

g. Verses 3:5-8 represent a continuation of Paul's line of thought, and so cannot be considered apart from the preceding context. In these four verses he poses four distinct questions, and their apparent disconnectedness, together with some uncertainty as to the perspective from which they were posed, provides the reason for the difficulty of the passage and the wide range of interpretation given to it.

- 1) The first question is found in verse 3:5b, and it represents Paul's anticipated objection to his assertion in 3:5a that *human unrighteousness actually demonstrates the righteousness of God*. Some have viewed this proposition as indicating that Paul was shifting his train of thought from verses 3:3-4, but it actually is Paul's own articulation of the summary point he was trying to make in those verses.

It was observed in the preceding section that he cited from Psalm 51 in order to support his contention of God's abiding faithfulness in the face of human unbelief - the fact that God is true though every man is a liar (3:3-4a). *More precisely, Paul's point was that the reality of God's truthfulness in the context of the human lie serves the purpose of vindicating God's justice in His words and deeds*. This is the sense in which he referenced the psalm. For in the psalm's context David was insisting that his sin in the Bathsheba episode, which in the ultimate sense was perpetrated against God alone, left God justified in His words of condemnation and vindicated in His judgment. David's meaning was that God's judgment against him was true and just, for his sin and guilt were exactly as had been proclaimed by the prophet Nathan. When God found fault and condemned David as a liar, both His truth and His justice were thereby exalted; *David's unrighteousness demonstrated the righteousness of God*.

Though Paul extracted this axiomatic principle from David's words in Psalm 51, the perspective from which he was considering it was somewhat different than David's. That is, Paul was viewing the principle in terms of the particular unrighteousness of *Jewish unbelief* and the righteousness of *God's faithfulness to His oracles*; he was concerned with how Jewish (and more broadly, *human*) unbelief demonstrates God's faithfulness in honoring His own revealed word. In this way Paul advanced his argument from verse 3:3. For there he insisted that Jewish unbelief does not *nullify* the faithfulness of God; in verse 3:5a he declared that their unbelief actually *demonstrates* God's faithfulness.

As noted previously, the idea of *faithfulness* in relation to God speaks of His integrity - the fact that God is always true to His word. And because the breadth of divine pronouncement includes both promise of blessing and warning of punishment, God's faithfulness has a negative as well as a positive aspect. As He is faithful to keep His word of promise to those who believe and love Him, so He is faithful to punish those who refuse Him and His overtures of mercy (Exodus 33:18-34:7; Numbers 14:1-24).

Thus, when God speaks words of condemnation and exercises retribution against those who disbelieve Him, He is demonstrating His faithfulness as much as when He showers His promised blessings upon those who have faith in Him. But if this is so; if the unrighteousness of unbelief openly demonstrates God's righteousness, then it must be concluded that unbelief serves to glorify God. And that being the case, *might it not be argued that God actually is **unrighteous** to inflict wrath upon those who, in their unbelief, bring Him great glory?* This is his meaning in verse 3:5b.

It is important to note the way Paul ended 3:5. For the fact that he qualified his question by attributing it to a purely human thought process shows that, though he raised the question in his own name - "*What shall we say,*" he was not expressing his own personal or apostolic sentiment. While some have maintained that Paul himself wrestled with the issue addressed in his question, this is clearly not the case. Rather, he was raising an objection that a person could possibly arrive at, albeit through sloppy logic and an inaccurate understanding of the relation between human unbelief and divine righteousness and faithfulness.

- 2) His emphatic response to the question in 3:6a further demonstrates the conclusion that he was not speaking on his own behalf. The notion that God is unjust to inflict wrath on unbelievers is preposterous: "*May it never be!*" It was toward the end of justifying this unequivocal declaration that he then posed his second question in verse 3:6b: "*For otherwise how will God judge the world?*" In other words, if God Himself becomes unrighteous through the act of inflicting His wrath on the world of unbelief, how, then, would He ever be able to judge the world?

