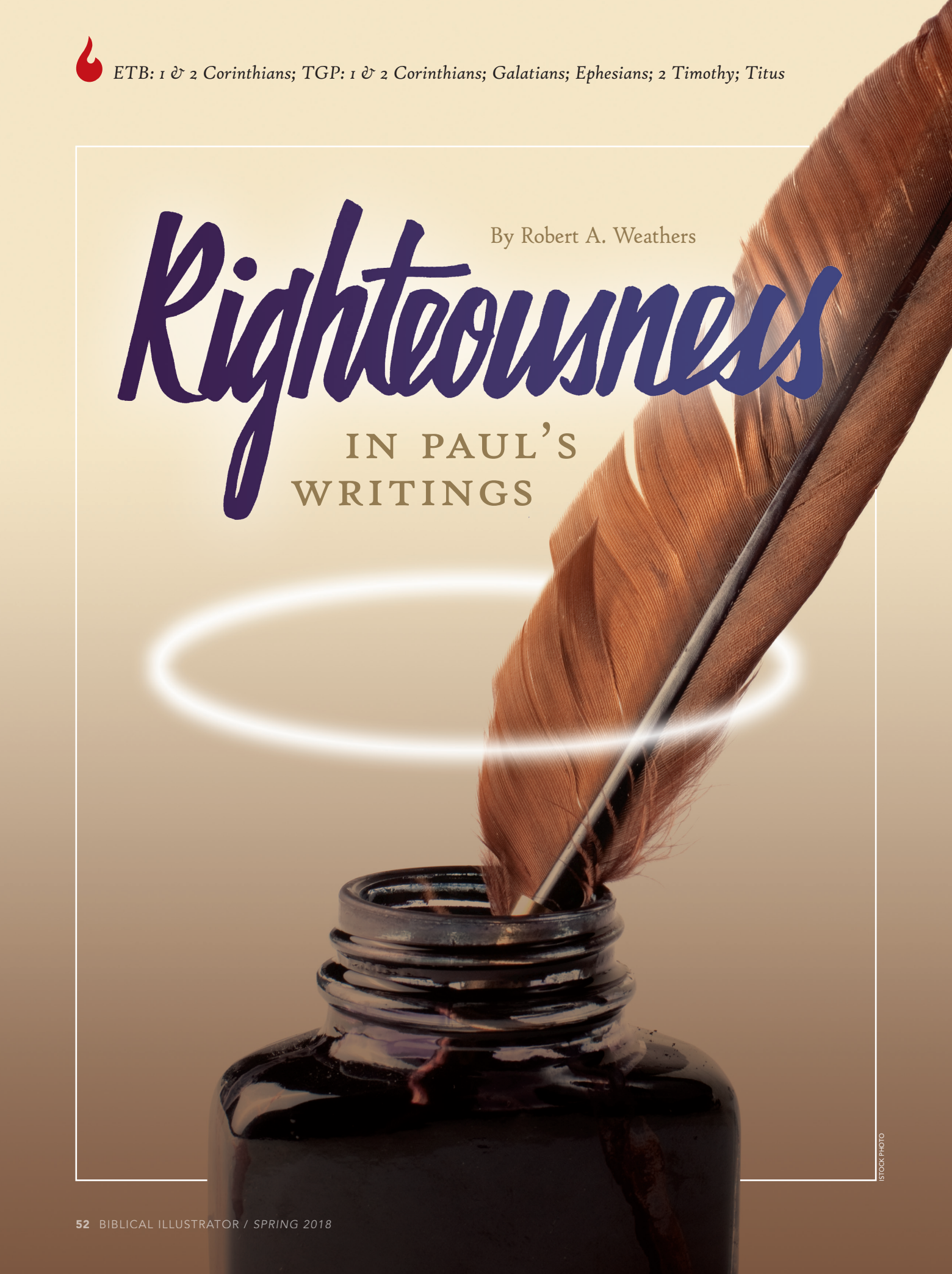
ETB: 1 & 2 Corinthians; TGP: 1 & 2 Corinthians; Galatians; Ephesians; 2 Timothy; Titus

Righteousness in Paul's Writings

By Robert A. Weathers



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PAUL'S LETTER TO THE GALATIANS IS not only among the earliest of his New Testament writings, it is also perhaps his most emotional. In this letter he stood firm to defend the gospel message against false teachers who claimed circumcision was required for the Gentile Christians to be fully saved. Paul railed against this notion, angered by even the implication that anything but the grace of God in Jesus Christ would be needed for salvation.

