

JEHOVAH-TSIDKENU

THE NAME **Jehovah-Tsidkenu** means **Jehovah our righteousness**. It appears in Jeremiah's prophecy of a "righteous Branch" and a "King" who is to appear; "and this is his name whereby he shall be called, Jehovah our Righteousness" (Jer. 23:5, 6).

THE OCCASION OF THE PROPHECY

When Jeremiah uttered this prophecy, the kingdom of Judah was hastening to its fall. More than a hundred years before, the ten tribes of the kingdom of Israel had been taken captive never to return. But apparently Judah had learned nothing from this lesson, and it sinned perhaps even more grievously than its sister kingdom in the north. Jeremiah's ministry began during the reign of the good king Josiah. Till this time good kings and bad kings, reformations and counter reformations had succeeded each other, a sad reflection upon the unstable spiritual condition of the people and their rulers, and revealing a downward moral and spiritual trend which could only end in disaster. The history of the period of the Judges appears to repeat itself here. Jehovah in His goodness and patience raised up pious and devout kings to succeed unrighteous, wicked kings, but it failed to arrest their downward trend.

The good king Josiah, who had followed the particularly wicked and cruel Manasseh and Amon, instituted sweeping reforms and a great spiritual revival which were brought to an abrupt end by his unfortunate and untimely death. His successors swept them all away. Their doings may be summed up in that familiar formula, which might well have served as an epitaph for them all—"he did evil in the sight of Jehovah." Conditions went from bad to worse spiritually, morally, materially. Even the priests, as well as the princes and people, polluted the very house of the Lord in Jerusalem, practicing every abomination of the heathen round about (Ezek. 8). The land was full of oppression and violence, political intrigue and unrest. Jehovah's warnings went unheeded; His messengers the prophets were mocked and despised and misused "until the wrath of the Lord arose against his people, till there was no remedy" (II Chron. 36:16). Even at the time of Josiah's death it was already too late, for "the Lord turned not from the fierceness of his great

wrath, wherewith his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations that Manasseh had provoked him withal. And the Lord said, “I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel, and will cast off this city of Jerusalem which I have chosen, and the house of which I said, My name shall be there” (II Kings 23:26, 27). Judah’s day of grace had already expired.

Jeremiah predicted the captivity of Judah and counseled submission to Babylon, the instrument of Jehovah’s judgment against Judah. But would not this mean the defeat of God’s own purpose and promise! Had He not promised to establish David’s kingdom and throne forever (II Sam. 7:16, 17)! Jehovah had promised that, and He would keep the promise that there should never fail David a man to sit upon his throne (I Kings 2:4), even though it was to be fulfilled only on condition that David’s descendants would walk before Jehovah “in truth with all their heart and with all their soul.” For Jeremiah predicted not only that Israel would return from captivity and be restored to its land, but that Jehovah would raise up to David a Righteous Branch, a King who should reign and prosper and do judgment and justice in the earth, and bring peace and security to Israel, and who should be called Jehovah our Righteousness.

There is a striking and significant similarity between the name of this Righteous Branch and King of Jeremiah’s prophecy and the name of Judah’s last king “Zedekiah,” which means the righteousness of Jehovah. His name had originally been Mattaniah, which means the gift of Jehovah. Strange to say, his name had been changed to Zedekiah by the king of Babylon. Was it a scathing rebuke by Nebuchadnezzar of Judah’s defection from its God? Perhaps it was intended to vindicate the justice and righteousness of Jehovah in all that had befallen this people, and the judgment about to fall upon them. Perhaps it was a reminder of what might have been. For Israel had steadily and determinedly trod the downward path of retrogression from its God, occasionally, through Jehovah’s mercy, halting and retracing a few steps, only to turn back again. “They have turned unto me the back, and not the face” (Jer. 32:33). They despised His provision of redemption as Jehovah-jireh. Consequently He could not be to them Jehovah-rophe, who heals. They were a people, as Isaiah says, without soundness from the sole of the foot to the

crown of the head, full of open wounds, bruises, and putrefying sores (Isa. 1:6). Without Jehovah-nissi, their banner, they were defeated at every turn. Refusing to sanctify themselves to Jehovah-M'Kaddesh, their sanctifier, they became corrupt and degenerate. Ezekiel sees their elders in the very Temple worshiping creeping things and abominable beasts (Ezek. 8: 10, 11). Forsaking Jehovah-shalom, their peace, they were torn by internal dissension and violence, and subjected by outward aggression and conquest.

