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God of Promise and Voucher: Alienation, Reconciliation, and Resurrection

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Abstract

A Christian approach to suffering, sin, and evil cannot offer now a full theodicy. We now 'know in part' only regarding divine purposes in allowing suffering, sin, and evil. We can clarify instead how God interacts in righteousness with people as their God of promise and voucher in the midst of suffering, sin, and evil. To that end, this article illuminates a divine effort toward human reconciliation with God in righteousness and resurrection, despite our gaps in explaining suffering, sin, and evil. It identifies current reconciliation with God and resurrection by God that do not fully explain suffering, sin, and evil, but can be a voucher now in human experience and life for eventual eschatological reparations promised by God. If the Spirit of God can be such a voucher, so also can the reconciliation and resurrection now empowered by that Spirit. This article recognizes a special role for the divine 'fruit of the Spirit' identified by Paul. It also explains how this role figures in spiritual resurrection with Christ now, in advance of any resurrection of the body. The article contends that the spiritual resurrection in question emerges through reconciliation with God now in volitional cooperation with God's unique moral personality traits.

Keywords: divine promise; divine voucher; reconciliation; resurrection; righteousness

1. Alienation from God

Whatever sin is, it often includes human alienation, or estrangement, from God. Such alienation leaves people at odds with trust and cooperation to some extent toward God, including God's expressed will, personality traits, or moral power. Using the term 'God' as a perfectionist title, we may say that God is perfectly good and worthy of worship if God exists. Alienation from this God entails failing to have trust or cooperation to some extent, in attitude or action, toward the perfect goodness characteristic of God. The Pauline Epistle to the Ephesians thus remarks on people who are 'darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart' (Eph 4:18, NRSVue here and in following translations, unless otherwise noted). A perfectly good God would seek to challenge and to correct such alienation, without extinguishing the responsible voluntary agency of persons.

Paul remarks that ‘just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, so death spread to all because all have sinned’ (Rom 5:12). He thus holds that sin was the entrance for death and the avenue for its spread to all people as a result of all people having sinned. He claims, then, that ‘sin reigns in death’ (Rom 5:21; cf. Rom 3:23, 6:21). He suggests that a resolution for human sin can be a resolution for human death too. We shall pursue this option by connecting reconciliation to God with resurrection from death by God. This connection merits attention from theologians and philosophers of religion.

We should not limit human sin or alienation in relation to God to individual actions of disobedience. Deep-seated human attitudes toward God loom large here. Paul thus states: ‘Whatever does not proceed from faith [in God] is sin’ (Rom 14:23). If this generalization fails to convince, we may introduce the following standard: Whatever does not proceed from faith in God indicates alienation from God. Failure to trust in God, we may assume, emerges from alienation from God in the general sense we have indicated. Such alienation includes a deficit in volitional fellowship, or *koinōnia*, with God and, as a result, a breach of moral-character harmony with God. Alienation from God thus involves moral disharmony with God and thus estrangement from God, at least to some extent. Even so, we have no easy response that overcomes human mistrust or alienation towards God.

We must ask how humans are to overcome death and alienation toward God. Paul offers ‘the gospel’ of God and Christ as the solution.

2. Gospel of reconciliation

Paul announces: ‘I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is God’s saving power for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith’ (Rom 1:16–17). Talk of ‘God’s saving power’ raises three initial questions. Saved to what? Saved from what? How is it ‘saving’? Paul holds that via the gospel people are saved to a life in God’s righteousness by faith in God and are thereby saved from the irreversible power of sin and death. Its manner of saving includes attracting people to repentance, as their turning cooperatively to righteous life with God, in the presence of divine goodness. Paul thus asks: ‘Do you not realize that God’s goodness is meant to lead you to repentance?’ (Rom 2:4, NKJV). His question assumes that humans have a voluntary role in the process of being saved by God through the divine power of reconciliation.

Paul holds that people are saved by the ‘life’ of Christ as God’s Son (Rom 5:10), adding ‘through whom we have now received reconciliation’ (Rom 5:11). He thus thinks of the life of Christ to include this vital fact: ‘In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us’ (2 Cor 5:19). Indeed, Paul takes this consideration to sum up his ministry, including his gospel, or ‘message of reconciliation’: ‘All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation’ (2 Cor 5:18).

