tom Schreiner even calls this a “serious difficulty” in Schreiner, *Romans*, 151. Cf. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 95.

¹³ Moo, *Romans*, 236–41.

¹⁴ Cf. Achtemeier, “Righteousness,” 82–3; John Reumann, “Righteousness,” *ABD, O–Sh* (New York, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1992), 725–35. Also, note wherever צדק and שפט appear together in the OT (as in Ps 51:4), they carry a positive, salvific meaning.

¹⁵ On exception is Mark Seifrid, who claims reads v. 10–18 back into the v. 2, such that λόγια refers to God’s judgment or “charge against humanity.” See Seifrid, “Romans,” Kindle Loc 23082–83. This interpretation, however, would make no sense of the fact that v. 2 functions as a response v. 1 so as to say that circumcision, i.e. Jewish identity, does have advantage.

¹⁶ Schreiner, *Romans*, 149.

¹⁷ Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 94.

¹⁸ Wright, “Romans,” 453. This reading fits the thesis argued in Jackson Wu, “Paul Writes to the Greek First and Also to the Jew: The Missiological Significance of Understanding Paul’s

Purpose in Romans,” *JETS* 56, no. 4 (2013): 765–79. According to this thesis, Paul writes the letter to urge the “Greeks” in Rome not to forsake their responsibility to help in spreading the gospel to Spain. To do this, Paul appeals to the Jews, who were exclusivistic towards Gentiles in the same manner as “Greeks” looked down upon “barbarians” (Rom 1:14). Thus, Paul does not want the Roman church to be “unfaithful” to the message “entrusted” to them as Israel had been previously.

¹⁹ This is conveyed both by the verb δικαιωθήσῃς (v. 4) and directly in by δικαιοσύνην (v. 5).

²⁰ Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 95.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 92–95.

²² Schreiner, *Romans*, 151.

²³ *Ibid.* Also, on pp. 149–50, he adds that God’s faithfulness, truth, and righteousness are complementary.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 152.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁷ Moo, *Romans*, 187.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

²⁹ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 133–34.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

³¹ Likewise, Byrne, *Romans*, 108–9, 111.

³² As do most OT scholars. For example, J. H. Eaton, *The Psalms: A Historical and Spiritual Commentary with an Introduction and New Translation* (New York, N.Y.: Continuum, 2003), 206.

³³ Cf. Koehler et al., “מַעַן” in *HALOT* (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1999). Contra John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 2: Psalms 42–89* (vol. 2; Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2007), 122. Goldingay follows N. H. Ridderbos, “Psalm 51:5–6,” in *Studia Biblica et Semitica: T. C. Vriezen Festschrift* (ed. M. A. Beck; Wageningen: Veenman & Zonen, 1966), 307–9. However, not only are there comparatively few possible examples where מַעַן indicates result, many of the examples listed in by Marvin Tate are ambiguous or doubtful (e.g. 2 Kings 13:23, more likely meaning “for the sake of”; cf. Exod 11:9; Ps 30:12). See Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (vol. 20; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1990), 18. Where a verse indicates purpose, one will

often see a result; yet, the fact that a result occurs does not signify result as its primary meaning. Also, Christopher Wright calls it a “purposive conjunction” in Daniel K. Darko, Beth Snodderly, and Christopher J. H. Wright, eds., “The Obedience of Faith Among the Nations,” in *First the Kingdom of God: Global Voices on Global Mission* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey International University Press, 2014), 242.

³⁴ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100* (trans. Linda M Maloney; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2005), 13.

³⁵ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1962), 404.