It must have been in the reign of Zedekiah that the great prophecy of Jehovah-tsidkenu was given. Certainly the prophecy of Jeremiah 33:16, which speaks of Jerusalem as Jehovah-tsidkenu, because of the presence there of Jehovah-tsidkenu, was made in Zedekiah's reign. And what a striking contrast is here presented! All that Judah's kings should have been as representatives of Jehovah, at least typically, and as summed up in the name of Judah's last king, Zedekiah (the righteousness of Jehovah), this Righteous Branch, and King of David's line, would be. And in Him, as Jeremiah declares in 33:6-26, Judah would be once more redeemed, healed, cleansed, victorious, at peace and made righteous. For the nature of His kingdom was to be spiritual rather than political and its chief characteristic righteousness, which was to be not of themselves but of that King who should be Jehovah.

MEANING AND USE OF THE TERM "TSEDEK"

The word tsidkenu is derived from tsedek-righteousness. It meant originally to be stiff or straight. There is certainly no more significant word in the Old Testament.

The Hebrew word cannot be adequately translated by any one English word. It signifies God's dealings with men under the ideas of righteousness, justification, and acquittal.

It is applied to the outward obligations and relationships of men. The Book of Leviticus, where Jehovah is revealed as M'Kaddesh who sanctifies and demands sanctification of life, the book which reveals the basis of approach and manner of worship, also reveals the standards of right

and just relationships among men. “Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment . . . in weight, or in measure. Just balances, just weights . . . shall ye have: I am Jehovah your God . . .” (Lev. 19:35, 36). In Deuteronomy 25:15 such a righteous practice is one of the conditions of prosperity and stay in their land.

Among the ancient Romans justice was represented by a person with a pair of balanced scales in her hand. Thus Job pleads: “Let me be weighed in an even balance,” or balance of righteousness, “that God may know mine integrity” (31:6). The psalmist pictures all men, both high and low, as going up when laid on the balances (62:9). It is a coming short in the righteous practices which men owe God even in their relationships toward one another.

Modern orthodox Jewry still conceives of God as weighing their good deeds over against the bad. On new year’s day the process begins and on the Day of Atonement it ends and judgment is sealed for the year. The ten days in between are spent in a desperate effort by charity, prayer, and fasting to tip the balances in one’s favor, although there is never certainty as to which way it may have gone.

The word *tsedek* is also used of a full weight or measure toward God in the spiritual sense. Thus Israel was commanded to walk in the paths of righteousness and to offer the sacrifices of righteousness, putting their trust in the Lord (Ps. 4:5). These sacrifices are described also as a broken spirit and a contrite heart (Ps. 51:17), because of failure to measure up to such a full standard of righteousness; for as Job says: “How shall a man be righteous with God?” (9:2). It is used in the sense of rendering justice and making right. The judges and officers of Israel were to judge the people with righteous judgment (Deut. 16:18). They were especially warned against perverting righteous judgment, but they justify or make righteous the wicked for a reward, says Isaiah (5:23). They decree unrighteous decrees (10:1). Isaiah pictures Jehovah as looking for righteousness in judgment, but finding the cry of the oppressed (5:7).

The word is used hundreds of times in the Scriptures both as right, righteous, righteousness, and

also as just, justify, declare innocent. Human language is at best insufficient to convey the full comprehension of the ideas of righteousness and justification contained in this word. It is only as we see it exhibited in God's character and acts that we see it clearly.

JEHOVAH THE SOURCE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Jehovah is Himself perfect righteousness; He is the perfectly righteous One. Jehovah is a Tsadik-a righteous One, says the psalmist (129:4). As an El-Tsadik -a righteous God, there is none to compare with Him, says Isaiah (45:21) . He is the Rock whose work is perfect, all of whose ways are justice. Tsadik-righteous and right is He (Deut. 32:4). His righteousness is an everlasting righteousness and His testimonies are righteous forever (Ps. 119:142, 144).

Righteousness and justice are the very foundations of His throne (Ps. 89:14; 97:2). Therefore in all His dealings He is righteous.