Paul’s story of being ‘saved’ is grounded ultimately not in mere talk but in moral power unique to God: the power of divine righteousness that can attract people to cooperate with their reconciliation to God and thus with the good news of God for their salvation. This salvation depends on such human cooperation with God; it thus does

not coerce human wills as if humans were mere pawns of God. God reconciles humans to God, with their cooperation, through the attracting power of divine righteousness. Paul thus speaks of humans 'receiving' the gift of righteousness (Rom 5:17), and he speaks of divine grace for salvation 'reigning through righteousness' (Rom 5:21).

Divine-human reconciliation in righteousness has two levels relative to voluntary human contributions: an external level and an internal level. The external level is solely God's work, through the death of Christ, with no reliance on mere human cooperation. Paul thus remarks that 'if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life' (Rom 5:10). At this external level, God works against powers of death that kill people, showing that God is not vanquished by such powers. This level shows that humans do not reconcile themselves to God. God is the ultimate source of divine-human reconciliation.

The internal level of reconciliation, in contrast with the external, is suggested with an imperative and connected with righteousness in humans: 'We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God. For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor 5:20–21; cf. Rom 8:4). So, we should ask how we humans 'in him might become the righteousness of God'. Paul holds that we humans have a voluntary role here, in this internal level, and we need to clarify it.

Paul suggests that humans can be 'made righteous' through Christ as the second Adam who succeeded with God where the first Adam failed: 'Just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so through the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous' (Rom 5:18–19). Our question thus concerns how through Christ's obedience many humans 'will be made righteous.'

Paul answers: 'Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand (Rom 5:1–2). The obedient life-giving Christ, according to Paul, gives us 'access to this grace' from God who credits our faith in God as righteousness (see Rom 5:15–19). The access from the obedient life-giving Christ saves God from any charge of trivializing righteousness or condoning human unrighteousness. If we are in Christ by faith in God, we have Christ as our representative for obedience for divine righteousness. Our faith in God, then, gives us a basis for credited righteousness in the righteous obedience of Christ, thereby enabling God's self-vindication in Christ for our sake.

Paul develops his understanding of credited righteousness in connection with God's promise to Abraham to bless all the families of the earth through him (Gen 12:3). It includes: 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness' (Rom 4:3). The divine purpose runs as follows: 'The promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith', in order to include Gentiles as well as Jews in the people of God (Rom 4:14, 16; 9:8–9). God's righteousness would be deficient if it were limited to one ethnic group.

Paul holds that God is the God of all people as a group, not of the Jews only (Rom 3:29). In that role, God works by promise of redemption to be fulfilled in the future, and

not immediately. As a result, God's vindication now comes not from fulfillment of the promise now or a full theodicy now, but from a voucher, in current human reconciliation with God, for its coming fulfillment.¹ We now need to relate resurrection to this divine project of righteous reconciliation available to all people of the earth, present and future.

3. Resurrection to life with God

In connection with Abraham's faith, Paul recognizes God's power of resurrection at work: 'As it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations", in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist' (Rom 4:17). He adds: '[Righteousness] will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over for our trespasses and was raised for our justification [or vindication; δικαίωσις]' (Rom 4:24–25). Paul claims that the God trusted by Abraham is the God who raised Jesus from the dead, even though Abraham was unaware of the eventual raising of Jesus by God.

Paul's ideas of 'giving life to the dead' and 'raising Jesus our Lord from the dead' are ideas of divine resurrection. As with divine reconciliation, we need a distinction between external and internal levels for divine resurrection relative to voluntary human contributions. This distinction corresponds, by way of contrast, to a difference between bodily death and spiritual death. Bodily resurrection by God assumes no voluntary human contribution. Paul remarks: 'If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you' (Rom 8:11). Paul does not offer an imperative to humans for the realization of such future bodily resurrection, because they do not contribute voluntarily to it. The causal power is fully God's at this external level of mere bodily resurrection.

An internal level for resurrection calls for imperatives for humans and thus for a voluntary human contribution to the process. Three of Paul's remarks are noteworthy. First, he remarks: 'We were buried with [Christ] by baptism into death, so that, just as [ὡσπερ] Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life' (Rom 6:4). The resurrection life of Christ, according to Paul, is the model for (is 'just as') the newness of life found among his followers. Second, Paul adds: 'The death [Christ] died, he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus' (Rom 6:10–11). Note the suggested imperative to reckon yourselves alive to God in Christ. Third, Paul offers a similar imperative to the Christians at Rome: 'Present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness' (Rom 6:13).