Paul's point was simply this: the God who is eminently and entirely righteous could never do anything that is unrighteous. This being so, if it is unrighteous for God to inflict wrath, He would have no alternative but to leave unexercised His own just retribution against sin, *which itself would constitute an act of unrighteousness*. According to this logic, then, God is left in an irreconcilable dilemma as it pertains to men: if He judges the world of unbelief He is rendered unrighteous; but if He restrains Himself from judgment He sets aside the demands of justice, and is thereby guilty of another form of unrighteousness. By insightfully showing the logical absurdity that results from this line of thinking Paul was able to set it aside with all finality.

- 3) The second question immediately leads to a third, which itself follows the same pattern seen in verse 3:5. In that pattern Paul first presented a summary principle introduced by the words, "*But if...*" (ref. 3:5a, 3:7a), and then proceeded to raise an anticipated objection to it in the form of a rhetorical question (3:5b, 3:7b). In the present instance, the principle is that "*through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory.*"

Two observations concerning this statement are important to make:

- First of all, it is fundamentally a rearticulation of Paul's central premise that human unbelief - and in particular Israel's unbelief - demonstrates, and so glorifies, God's faithfulness; God is glorified in His truthfulness though every man is a liar. Though expressed here in a slightly different way than in verse 3:4 (and 3:5), the premise remains unchanged. This much is obvious, but what is not so clear is whether Paul was also building upon his thoughts in 3:6.

The best answer appears to be that he was doing both. For, in the first place, his central thesis throughout the whole context of 3:1-8 is that man's unrighteousness/unbelief/lie establishes and demonstrates God's righteousness/faithfulness/truth, and his statement in 3:7a is clearly affirming this maxim. But at the same time, Paul's concern with God's righteousness in judging the world is reflected in his response in 3:7b - "...*why am I also still being judged as a sinner.*" And so this verse - as the whole context - must be understood in terms of Paul interacting with one central theme, but from several different vantage points.

- The second thing to observe is that Paul here shifted his pronoun use to the first person singular *my* and *I*. He began the context in 3:1 by speaking of the Jew in the third person plural *they*, and then switched to the first plural *our* and *we* in 3:5. His reason for doing so was not to identify himself as a fellow Jew, but to emphasize what he had already insisted upon, namely that the problem of unbelief extends to all of humanity; all men - Paul included - are, in their fallen nature, liars. Thus, he again returned to the pronoun *we* to close out the context (3:8). But given his "universal" perspective, why did Paul refer specifically to himself in verse 7?

Several answers have been offered, but the best seems to be that Paul employed the first person singular pronoun, not because he was actually raising an objection on his own behalf, but in order to put a more personal "face" to the objection and its undefined objector. In this way Paul's *my* is effectively a "rhetorical variant" of his previous *our* in verse 3:5. At first glance this may appear strange, but presenting arguments in terms of the hypothetical "I" is a common practice with which all people are familiar.

Having made his assertion, Paul responded to it with his third rhetorical question: "*Why am I also still being judged as a sinner.*" This objection, too, has provided no little difficulty for interpreters. But as previously noted, it must be understood first as a restatement of his core thesis, but also in relation to the preceding verse.

Approached in this way, it seems apparent that Paul was continuing along the same line of argumentation. Following the logic that God is unrighteous to punish those whose unrighteousness demonstrates and exalts His own righteousness (3:5), it could likewise be contended that it is wrong for God to condemn the sinner whose lie serves to glorify Him in His truthfulness. Once again Paul was correlating the categories of *faithfulness/truth/righteousness* and *unbelief/lie/unrighteousness* that are the focal point of the context.

But it ought also to be observed that Paul was continuing the idea of divine judgment introduced in verse 3:6. However, there he was referring to the great judgment of all unrighteousness to come at the end of the age with the return of Jesus Christ, whereas in the present verse his grammar indicates that he was speaking of God's present disposition of condemnation toward the sinner. Thus his point: if the sinner's status as *liar* highlights and exalts God as the God of all truth, then might it not be objected that it is unrighteous for God to sit in judgment of that sinner?