As he defended the gospel, Paul revealed fundamental truths related to the message of Christ's work on the cross, including His provision of righteousness to the believer. Galatians chapter two contains Paul's recounting of a pivotal event in the apostles' ministry and his explanation of how critical God's righteousness is for every believer. God's righteousness was a key feature in Paul's understanding of what salvation means, as many scholars maintain, "that justification, or righteousness, is the center of Paul's theology."[1]

Confrontation in Antioch

Perhaps few things would raise the ire of Paul quite like a distortion of the gospel. Paul reported that in Antioch Peter had chosen to sit with Jewish believers to the exclusion of Gentile Christians. This represented an intentional change in Peter's behavior, and Paul recognized it as a potentially dangerous symbolic affront to the gospel of grace (Gal. 2:12,14).

Peter's decision to withhold fellowship from the Gentile Christians implied they were somehow less saved than their Jewish brothers and sisters. That would mean, of course, that grace was not enough for salvation and that both being a Jew and keeping the Jewish Law

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ LOUISE KOHL SMITH (32/25/2)

Right: Torah scroll and prisimatic case from Hebron. The case is adorned with decorative wooden inlays and silver and has 12 sides. Using this rigid case is a Shephardic tradition.

Below: Ruins of a Roman bath at Ankara, which was on the northern border of Galatia.

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earned God's favor and completed salvation. Due to Peter's high-profile position as a leader, Paul knew he had to confront this error quickly and publicly.

Paul insisted the Law had led him to Christ, and that through the Law he had "died to the Law" so he could "live to God" (v. 19).[2] True righteousness was not a result of keeping the Law, it was the result of God's grace. Righteousness was not a result of being a Jew or a Gentile, or being circumcised, it was a result of the cross of Jesus Christ. Paul insisted, therefore, that to claim righteousness comes through the Law is to "nullify the grace of God." And "if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly" (v. 21). Paul was adamant. If in any way we can make ourselves righteous before God, Christ died for no reason.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ JUSTIN VENEMAN (3/6/97)

Right: Inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the altar that is above the site which, according to tradition, was the location of Jesus' crucifixion. The images on the back wall depict left to right Mary, Jesus, and John.

Far right: Part of the Chester Beatty collection of biblical papyri; the text is of Galatians 2:12-21.

Righteousness in Paul's World

Paul's indignation and defense of righteousness were ignited by his grasp of the way righteousness changed at the cross of Jesus Christ. What God had done for us in Christ supplanted any previous, and lacking, view of righteousness. Prior to Christ's coming, two views on righteousness dominated the religious climate of Paul's culture, and both views would have influenced Paul's perspective.

The Greeks and Romans considered righteousness to be a virtue. It was the product of an ethical life. Being righteous meant a person had to comply with a set of norms. In other words, to be righteous took work and the exercise of righteous behavior. For example, according to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, "righteousness was the correct functioning of all the virtues." And in Roman civil law, "justice (*iustitia*) was done when one acted toward another in accordance with one's respective status established by tradition and the Roman legal corpus."[3]

The Jews held a similar ethical perspective, but with a clear difference. Jews understood righteousness was tied to Israel's covenant with God and to the Law. A person was "righteous" when "acting properly in regard to the covenant relationship with Yahweh."[4] And righteousness was also an ethical standard, so a person was righteous toward another person when he conducted his life in accordance with the Law.

Though both of these perspectives influenced Paul, his understanding of the meaning and depth of righteousness matured. This developing understanding came as he recognized that righteousness was more