Paul assumes that followers of Christ 'have been brought from death to life' after the model of Christ's resurrection by God. C.E.B. Cranfield thus remarks: '[Paul's] words "as alive from the dead" underline the fact that it is a resurrection that is in mind and made it abundantly clear that Paul does think that the people he is addressing

¹On the limits of full theodicy now, see Paul K. Moser, *God in Moral Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), chap. 7.

have already been raised from the dead in some sense'.² Cranfield goes further: 'In view of [Romans 6:11,13], I cannot accept the contention (though it is quite often stated very confidently) that there is a substantial disagreement between this passage and Col 3:1'.³ The latter verse offers this injunction: 'If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God'.

At the internal level of resurrection, Paul assumes a voluntary human contribution, given his imperatives: for instance, to present yourselves to God in a manner fitting to 'instruments of righteousness'. This level differs from mere bodily resurrection; it depends on an interpersonal relationship between a human and God directed toward receiving and cooperating with divine goodness as righteousness. This goodness, according to Paul, comes courtesy of God's Spirit relating uncoercively to people, a Spirit who can be grieved and frustrated by humans (1 Thess 5:19; cf. Eph 4:30).

In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul highlights the working of God's Spirit at an internal as well as an external level relative to a voluntary human contribution. He notes that God's Spirit has set Christ's followers 'free from the law of sin and of death' (Rom 8:2). Such freedom calls for a voluntary human contribution. Paul thus remarks that 'those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace' (Rom 8:5, 6). He is speaking of the Spirit involved in the resurrection of Jesus: 'the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you' (Rom 8:11).

The Spirit in question empowers resurrection life at an internal level when humans cooperate as God's children with that Spirit's life-giving power on offer: 'If by the Spirit you put to death the [unrighteous] deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God' (Rom 8:13–14). Paul has in mind being adopted as God's children and thus as joint heirs with Christ: 'For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!", it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs: heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if we in fact suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him' (Rom 8:15–17).

Being glorified with Christ includes being raised from the dead with him, at least in the internal manner indicated previously from chapter 6 of Romans, and this process begins now. Paul endorses the sharing of divine glory now by people who 'turn to the Lord': 'All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit' (2 Cor 3:18). The Lord here is the risen Lord, who has taken on divine glory by overcoming death.

The key role of resurrection in the faith of Abraham and of followers of Christ has, in Paul's thought, a basis in the primary fruit of God's Spirit: self-giving love:

Who is to condemn? It is Christ who died, or rather, who was raised, who is also at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness

²C.E.B. Cranfield, 'Rom 6:1-14 Revisited', *Expository Times*, 106 (1994), 41.

³Cranfield, 'Rom 6:1-14 Revisited', p. 41.

or peril or sword?.. No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:34–35, 37–39)

Paul means love ‘from’ God and Christ. The resurrection of Christ enables him to be alive and active for presenting the lasting, enduring ‘love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord’. God appoints Christ to manifest divine perfect love in order to attract and empower the people of God, including the people blessed through Abraham, even if unaware of Christ’s role.

The primary fruit of God’s Spirit, according to Paul, is divine love (Gal 5:22, Rom 5:5), and this love endures lastingly (Rom 8:37–39, 1 Cor 13:8). As a result, Christ as its perfect bearer must endure similarly, to represent and support such love effectively for humans. So, if Christ dies, he must be raised to carry out God’s purpose with divine love. In addition, if typical humans are to enjoy and share the fullness of lasting divine love, they too must endure similarly. So, if, like Christ, they die, they likewise must be raised to live in the fullness of enduring divine love. God’s love, then, is not intended to be short term. So, any threat to its recipients being enduring must be overcome with resurrection. Paul thus notes: ‘To this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living’ (Rom 14:9).

External resurrection is not adequate for divine purposes. The fullness of lasting divine love has an internal, interpersonal feature. So, people must have the opportunity to cooperate with such love even if they are subject to death. As a result, at least internal resurrection is central to the divine proliferation of lasting self-giving love. In addition, if bodily interaction figures in the fullness of divine love for people, external resurrection has a role too.