- 4) As an extension of that sentiment Paul posed his final question of the context: "*Why not say, 'Let us do evil that good may come?'*" This question also concerns itself with the same contextual theme, but from a different perspective. Like the previous three questions it presupposes the thematic principle that human unrighteousness in unbelief demonstrates and exalts God's righteousness in His abiding faithfulness. But whereas they all approach that principle from the vantage point of its implication for God's own character in exercising judgment against unbelieving sinners, this final question is concerned with the sinner himself. Its thrust is that, if it is true that God is exalted through the evil of unbelief, then ought not men give themselves to that evil for the sake of God's glory?

It is interesting that, in posing his question, Paul stated that some had slanderously attributed this line of thinking to him and his associates. The overall witness of his letters would seem to indicate that he was making reference to the Jewish charge against him that his gospel of a sovereign, gracious salvation was antinomian and encouraged lawlessness in those who embraced it. In a perverse and illogical way this charge of antinomianism was then used to argue that Paul was effectively teaching men to practice evil in order that good may come from it. Some have referred this "good" to the exaltation of God's righteousness, as the immediate context most seems to suggest. However, the broader context implicates God's faithfulness in fulfilling His oracles of redemption, so that others have viewed this good as referring to God's accomplishment of His saving purposes in spite of unbelief. Either way, it is evident that Paul was thinking in terms of *gospel realities* and how the response of men to the gospel implicates God's faithfulness to His word and His righteousness in judging those who disbelieve.

In this way Paul addressed in these eight short verses the matter of *unbelief* in summary fashion, both as it pertains to the Jew and the world of men as a whole.

- In acknowledging the unbelief of many within Israel, Paul insisted that it in no way *nullifies* God's faithfulness with respect to the fulfillment of His oracles. God has fulfilled and will yet fulfill all His purposes as revealed in His word; He is true though every man is a liar (3:1-5a).
- Yet it is not simply that the unrighteousness of unbelief cannot prevail against God's truth, it actually serves to *establish* God as true. This is so first of all because God's word declares that all men are unbelieving, and therefore liars. But much more, unbelief vindicates God's truthfulness in that God's true oracles are specifically concerned with the **gospel**. Because the gospel is the revelation of *God's righteousness* appropriated *by faith* (1:16-17), it declares the idea of human self-righteousness to be a lie. The result is that personal confidence of such righteousness constitutes suppression of the truth exercised in the context of self-worship (1:18-25).
- These truths, in turn, show that God is not unrighteous to inflict wrath and judge the world for its unbelief (3:5b-6). This is evident first in that all men are rightly obligated to believe what they know to be true (1:18-23), making their unbelief fully culpable. But even more, God has given men every incentive to believe, for without exception throughout all of human history He has shown Himself to be faithful. God has always kept His word, and He has provided every resource necessary for men's love and service (cf. Deuteronomy 7:1-11:7; Isaiah 5:1-7; Ezekiel 16:1-14; etc.).
- For this reason God is just to regard men as sinners and dispose Himself toward them accordingly (3:7). Their unbelief is their own, even as it flies in the face of God's self-revelation and active goodness. This culpability is the issue in God's judgment, and the fact that His righteousness and truth are demonstrated through unbelief does not exonerate men.
- So also men cannot use God's self-glorification in their unbelief as an excuse for their continued rebellion. It is blasphemous for them to justify their sin on the basis that it accomplishes the great good of God's glory.

The gospel is the glorious revelation of God's *mercy* and *severity*. It reveals and exalts His righteousness and His insistence upon the same righteousness in His image-bearers. At the same time, its *provision* of divine righteousness testifies to God's *grace* and *power* and men's *need* and *incapacitation*; according to His sovereign, kind intention God has accomplished for men and supplies to them what He justly demands of them. Yet their innate allegiance to self-righteousness insures that, left to themselves, men will live as liars and suppress the truth. Nonetheless, God's faithfulness triumphed at Calvary, so that in his defeat man the liar triumphs in embracing the truth through union with the Man who is true.