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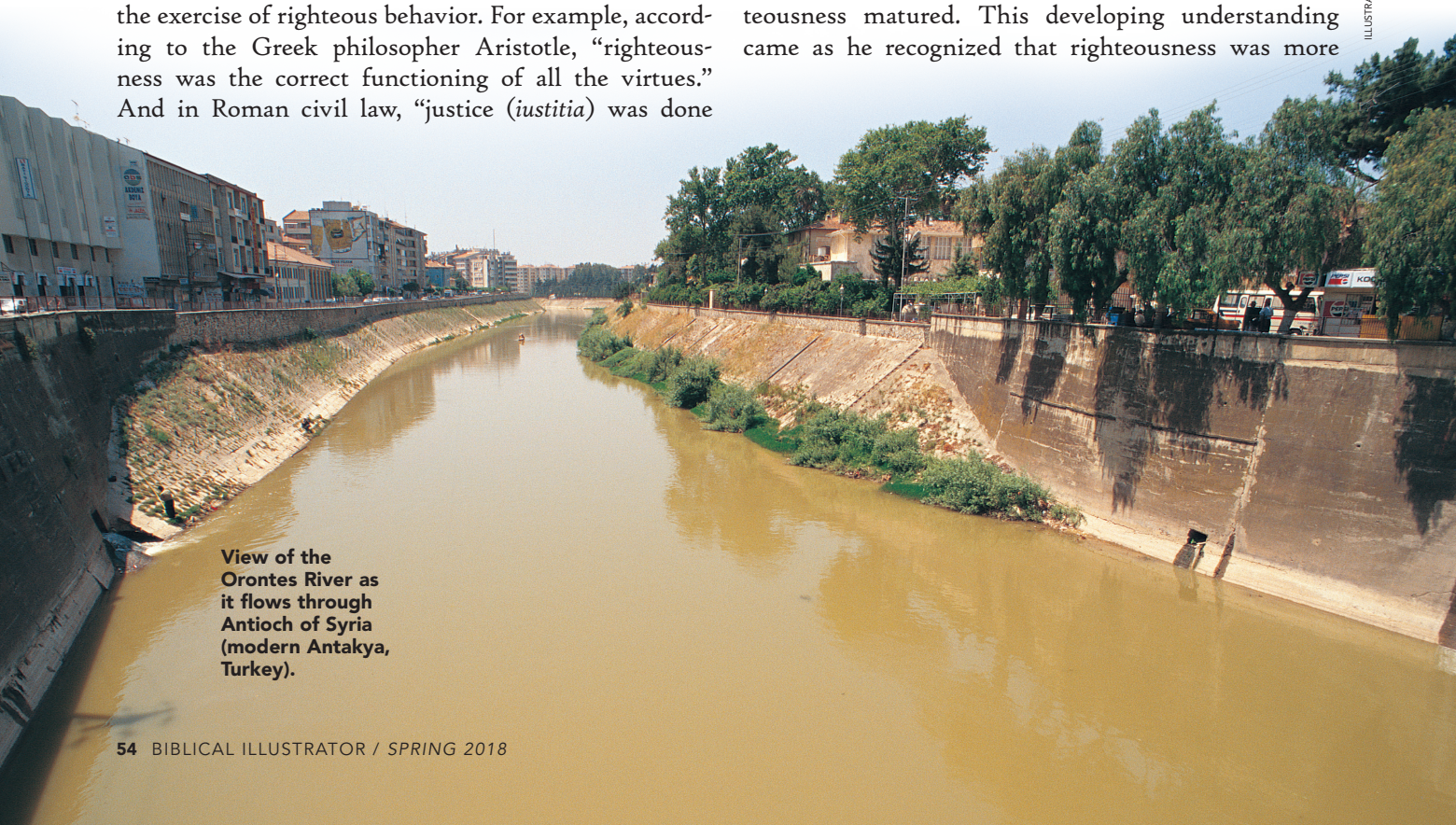


View of the Orontes River as it flows through Antioch of Syria (modern Antakya, Turkey).

than keeping a set of ethical standards or adhering to the Jewish Law.

What Then Is Righteousness?

When speaking of righteousness, Paul used the Greek word *dikaiosune*, which can be translated by the noun "righteousness," or, if an adjective, "righteous," or as a verb, "to justify," which refers to making one righteous. These words occur over 100 times in Paul's letters, so by their sheer volume they show the central place righteousness had in Paul's thinking.[5]

Paul used this word in relation both to God and people. Unquestionably, Paul considered the term's meaning for the Christian to spring from the character of God. He applied the word in four ways.

First, righteousness is a declaration from God. So, as Paul recalled for this readers, Abraham's faith was "reckoned to him as righteousness" (3:6). That is, God declared Abraham righteous.

