

By David Fields
Jeremiah 23:3-6

God leads his people to return from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem where they rebuild the walls and the temple. (See Ezra and Nehemiah).

The Bible's grand story can be described as one of exile and return from exile.

All humanity has functioned like Adam and Eve. We've wanted to be independent of God's loving leadership. We've wanted to do things in our own way.

Israel's exile in Babylon becomes this image of something more universal – that feeling of homesickness...in all of us. A longing for a place at the table, a longing for presence.

“But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.” – 2 Peter 3:13

[illegible]

II. Jesus: David's "Righteous Branch"

¹⁷Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to **David**, fourteen from **David** to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the **Messiah** [i.e. the promised "Branch from David"]. – Matthew 1:17

Why fourteen?

The ancient Hebrews had a practice called "gematria". It ascribes a number to each letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

"dalet" = 4

"vav" = 6

"dalet" = 4

Dalet+Vav+Dalet, add up to 14, and spell "DaViD."

Matthew is showing how Jesus is the climax of Israel's history. The whole, long and winding story, has been leading to this moment. To this Person.

Here, in this baby, is the "righteous Branch" Jeremiah writes about. This is the King who will reign with wisdom and justice. The One who will save and heal.

III. Jesus: The Lord Our Righteous Savior

"There is absolutely no concept in the Old Testament with so central a significance for all the relationships of human life as that of [righteousness]. It is the standard not only for man's [sic] relationship to God, but also for his relationships to his fellows, reaching right down to the most petty wranglings – indeed, it is even the standard for man's relationship to the animals and to his natural environment."

– Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*

Righteousness, in the Bible, is about "Right-Relatedness."

We might think of righteousness as conformity to a strict legal code. But in the Bible, a person is "righteous" when they live in a way that accords with God's design for our relationships – at every level. With God. With others. With the natural world. With our own selves.

"For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

– Matthew 5:20

The Pharisees and teachers of the law were devoted to finding ways to keep a moral/religious code. How could you surpass that? Because their view of "righteousness" was limited to the external code itself. It did not go deep enough. Did not focus on what righteousness really is, or how to get at it.

That's why Jesus goes on, in the rest of his sermon, to help us see righteousness as "right-relatedness." From "do not murder", to "do not be angry...do not insult others with your words."

Yes, murder is wrong. But to nurse a grudge in your heart and hold on to bitterness and anger will kill relational wholeness. You cannot imagine yourself as "righteous" simply because you didn't draw someone's blood. You are only "righteous" when you seek to maintain whole, healthy relationship, says Jesus.

Righteousness is demonstrated most perfectly in Jesus' own life. His emphasis on caring for the needy – those who are taken advantage of, those who are vulnerable – this is what "righteousness" is all about.

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To know Jesus as God Our Righteous Savior is to have a measure for what a life of wholeness and goodness looks like.

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IV. Jesus: The Lord Our Righteousness

“A great sorrow, and one that I am only beginning to understand: we don’t get to choose our own hearts. We can’t make ourselves want what’s good for us or what’s good for other people.... Because it’s drilled into us constantly, from childhood on, an unquestioned platitude in the culture? – from William Blake to Lady Gaga, from Rousseau to Rumi to Tosca to Mister Rogers – it’s a curiously uniform message, accepted from high to low: when in doubt, what to do? How do we know what’s right for us? Every shrink, every career counselor, every Disney princess knows the answer. “Be yourself.” “Follow your heart.”

Only here’s what I really, really want someone to explain to me. What if one happens to be possessed of a heart that cannot be trusted –? What if the heart, for its own unfathomable reasons, leads one willfully and in a cloud of unspeakable radiance away from health, domesticity, civil responsibility and strong social connections and all the blandly-held common virtues and instead straight towards a beautiful flare of ruin, self-immolation, disaster?” – Donna Tartt, *The Goldfinch*

The beautiful thing that Jeremiah says, and we see through the whole New Testament, is that Jesus not only righteous, but Our Righteous Saviour. Back to Matthew 1 – the very name Joseph is told to name this promised baby is *Yeshua*. That’s the Aramaic name for ‘Jesus.’ That’s “Joshua” in English. It means “The Lord Saves.” (Matthew 1:21).

Jesus can “save” us, because he lives a righteous life. And then, through his death, in our place, he gives us his righteous record. He can become *our righteousness*; the source of our “right-relatedness” to God, and others.

Listen to how Paul puts it:

³⁰ It is because of him [God] that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, **our righteousness**, holiness and redemption. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”

– 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

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Paul makes that abundantly clear in Romans 3, and quoting from the Psalms, “*There is no one righteous, not even one;*” (3:10).

That is, there is no person who lives in line with the beautiful ways God intended for us. No one who does not, in some way, disrupt the “right-relatedness” with God and others we were made for. As Paul says next: “*there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.*” (3:11).

This is why we need “The Lord Our Righteousness”. To restore us to wholeness.

But how? Paul says it a few lines later: “*This righteousness given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*” (Romans 3:22).

This “right-relatedness” to God. This “right standing” with God. It’s *given*. Not earned. Gifted. Freely.

V. Faith in Jesus, Our Righteousness

Barabas (see Luke 23:18-25) is, in some ways, a picture of what it means to have faith in Jesus. We hear this news, “Someone named Jesus has taken your place. You can go free.”

The Bible uses the metaphor of “redemption” to describe what we experience through Jesus. To “redeem” a person was to pay a price – for a slave or prisoner – and set them free. We were imprisoned, enslaved, to sin – to a way of life that put us at the centre – that was ‘un-righteous.’ And Jesus, he is our righteousness.

Jesus went around the cities and towns and villages in first century Palestine with this message: “The time has come,” he said, “*The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!*” (Mark 1:15).

If that’s true, if heaven’s life is breaking in to bring help and healing and life, what else could Jesus say but, “Be honest about your situation. Be real about it. And be real about *who I am, and what I’m offering*. Turn back to me – the source of righteousness –and throw the weight of your life on me, on my kindness – onto the gospel. Throw the weight of your life on *me!*”

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VI. Implications

To know Jesus as The Lord Our Righteousness...

**1. Leaves No Place for Boasting
(1 Corinthians 1:30-31).**

2. Leads to a Life of Praise (Isaiah 61).

“I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” (Isaiah 61:10).

3. Gives Us Deep Confidence (Hebrews 4:16)

“You, Sir Satan [Accuser], your menaces and terrors trouble me not. For why? There is one whose name is called the Lord our righteousness, on whom I believe. He it is who hath abrogated the law, condemned sin, abolished death, destroyed hell, and is a Satan [accuser] to thee, O Satan.” – Martin Luther, cited in John Trapp’s, commentary on Jeremiah 23

“When Satan tempts me to despair. And tells me of the guilt within, upward I look to see Him there, who made an end to all my sin. Because the sinless Saviour died, by sinful soul is counted free. For God the just is satisfied to look on him and pardon me...” – Charitie Lees Smith, “Before the Throne of God Above”

**4. Calls Us to Be Agents of Righteousness
(Matthew 5:6)**

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” – Matthew 5:6

This is what Jesus was saying when he taught us to pray to our Father: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.” – Matthew 6:10

What are we asking for? For God’s ways to be the way things are done. For justice and peace to be the norm and then align our lives after that way of being.

REFLECTION