

## God Is Righteous

Isaiah 45:18-25

### Righteousness in Tape Measures and People

A humorous internet meme depicts two measuring tapes side by side. Both are made by the same company, and both are pressed against a flat surface. But their number markings do not line up: they are off by about a quarter inch.

The caption states: “This is why I have trust issues.”

In Biblical terms, the correct tape measure would be called “righteous,” and the incorrect one “unrighteous.” In fact, the Bible uses the word “righteous” to describe measuring instruments: “You must have accurate and honest weights and measures” (Deuteronomy 25:15). The Hebrew word rendered “honest” is most often translated as “righteous.”



This helps us understand the basic meaning of righteousness. Something or someone is righteous when *what they are* matches *what they ought to be*. Likewise, they are *unrighteous* when what they are does not match what they ought to be. An inch marker that is only three-fourths of an inch is not what it ought to be: it is unrighteous. An inch marker that is actually one inch long is what it ought to be: it is righteous.

When the Bible says that God is righteous, it means that who he is matches perfectly with who he ought to be. For God, “ought-ness” and “is-ness” are one and the same. This means, for example, that when God says he will do something, he will always do it (Nehemiah 9:8). It means that when he says something is wrong, then it is.

### Who’s Right, and Who’s Wrong?

But the Bible also presents several problems related to righteousness. When people act *unrighteously*, other people become their victims and need justice (Psalm 35:24; 43:1; Jeremiah 22:3). Also, because people act unrighteously by serving false gods, and yet seem to do OK, this puts God’s righteousness into question: who’s right—God, or idols (Psalm 37:27-29; Habakkuk 1:13)? So God needs to show that he is really right, which involves giving these unrighteous people the punishment they deserve (Romans 2:5).

Let us bring this understanding of righteousness to Isaiah 45:21-25.

#### 1. A Challenge: Find Another Righteous God (Isaiah 45:21)

When God says, “There is no other god beside me, a righteous God and a Savior” (Isaiah 45:21), he is inviting his people to compare him with any other god. All other gods need humans to prop them up: they are “wooden idols” that “cannot save” (45:20). Can any other god (righteously) keep his promises to save his people?

## 2. An Invitation: Turn to Me (Isaiah 45:22)

The answer is no, so this leaves only one option: to turn to the one true God, “for I am God, and there is no other” (45:22). But this presents an even bigger challenge. Turning to God means that they must admit that they have been utterly *unrighteous*. Will they not be punished, then?

## 3. A Reason: Righteousness Is Found in the Lord (Isaiah 45:23-25)

This implicit question is answered in verses 23-25: “Only in the Lord, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength; to him shall come and be ashamed all who were incensed against him. In the Lord all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory.” The reason they can turn to the Lord, is that turning to him means to “be saved”—finding in him alone the righteousness they need.

But how will this happen? If they turn to God, God must prove himself righteous by punishing them. Yet if they turn away from God, they are turning to false gods that cannot save. How will God prove himself righteous *and* save his people?

This tension finds its resolution in the mysterious “suffering servant” Isaiah describes in chapter 53: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—everyone—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. . . . By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquity” (53:6, 11).

Jesus of Nazareth, the only perfectly righteous human being who ever walked the earth, bore “the iniquity of us all.” Through Jesus’ death on the cross, God both proved himself to be righteous—sin deserves death!—but also declared righteous those who find refuge in Jesus. The Apostle Paul describes this amazing act as follows: “It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:26).

### Discussion Questions

1. Even though people rarely use the words “righteousness” and “unrighteousness,” in what ways do people today show their concern for these concepts?
2. The Bible says that “none is righteous; no, not one” (Romans 3:10). Still, we try to establish our own righteousness. What are some ways we tend to do that—even when we realize that there is no righteousness apart from God?
3. What are some reasons it is hard for us to accept that “in the Lord alone are righteousness and strength?” (Isaiah 45:24)?
4. We are told to pursue righteousness (1 Timothy 6:11). If we already have the righteousness of Christ, in what sense are we to pursue righteousness?