



Who Were the "RIGHTEOUS"

IN THE PSALMS?

By Tom Goodman

THE PSALMIST OFTEN DIVIDED THE world between the "righteous" and the "wicked"—and placed himself among the "righteous." This may seem arrogant if the reader does not understand how these terms are used. Didn't Jesus caution against those "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and looked down on everyone else" (Luke 18:9)?

The word "righteous" is a translation of the Hebrew word *tsaddiq*. The "righteous" are often contrasted with the "wicked," a translation of the Hebrew word *rasha*. The words identify persons in relation to how they conform to a standard.² In *The Destiny of the Righteous in Psalms*, Jerome Creach wrote:

The term "righteous" (*saddiq*; plural *saddiqim*) itself occurs fifty-two times in the Psalms. Only Proverbs uses the term more often (sixty-six times). The related word "upright" (*yasar*) appears more often in the Psalms than any other book (twenty-five times). Furthermore, the term "wicked" ... appears eighty-two times in the Psalter, far more frequently than any other book of the Old Testament. The impressive frequency of this terminology alone makes it hard to escape the crucial importance of the righteous to the book.³

When reading the psalmist's claim of "righteousness," the reader must distinguish, however, whether the poet is referring to his *cause* or his *life*.

In some psalms the poet cries to God to judge his righteous cause (e.g., Pss. 17; 40; 71). In these instances, he is not declaring himself entirely innocent, just innocent in a particular complaint.⁴ This is simply an extension of the earliest biblical usage of the word, which occurs in relation to the function of judges (e.g., Lev 19:15; Deut. 25:1) and the use of weights and measures (e.g., Lev 19:36). One professor even suggested *tsadeq* be translated as "the party in the right" and *rasha* as "the party in the wrong" to clarify when the terms are used in a forensic rather than ethical sense.⁵ When Judah neglected his obligation to provide his daughter-in-law Tamar with a levirate husband, Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and tricked him into fulfilling that duty. Yet Judah said of the relationship, "She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah" (Gen. 38:26, ESV). Declaring this deceptive prostitute *tsadeq* clearly indicates that at times, the word applied narrowly to the rightness of one's cause instead of to the rightness of one's entire life.⁶

In his *Reflections on the Psalms*, C.S. Lewis said that though none of us is righteous, "any of us may be, probably all of us at one time or another are, in the right about some particular issue." He compared the situation to two boys arguing over a pencil:

The question whether the disputed pencil belongs to Tommy or Charles is quite distinct from the

Right: Facing the Mount of Olives, the Eastern Gate in

the Old City of Jerusalem; the psalmist declared that the righteous

would enter through the gate of the Lord (Ps. 118:20).







Left: Part of a scene that decorated the Assyrian North Palace at Nineveh. The image shows the king's armor bearers stringing a bow. The psalmist declared, "The wicked have drawn the sword and strung the bow to bring down the afflicted and needy and to slaughter those whose way is upright" (Ps. 37:14, HCSB).

Below: Hand-held bronze rattle or "sistra"; used in Anatolian worship; 2300–2000 B.C. The psalmist said, "Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous ones; shout for joy, all you upright in heart" (Ps. 32:11, HCSB).



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question which is the nicer little boy... We need therefore by no means assume that the Psalmists are deceived or lying when they assert that, as against their particular enemies at some particular moment, they are completely in the right.⁷

No matter how righteous his cause, however, the psalmist was well aware that his life was far from *tsadeq*. The Hebrew poet confessed that "no one alive is righteous" in God's sight (Ps. 143:2; cf. 14:3; 53:2-3).

In light of this confession, how could the poet so often declare himself and his nation among "the righteous"? His hope was entirely in the God who is altogether righteous (5:8; 31:1; 35:24; 88:12; 143:11).

Even when he felt he had a justifiable complaint, the poet appealed as much to the *tsadeq* of God as his did to the *tsadeq* of his personal cause. So, in Psalm 17 he referred to his complaint as "a just cause" (v. 1) but he also declared, "I will see Your face in righteousness" (v. 15; cf. 143:1, "in Your righteousness answer me"). The psalmist was confident God would judge his righteous cause and clear him. Even more, the Lord would "champion" his cause and fight on his behalf to restore the rightness of life.

When God's people can make

no claim to their own *tsadeq*, however, they still cast themselves on God's *tsadeq*. In his last speech to Israel, Samuel said, "Now present yourselves, so I may confront you before the LORD about all the righteous acts He has done for you and your ancestors" (1 Sam. 12:7). What fol-

Below: Judean soldier with a shield. In Psalm 5:12 the LORD blesses the righteous by surrounding him like a shield with His favor.



lowed were not manifestations of impartial justice but examples of God's undeserved goodness to Israel in spite of their repeated apostasy. The psalmists depend on this kind of divine righteousness in their unrighteousness, too.

God was "righteous" in that He kept His covenant with Israel and took the uncompelled initiative to restore the broken relationship. The people, therefore, were "the righteous" in the sense that they hoped in a God who would set things right.

This coalesced dramatically at the cross of Christ, where a Roman centurion exclaimed, "This man really was righteous!" (Luke 23:47) What prompted this statement was watching Jesus entrust the injustice of His suffering to God, just as the psalmists did on many occasions. This death, however, was a substitution: "the righteous for the unrighteous" (1 Pet. 3:18). God acted in this way "to demonstrate His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be



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righteous and declare righteous the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26; cf. 2 Cor. 5:21).

Like the psalmists, then, we are “the righteous” when we cast ourselves upon the righteous intervention of God. The designation does not point to our own moral worth but to a gracious God who took the initiative to save us. ☞

Left: Cache of silver coins found in the region of Pella. The psalmist declared, “The wicked man borrows and does not

repay, but the righteous one is gracious and giving” (Ps. 37:21, HCSB).

Above: Palm trees with Great

Pyramid of Khufu in the distance. The psalmist said the righteous would thrive like the palm tree (Ps. 92:12).

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

2. Harold G. Stigers, §1879 שֶׁדֶק (*sedeq*, justice) in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* [HARRIS], ed. R. Laird Harris (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2:752-55. See also David J. Reimer, §1879 שֶׁדֶק (*sdq*; be just, righteous) in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, gen. ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:744-69.

3. Jerome F.D. Creach, *The Destiny of the Righteous in the Psalms* (Saint Louis: Chalice, 2008), 1. See also the entry for *sedeq* on pages 752-55 of HARRIS and G. Herbert Livingston, §2222 רָשָׁע (*rasha*; be wicked) in HARRIS, 863-64.

4. “While we do have references to absolute righteousness in the OT... there are many more references to a righteousness grounded in particular or generalized situations.” Tremper Longman III, ed., *The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 1430.

5. James Hardy Ropes, “‘Righteousness’ and ‘the righteousness of God’ in the Old Testament and in St. Paul,” *Journal Of Biblical Literature* 22, no. 2 (1903): 211-27.

6. C.J. Graesser, “Righteousness, human and divine” in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 10, no. 3 (June 1983): 134-41. Although most English translations render *sedeq* in Gen. 38:26 as “righteous,” the HCSB helpfully renders it “in the right.” See also 1 Sam. 24:17, where Saul declares David as “more righteous than I” in their dispute.

7. C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1958), 17-18.

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