4. Internal resurrection through reconciliation

We have suggested that volitional cooperation with God in righteous love brings internal resurrection-life, owing to sharing in the enduring moral character of God in the risen Christ. According to Schuyler Brown:

The presentistic aspect of the resurrection (akin to “the internal level” noted) is what we mean by reconciliation, and it is the task of theology to show how our present reconciliation with God in Christ is truly an aspect of Christ’s death and resurrection and not merely a consequence of an objectified redemptive act that would belong exclusively to the past.⁴

Our previous considerations support such an internal level in resurrection. This level includes reconciliation as volitional cooperation with God in divine righteous love that lasts.

Paul relates the divine resurrection of humans to righteousness in reconciled life with God. He mentions ‘those who have been brought from death to life’, and urges

⁴Schuyler Brown, ‘The Resurrection of Jesus in the Life of the Christian’, *Worship*, 45 (1971), 527.

them, as a result, to contribute to God's righteousness in human life (Rom 6:13). He then adds: 'For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace' (Rom 6:14). The power of divine righteousness in God's grace, with human cooperation, undermines the power of unrighteousness in sin. We have noted Paul's talk of 'grace reigning through righteousness' (Rom 5:21).

The Pauline Epistle to the Colossians relates the grace of the gospel to bearing fruit: 'Just as [the gospel] is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God' (Col 1:6). The gospel's 'bearing fruit' is the bearing of the fruit of God's Spirit (cf. Rom 5:5), what Paul calls 'the fruit of righteousness' (Phil 1:9–11), and this result depends on human cooperation in 'the obedience of faith' (Rom 1:5, 16:26). It thus depends on the internal level of resurrection with a voluntary human contribution.

The Epistle to the Colossians traces our previously noted path from human alienation to reconciliation in righteousness through resurrection:

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel (Col 1:21–23, NIV).

The hope in question is based not just on external reconciliation in the death of Christ but also on internal reconciliation and resurrection from the risen Christ in the lives of his followers: 'God chose to make known how great among the gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory' (Col 1:27).

In Paul's perspective, internal reconciliation needs the risen Christ, because the risen Christ guides and empowers such reconciliation. Paul thus writes to the Galatian Christians: 'I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you' (Gal 4:19). He has in mind the risen Christ. This remark fits with his comment on his own internal relation to Christ: 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal 2:20, RSV; cf. Rom 8:10). Paul has the risen Christ and internal reconciliation in mind, given the key role for his faith in Christ. This relation includes not just a divine action in Christ, but also a human response of cooperative faith in the risen Christ.

The resurrection of Christ is crucial, in Paul's thought, because faith in Christ has no suitable present object without the risen Christ. Christ's being alive and active gives substance to the resurrection faith and the internal reconciliation central to Paul's gospel. Paul relates the death and the resurrection of Christ to present human life: 'We are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised' (2 Cor 5:14–15, RSV). This view extends the risen Christ from his past resurrection to the current lives of those who 'live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake ... was raised'. Their living 'no longer for themselves' fits with internal reconciliation and resurrection.

5. Knowing Christ from New Creation

Our approach to reconciliation in righteousness and resurrection calls for comment on its opportunity to be known, rather than merely imagined. The relevant knowledge must find a basis in the God involved in the suggested reconciliation and resurrection. Paul comments:

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we no longer know him in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Cor 5:16–18)

Paul contrasts two perspectives: knowing from a ‘human’ (literally, ‘according to flesh’) point of view and knowing from a point of view of ‘new creation’. The latter point of view emerges on the heels of Paul’s endorsement of living for the risen Christ (2 Cor 5:15), and it is followed by his advancing the purpose ‘that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Cor 5:21). So, Paul has in mind knowing from the perspective of sharing in Christ’s risen life of righteousness with God, in advance of our bodily resurrection.

Paul’s knowing the risen Christ is a top priority for him:

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Phil 3:8–11)

Paul thus relates knowing Christ and knowing ‘the power of his resurrection’, with the goal that he ‘may attain the resurrection from the dead’. This goal includes Paul’s being ‘found in him [Christ], not having a righteousness of my own ... but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith’. Paul means being found in the risen Christ, and this status includes voluntarily receiving divine righteousness through faith in Christ. We need to clarify the role of such righteousness in knowing God in the risen Christ, as a counter to alienation from God and a means to reconciliation with God.