In contrast to Jehovah's perfect righteousness is man's lack of righteousness and the evil of his ways. The constant testimony of Scripture is to this effect. "What is man that he should be clean? And he which is born of woman, that he should be righteous?" asks Eliphaz of Job (15:14). The psalmist represents Jehovah as looking in vain from heaven upon the children of men to see if there be any that understand and do good. And the verdict is: "There is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Ps. 14:3). The apostle Paul, quoting this very passage in the New Testament, says, "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:20), and he concludes that "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

Israel is sharply reminded that not because it has any righteousness of its own does Jehovah give them the land to possess. On the contrary, they are a stiff-necked and sinful people. It is only because He would perform His promise to the fathers and carry out His purpose that they inherit the land (Deut. 9:4-6). The prophet Isaiah regards as filthy rags what he had once considered his personal righteousnesses (Isa. 64:6). And that righteousness of the law of which Paul had once been so proud, and which he considered as great merit and gain, he came to regard as refuse

(Phil. 3:4-9).

Acknowledging Jehovah's righteousness, the Old Testament saints at the same time acknowledged their own guilt. "O Lord, righteousness belongeth to thee, but unto us confusion of faces . . . to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and unto all Israel . . . because of their trespass that they have trespassed against thee . . . because we have sinned against thee" (Dan. 9:7, 8). The Old Testament makes it abundantly clear that a righteousness acceptable to God is impossible of attainment by man alone because of inherent sin. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceedingly corrupt: who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9, A.S.V.). "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5, A.S.V.). "How then can man be righteous before God? Or how can he be clean that is born of a woman?" (Job 25:4). And the word for man here denotes frailty, weakness.

Jehovah, who is perfectly righteous, cannot overlook this lack of righteousness in man. For He "will by no means clear the guilty." These words follow that remarkable expression of His desire and purpose to forgive sin and transgression found in Exodus 34:6, 7. "I will not justify the wicked" (Exod. 23:7). The sinner is regarded as guilty in God's sight. The soul that sinneth shall die; the wages of sin is death. And it is clear that none is capable in himself of a righteousness acceptable to God. It is obviously impossible for a fallen creature to rise to the standard of a perfect obedience. "It is quite impossible that any man can in himself be right who does not render pure, perfect, perpetual, and personal obedience to the precepts of God's law, since it is inconceivable that God could be satisfied with less." How then can man be acquitted of his unrighteousness and become righteous before God?

Only Jehovah has provided such a righteousness for man. It was clearly understood by the spiritually discerning even in Old Testament times that such a righteousness must be provided by God Himself. "Surely, shall one say, in Jehovah have I righteousness . . . to him shall men come.... In Jehovah shall all the seed of Israel be justified ..." (Isa. 45:24, 25). "He is near that justifieth me; who will contend with me?" (Isa. 50:8). Isaiah further predicts that no weapon

formed against Israel is to prosper; every tongue rising up in judgment against her is to be condemned because her righteousness is of Jehovah (Isa. 54:17). It is this righteousness of Jehovah which the prophet further predicts is to go forth like brightness from Jerusalem, and, as the chief characteristic and glory of a redeemed Israel, will attract the nations (Isa. 62:1, 2). But how was this righteousness of Jehovah to be applied to men? Again the spiritually minded of the Old Testament dispensation clearly understood on the one hand that the penalty of death which his sin had incurred must be borne by an innocent sufferer and that, on the other hand, the innocence or righteousness of the sufferer must be applied to him. It is only on this basis that God could declare the guilty innocent and the unrighteous righteous. Only so could Balaam understand that Jehovah “hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel” (Num. 23:21). Only so could Jeremiah say: “In those days, and in that time, saith Jehovah, the iniquity of Israel shall be sought for, and there shall be none: and the sins of Judah, and they shall not be found: for I will pardon them ...” (50:20). For they were to be borne by an innocent one. Such an innocent person is predicted in the Scriptures.

Isaiah spoke of a Servant who should be wounded for our transgressions and be bruised for our iniquities. Upon Him Jehovah would lay the iniquity of us all and would make His soul an offering for sin. This Servant is called “my righteous servant” who should justify many by “bearing their iniquities.” But who could that one be? Surely he could be no mere man, for there is no man righteous, and “none can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him” (Ps. 49:7).

Apart from the fact that such a substitute and sufferer must of necessity be perfectly righteous himself and therefore more than man, the Servant of Isaiah 53 is also that Servant of Isaiah 49:7, the Holy One. He is identified by Zechariah as the Servant who is the Branch (Zech. 3:8-10). And that Branch- is the righteous Branch of David and the King of Jeremiah 23:5 who is also Jehovah-tsidkenu-Jehovah our Righteousness.