³⁶ Tate, *Psalms*, 17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁸ Allen Ross attempts to do this by claiming that “I know” (עָדַע, 51:5, MT) should have a causative translation, such as “My sin (חַטָּאתִי) I caused you to know” or “I made known to you.” He suggests עָדַע (an imperfect form of עָדַע) “probably [has] the nuance here” of the “perfect tense, definite past” verb חַטָּאתִי in v. 6a, i.e. “I have sinned.” Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Academic, 2011), 713. The first problem with this view is that the hiphil “normally serves as the causative of the Qal imperfect.” See Christo H. J VanDerMerwe, Jan H Kroeze, and Jackie A Naudé, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 86; Bruce K. Waltke and Michael Patrick O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 433. Second, David does not add a second-person pronoun, as would be expected according to Ross’ interpretation. Cf. Ps 32:5, where the psalmist uses the hiphil עָדַעְתִּיךָ with a suffixed second-person pronoun. Because Ross regards Ps 32 as “a sequel to Psalm 51,” it seems he finds theological reason to read the hiphil עָדַעְתִּיךָ from Ps 32 back into the imperfect form of the verb in Ps 51:5. See Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 706. Finally, the LXX translator chose to use γινώσκω, “to know,” rather than the causative γνωρίζω. Cf. Johan Lust, Karin Hauspie, and Erik Eynikel, “γινώσκω,” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint, Revised Edition* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003).

³⁹ For example, Seifrid, *Christ*, 58; Schreiner, *Romans*, 152.

⁴⁰ Mark Seifrid, “Paul’s Use of Righteousness Language Against Its Hellenistic Background,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Paradoxes of Paul* (ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark Seifrid; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004), 137.

⁴¹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 13.

⁴² Similarly, cf. Ps 41:4.

⁴³ Cf. Moo, *Romans*, 81–82. N. T. Wright, “Righteousness,” ed. Sinclair Ferguson, J. I. Packer, and David F. Wright, *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1988). Douglas

Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 688–702; Adrian M. Leske, “Righteousness as Relationship,” in *Festschrift: A Tribute to Dr. William Hordern* (ed. Walter Freitag; Saskatoon, Canada: University of Saskatchewan, 1985), 126, 136.

⁴⁴ Seifrid, *Christ*, 44.

⁴⁵ Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 265–66. Psalm 111 continues to praise God because he is “trustworthy” (v. 7; מַיְמוּנִים, πισταὶ LXX) and “faithful” (v. 8; נֶאֱמַן, ἀληθεία LXX).

⁴⁶ Intriguingly, Zaspel uses v. 14 to indicate that God’s righteousness is “the source and ground of salvation.” Yet, a few pages earlier, his citation of Rom 3:5 is used to show that “punishment or retribution” demonstrates God’s righteousness. See Fred G. Zaspel, “Four Aspects of Divine Righteousness,” *Reformation and Revival* 6, no. 4 (1997): 73, 76.

⁴⁷ Interestingly, Michael Bird says v. 4 refers to God’s punitive righteousness while observing that v. 14 speaks of God’s saving righteousness. He does not attempt to reconcile this contrast. Instead, he jests about Paul’s use of Ps 51, “tracing the logic of Paul’s thought here is like trying to nail jelly to the wall and the jelly fights back UFC style.” Michael Bird, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2016), 108.

⁴⁸ Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 262–5. Intriguingly, Ross interprets Ps 6 as I interpret Ps 51.

⁴⁹ The LXX uses ἔνεκα, not ὅπως, as in Ps 51:4 (50:6, LXX). In the verse, ἔνεκα indicates “reason for” or “purpose,” strengthening the interpretation in this essay. Cf. Walter Bauer et al., eds., “ἔνεκα,” *BDAG*, 334.

⁵⁰ Likewise, Ps 36:10; 85:10; 89:14; 103:17; Hos 2:19; 10:12. Sometimes, the LXX even translates צְדָקָה using “righteousness” terms, e.g. Gen 24:27.

⁵¹ Various passages are debatable, e.g. Exod 10:1; 1 Kings 11:34; 2 Chron 10:15; 2 Chron 25:20; Jer 44:29.

⁵² Space prohibits discussion on other suggestive texts, e.g. Num 15:39–40; Ps 9:13–14 (v. 14–15, LXX); 41:4; 89:28–46; 106:4–8, 30–47; 143:1–2; Jer 3:22–4:2; 14:7.

⁵³ Cf. 2 Sam 7:28 (LXX), after God announces his covenant with David: “And now, O Lord GOD, you are God, and your words are true [καὶ οἱ λόγοι σου ἔσονται ἀληθινοί], and you have promised this good thing to your servant.”

⁵⁴ Piper, *The Justification of God*, 108–13.

⁵⁵ Schreiner, *Romans*, 153.