6. Faith and fear and in knowing God

Obstacles to human faith in God and knowing God arise from fearing and forsaking God in certain ways. Perhaps some people fear and forsake God without knowing that they do. The role of fearing and forsaking God, in any case, looms large in some Biblical portraits of humans who improperly relate to God, knowingly or unknowingly. We should

approach knowing God and alienation from God with a distinction between human fear that *honors* God and human fear that *dishonors* God.

Fear that dishonors God distrusts God's goodness, considering it unsafe or harmful for humans. In contrast, fear that honors God trusts God's goodness to be valuable for humans. This distinction enables us to introduce a neglected perspective on God's *showing* divine worthiness of human fear that honors God. Such showing also supports the divine worthiness not to be forsaken by humans. Our distinction between two kinds of fear, in addition, will enable us to illuminate human alienation from God and human reconciliation with God in righteousness. Knowing God in internal reconciliation, we shall see, counters alienation from God.

We shall consider some cases of fear relating to God that are good and some other cases that are bad. One lesson is that God uses both kinds of fear to show something important about God and humans: (a) the worthiness of God as Lord who is not to be forsaken and (b) the need of humans to be transformed morally to become trustworthy witnesses to divine righteousness.

The book of Jeremiah, acknowledging that not all fear is good, represents God to command Israel not to fear: 'As for you, have no fear, my servant Jacob, says the Lord, and do not be dismayed, O Israel, for I am going to save you from far away and your offspring from the land of their captivity' (Jer 30:10; cf. Jer 46:27, Lam 3:55-57). This injunction not to fear contrasts with the following announcement of Jeremiah:

They do not say in their hearts, 'Let us fear the Lord our God, who gives the rain in its season, the autumn rain and the spring rain, and keeps for us'. (Jer 5:24)

The contrast is between fear that honors God, and thus is to be maintained by humans, and fear that dishonors God by distrusting God, and thus is to be avoided by humans.

The relevant dishonoring and distrusting of God emerge in chapter 3 of Genesis. Adam and Eve assume that God is withholding some good wisdom from them ('desired to make one wise'), in connection with the prohibition on eating from the tree in the middle of the garden (Gen 3:6). They thus give in to harmful fear and distrust of God. They do not deem God to be safe or trustworthy for their well-being; instead, they think of God as neglecting them in some way. There is, then, no incompatibility between Jeremiah's previous remarks on fear and God; they involve two different kinds of fear. The two kinds share a felt uneasiness of caution with regard to God. They thus both qualify as fear, but only fear with human trust of God honors God. Adam and Eve failed by the standard of fear with trust toward God.

Jeremiah identifies God's corrective response to misplaced trust held by the people of God: 'The Lord has rejected those in whom you trust, and you will not prosper through them' (Jer 2:37). So, God does not promote human trust in unworthy alternatives to God. In fact, God opposes such trust, for the sake of human improvement in life. As noted above, Jeremiah also places the responsibility for the problem on wayward humans: 'You [have] brought this [destruction] upon yourself by forsaking the Lord' (Jer 2:17). God, then, does not start with an intention to bring destruction on humans, apart from their chosen distrusting and dishonoring God.

Fear that dishonors God with distrust of God interferes with human knowing of God, at least because it prompts human forsaking of God. Such forsaking arises as neglecting, abandoning, or forgetting God in a way that harms a constructive, cooperative,

and reconciled relationship with God. Jeremiah's concern about forsaking God has an antecedent in the book of Hosea:

It was I who fed you in the wilderness, in the land of drought.
When I fed them, they were satisfied; they were satisfied, and their heart was proud; therefore they forgot me. (Hosea 13:5–6)

The 'proud' heart in question stems from human contentment without due honoring of God for it. It forgets God and God's merciful goodness in a way that forsakes God and impedes knowing God.

Our refusing to forget and forsake God would honor God in a way that contributes to a cooperative, reconciled relationship with God. As Moses announced to Joshua, God promises not to forsake the people of God: 'It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed' (Deut 31:8). Even so, people can rebuff God, as Paul illustrates with those who 'did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless hearts were darkened' (Rom 1:21; see 2:23 on 'dishonoring God'). Failure to honor God thus can bear on our thinking and being illuminated regarding God, including our knowing God.