Second, righteousness is a gift from God. The righteousness the believer enjoys results from God's grace. If righteousness could be achieved any other way, Christ would have died for no reason (2:21). And Paul equated righteousness with life, "which the Law is powerless to produce."[6]

Third, because righteousness is a gift one cannot earn, it comes to believers through faith. Paul rejected the notion that any righteousness of our own would be acceptable to God. Instead, God accepts only the righteousness that is based on faith in Christ (Phil. 3:9).

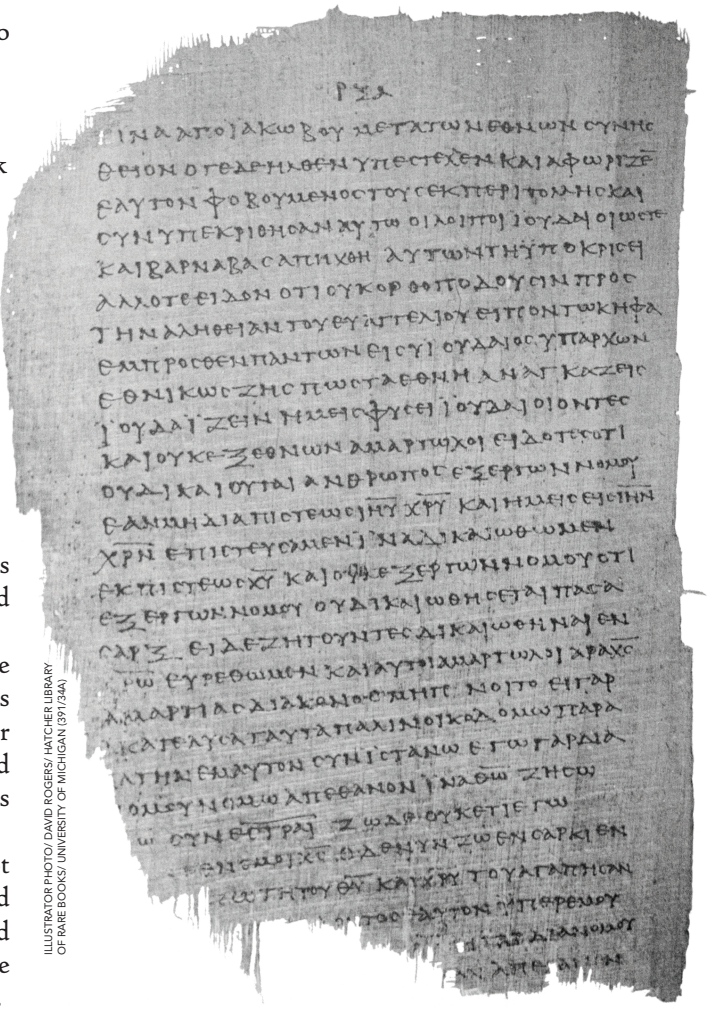
Then fourth, righteousness results in obedience. For the Christian, ethical behavior is the end result of true righteousness, not the starting point. Righteousness "marks the believer's relationship with others (rather than judging or offending others) and is the result of God's reign."[7]

What Does It Mean to Be Righteous?

So for Paul, though righteousness included clear moral implications, being righteous had more to do with one's relationship with Christ than with ethical behavior.[8] For the believer, righteousness had grown beyond a mere ethical standard. It was a demonstration of the power of God in Jesus Christ.

Paul's radical message was that righteousness came as a result of the gospel, and without accepting the gospel no one could be righteous. It could not be achieved, but only received by faith, because in the gospel "the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, just as it is written: The righteous will live by faith" (Rom. 1:17, CSB).

Paul fervently defended such righteousness. Even



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS/ HATCHER LIBRARY OF RARE BOOKS/ UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN (391/344)

a respected fellow apostle could not slide on this great truth. Righteousness is the result of Christ's payment for our sin. It is available to all who trust Christ; it is imparted to the Christian, never earned. The life transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ enjoys the righteousness of God in Christ, and it shows as the Christian lives an ethical life in obedience to Christ. This is the gift of the gospel (2 Cor. 5:21).

1. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 192.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations come from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).
3. Karen L. Onesti and Manfred T. Brauch, "Righteousness, Righteousness of God" in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters,* ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 829.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 830.
6. Ibid., 831.
7. Ibid.
8. Peter Toon, "Righteousness" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 688.

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