⁵⁶ Morris, *Romans*, 158–9; Wright, “Romans,” 454.

⁵⁷ Based on vv. 5–6, scholars generally concur that God’s righteousness in these verses entails wrath and punitive judgment. This agrees with the common view that v. 4 refers to God’s punitive righteousness.

⁵⁸ This is one place commentators go wrong. They generalize the conversation to mere wrongdoing when the problem is more precise. Recall the distinction between sin and trespass (cf. Rom 5:12–14); the latter is more specific, regarding specific commands, as in the Law.

⁵⁹ Cf. Ernst Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 82. In contrast, Schreiner claims “the major argument against” the view is that v. 4b “has just spoken of God’s judging righteousness.” If so, the exegesis in this essay removes that obstacle. Likewise, he agrees that the weakness of claiming v. 5 refers to God’s punitive righteousness is that “it scarcely makes sense as an objection” and results in a self-contradiction. Schreiner, *Romans*, 155. Cf. Piper, *The Justification of God*, 107.

⁶⁰ The issue in 3:5–8 is not divine sovereignty and human inability. Cf. Schreiner, *Romans*, 153–56.

⁶¹ Rightly, *ibid.*, 155.

⁶² Cf. Walter Bauer et al., eds., “κρίνω” *BDAG*, 567. In Sir 45:26, the writer prays for the Lord to “judge his people with justice” (NRSV). In Greek, “κρίνειν τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ.”

⁶³ Regarding the verb found in Ps 51:4b (50:6, MT), *HALOT* lists 1 Sam 18:19, 31; 24:16; Ps 10:18; Lam 3:59. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, M. E. J. Richardson, and Johann Jakob Stamm. “כָּפַח” in *HALOT*, 1999), 1621. For a helpful overview of OT background concerning judgment and salvation, see Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Publications of the Perry Foundation for Biblical Research in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Minneapolis, Minn.: Magnes Press, 1995); in shorter form, see Moshe Weinfeld, “‘Justice and Righteousness’: *Mshpt Wtsdqh* the Expression and Its Meaning,” in *Justice and Righteousness* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 228–46.

⁶⁴ For *οἰκουμένη* as “world,” see Ps 9:8 (9:9 LXX); 96:13 (95:13, LXX); 98:9 (97:9 LXX). Cf. Acts 17:31. For *λαός* the “peoples,” cf. Ps 96:10, (95:10, LXX). For *γῆ* as “peoples” or the “earth,” see 1 Chron 16:33; 2 Kings, 15:5; 2 Chron 26:21 (governing); Ps 2:10 (rulers of the earth); 58:11 (57:12, LXX) parallel is positive; 67:4 (66:5, LXX); 96:13 (95:13, LXX). In 1 Cor 4:5, *κρίνω* expresses “commendation.” Cf. the contrast in 1 Cor 11:32. In extra-biblical literature, 2 Macc 13:13–16 and Wis 9:3 could be used in support of the present argument.

⁶⁵ V. 6 is another reason to see *κρίνεσθαι* as middle rather than passive voice.

⁶⁶ A fuller yet concise exegesis of Rom 3:25–26 can be found in Jackson Wu, *Saving God’s Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame* (Pasadena, Calif.: WCIUP, 2013), 263–65. Many important details are included there in the footnotes.

⁶⁷ In Rom 4:7–8, Paul again quotes David using Ps 32:1–2, which in many ways echoes Ps 51.

⁶⁸ Achtemeier's grammatical analysis suggests an *inclusio* in v. 1 and v. 9. Achtemeier, "Romans 3:1–8," 84–7. This may indicate two things. First, Rom 3:9 primarily focuses on the Jew, not humanity at large. Second, the response to 3:9–18 in v. 19–20, which "speaks to those under the law," reinforces the idea that Rom 3:1–5 implicitly concerns the Mosaic Law specifically, not simply moralism.

⁶⁹ I have offered more thoughts on Rom 3:27–ch. 4 in Wu, *Saving God's Face*, 269–79.

⁷⁰ Jackson Wu, *One Gospel for All Nations* (Pasadena, Calif.: WCL, 2015), 17–28, 183–198.