7. Knowing God in righteousness

Jeremiah identifies an important relation between knowing God and human boasting:

Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom; do not let the mighty boast in their might; do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord. (Jer 9:23–24)

The boasting here involves trusting, and the divine command is to boast and trust in the Lord, rather than in things at odds with the Lord and his moral character of 'love, justice, and righteousness'.

We find here a close connection between 'understand and know me, that I am the Lord' and the Lord's pronouncement that 'I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth'. This connection is assumed in Jeremiah's reference to God as 'Lord of hosts, who judge righteously, who try the heart and the mind' (Jer 11:20). Jeremiah adds: 'I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings' (Jer 17:10). The Lord's test is for righteousness in humans, the kind of 'righteousness in the earth' shown by the Lord.

The challenge from Jeremiah to understand and know the Lord calls for attentive listening to the Lord. We thus face this question in Jeremiah: 'Who has stood in the council of the Lord so as to see and to hear his word?' (Jer 23:18). This question is about attentive receiving from the Lord for the sake of understanding and knowing the Lord. Apart from such receiving, humans are at risk of counterfeit knowledge of God, given their lack of familiarity with the divine righteousness central to knowing God.

Jeremiah's recommended knowing of God is founded on God's acting with steadfast love and righteousness 'in the earth', including in human experience. So, regarding the ground for our knowing God, we should look to God's acting with righteous love in our experience. This ground saves knowing and trusting God from being just wishful thinking or a leap in the dark. It gives such knowing a trustworthy foundation in God's distinctive self-intervention and self-authentication with unique love in human experience.

The relevant knowing of the Lord, as Jeremiah suggests, is 'know[ing] me, that I am the Lord'. It thus is *lordship knowledge* whereby a human yields to the authority of God in God's morally good will of righteous love manifested in human experience. Jeremiah represents the moral dimension of righteousness in knowing God:

Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness?
Then it was well with him.
He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord. (Jer 22:15–16)

Such knowing is not speculative or merely theoretical. It responds to God's self-manifested righteousness by 'do[ing] justice and righteousness' and supporting 'the cause of the poor and needy'. So, it is knowledge responsive to, and interactive with, God's distinctive righteousness expressed in human experience. God self-manifests first, with righteousness to humans, and then they are expected to respond cooperatively, with a kind of reciprocity in righteousness toward God. In this regard, human knowledge of God is interpersonally interactive, and not static or purely intellectual.

Humans do not get the relevant knowledge of God from a self-help program. They need special support, according to Jeremiah, for proper responsiveness to God, and God offers this support. God's central role arises as follows: 'I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord, and they will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with their whole heart' (Jer 24:7). In the same vein, 'I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me for all time, for their own good and the good of their children after them' (Jer 32:39). The relevant fear trusts and honors God, rather than distrusts, dishonors, or forsakes God. It is fear favorable to God in response to divine righteousness.

The 'heart to know that I am the Lord' is not a mechanical or coerced instrument. It is interpersonal with an interactive voluntary relationship between a human and God. It arises from human responsiveness to God's self-manifestation of righteous love in human experience. This responsiveness is interactive and cooperative in receiving the promised 'heart', best understood as including a sustained volitional attitude that cooperates in response to God. It thus is not a result of divine fiat or coercion.

Horace Bushnell remarks: 'God circles around the will, doing it respect by laying no force upon it, and only raising appeals to it by what he puts in the mind, the conscience, the memory, the sense of want, the fears excited, the aspirations kindled'.⁵ Even with divine nudging of the will by moral appeal in conscience, God does not

⁵Horace Bushnell, 'The Gentleness of God', in *Sermons on Christ and his Salvation* (New York: Scribner, 1877), p. 36.

coerce a favorable human response. In this regard, God preserves personal voluntary agency for humans. Human responsibility before God, then, is a live option.

Jeremiah represents a central role for divine merciful forgiveness in providing a new heart and in knowing God:

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, “Know the Lord”, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more (Jer 31:33–34; cf. Jer 33:8).

In cooperative response to the offer of divine forgiveness, humans can receive a new heart that honors God’s righteous ways summarized in the law of God. Such a response turns away from anti-God human ways to the righteous love of God that offers forgiveness and moral renewal, with a ‘new heart’ for all cooperative respondents.