“Thus while the Scriptures of the Old Testament took away from the Hebrew any hope he might

have in himself, they concentrated his expectations on the living God who had specially revealed Himself to Israel.”²

Now Israel understood that punishment for sin does not of itself cleanse a sinner, but that the righteousness of the innocent sufferer must also be reckoned to the sinner if he is to stand before Jehovah acquitted not only of penalty but of guilt. A glimpse into this marvelous doctrine of God’s grace was given to men from the beginning. Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him for righteousness (Gen. 15:6). “Thou hast forgiven the iniquity of thy people,” ‘says the psalmist, and adds, “thou hast covered all their sin” (Ps. 85:2). And Isaiah tells us how: “I will greatly rejoice in Jehovah ... for ... he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with a garland, and a bride adorneth herself with jewels” (61:10, A.S.V.).

JESUS, OUR JEHOVAH-TSIDKENU

The manifestation and provision of that righteousness of Jehovah which alone can make men acceptable to God was fully realized in the Lord Jesus Christ, our Jehovah-tsidkenu. In His person, character, and work as the suffering, righteous Servant of Jehovah, He was worthy to be substituted for Israel and for us. As the Righteous Branch of David He identified Himself with Israel and with us so that He could truly represent us before God, and that in Him it could be said we have truly met our obligations to God. Yet as Jehovah our Righteousness He is also distinct from us so as not to be involved in our guilt.

Jesus is Himself the Righteous One. In his great sermon at Pentecost, Peter accuses his hearers of denying the Holy One and the Just or Righteous (Acts 3:14). Hebrews 1:8, 9 says of Him: “Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever: a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of thy kingdom. Thou hast loved righteousness and hated iniquity.” This is a quotation of several Old Testament passages of which Psalm 11:7 reads, “For the righteous Jehovah loveth righteousness.” “He, in human nature, lived up to the perfect standard of the divine law, so that His righteousness was of

the same complexion and character as the righteousness of God.”³ Still more, as one with the Father, His righteousness was the perfect manifestation of the righteousness of God.

And then He is made righteousness to us. “Of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness ...” (I Cor. 1:30). And this He did on His part by paying the penalty for sin in His death for us upon the cross. “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (II Cor. 5:21) . And Peter adds: “Because Christ also suffered for sins once, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God; being put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the Spirit” (I Peter 3:18, A.S.V.). What we could not do for ourselves, Christ did for us. Being Himself the Lawgiver, the Law had no claim upon Him. As perfect, He perfectly obeyed the Law for us, and became “the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth” (Rom. 10:4). In His death for us as a perfect and worthy sacrifice, He took our guilt and paid our penalty.

So, on our part His righteousness is bestowed upon us as a free gift through faith. Israel’s great error was in seeking to establish a righteousness of its own and in not submitting itself to the righteousness of God (Rom. 10:3). This is the great argument of Paul in Romans 3, in which, establishing the unrighteousness of man, he presents the righteousness of God as His grace in redemption toward us, closing in verse 26 with the words: “To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.” In Philippians 3:9, applying the argument to his own experience, he places all his hopes on being “found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is of the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.” In Romans 5, Paul argues again that as our identity with Adam brings us under sin and death, so our identity with Christ makes us the recipients of the free gift of His righteousness and life (Rom. 5:16-19).

Finally, the practical effect of the bestowal of the gift of His righteousness is to set our feet on the path of righteousness in conformity to His will whose ways are all righteousness, who loves righteousness and hates iniquity. We are to put on the new man which is created in righteousness

(Eph. 4:24), and being made free from sin, we have become the servants of righteousness (Rom. 6:18).

Jehovah-tsidkenu! Wonderful name! It reveals to us the method and the measure of our acceptance before God; cleansed in the blood of the Lamb; clothed with the white robe of the righteousness of Him who is Jehovah-our righteousness-even our Lord Jesus Christ.

I once was a stranger to grace and to God,
 I knew not my danger, and felt not my load;
 Though friends spoke in rapture of Christ on the tree
 Jehovah-tsidkenu was nothing to me.
 When free grace awoke me, by light from on high,

Then legal fears shook me, I trembled to die:
 No refuge, no safety, in self could I see;
 Jehovah-tsidkenu my Savior must be.
 My terrors all vanished before the sweet name;
 My guilty fears banished, with boldness I came
 To drink at the fountain, life-giving and free: Jehovah-tsidkenu is all things to me.⁴

1 Whitelaw, Jehovah-Jesus, p. 94.

2 Girdlestone, Old Testament Synonyms, p. 260.

3 Op. cit., p. 269.

4 Whitelaw, Jehovah-Jesus, pp. 102, 103.