8. Responsive repentance for renewal

Paul amplifies the message of Jeremiah in the wake of Jesus. He highlights the importance of suitable human interaction with God in relation to divine intervention in human experience. Writing to the Roman Christians, as noted, he asks: ‘Do you despise the riches of [God’s] goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?’ (Rom 2:4, NKJV). In Paul’s perspective, God self-manifests divine goodness in human experience in order to lead people to turn to God in repentance enabling moral renewal. In doing so, God shows God’s worthiness of trust and aims to show repentant humans’ worthiness of representing God in righteousness.

Turning in repentance is a cooperative human response to God that enables people to receive divine power in righteous love, including divine forgiveness. Paul takes this ‘turning’ in response to God’s goodness to include, as suggested, ‘seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror’, whereby people ‘are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another’ (2 Cor 3:16, 18). Paul has in mind human character-transformation toward reconciliation with God’s righteous character, courtesy of God’s empowering Spirit through the risen Lord.

Paul understands the desired character-transformation to include receiving the mind, or spirit, of Christ (equivalent to the new ‘heart’ promised in Jeremiah). He writes to the Christians at Philippi:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped,... and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Phil 2:5–6)

Paul thus suggests that we let the mind of Christ be in us, as our moral guide, through our faithful obedience to God. As a result of such cooperation, Paul says: ‘We have the

mind of Christ' (1 Cor 2:16), that is, is the unique spirit of Christ, which Paul takes to be equivalent to the spirit of God (Rom 8:9–10).⁶

The obedience in question recalls the cooperative, faithful response of Jesus to God in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36). It is what Paul calls 'the obedience of faith' (Rom 1:5, 16:26), and it includes the kind of fear of God that honors God with trust in God (Rom 3:21–22, 4:2–5). *Earning* God's favor is not a live option, given human moral weakness and the priority of divine grace as a gift to humans. So, God calls for human cooperation in faith as a basis for crediting divine righteousness to humans and for their receiving divine power in righteousness (Rom 4:5).

The desired cooperation enables humans to be reconciled to God, at least more deeply, even given prior justification by God. Paul, we have noted, calls for such reconciliation as the center of his message (or gospel) and ministry (2 Cor 5:19–21). The divine goal is for humans to share in and manifest the righteousness of God, thereby vindicating God's righteous character among humans (cf. Ezek 36:23).

Paul takes the righteous love from God to be expressed in the divine self-manifestation that he calls 'the fruit of the Spirit' of God: 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control' (Gal 5:22–23; also called 'the fruit of righteousness', Phil 1:9–11). This fruit, when manifested, shows God's moral character directly to humans. It exhibits the moral personality-traits of God in human experience, if humans do not interfere.⁷

The Epistle to the Colossians relates human welcoming of the fruit of the Spirit to putting on a new self or heart from God:

You have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.... Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive (Col 3:9–10, 12–13).

We thus have an important voluntary role in receiving a new self or heart from God. This process is not a divine fiat. Instead, it assumes human welcoming of the fruit of the Spirit as the way to 'clothing yourselves with the new self' from God. The promise of the new 'heart' from God in Jeremiah, then, finds its fulfillment in human appropriating of the fruit of God's Spirit. God thereby shows God's worthiness of human trust in supplying such goodness to humans in need of it.

If asked, 'Where is God?', Paul would point to the fruit of the Spirit manifested in receptive human experience. This approach is widely neglected among theologians and philosophers, but it lies at the heart of Paul's perspective on knowing God in righteous reconciliation with God. Such knowing is not mere factual knowledge that God exists. Instead, it is interpersonal knowing as participating in the divine righteousness of God's moral character offered to humans. Given its interactive character, Paul speaks of it as 'being known by God' (Gal 4:9, cf. 1 Cor 8:3). He also thinks of it as 'being led' by

⁶On this topic, see Paul K. Moser, 'We Have the Mind of Christ', *Philosophia Christi*, 25 (2023), 261–80. See also Moser, *God on Trial* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2025, forthcoming), chap. 2.

⁷See Moser, *God in Moral Experience*, chap. 2. See also Moser, *God on Trial*, chaps. 1, 3.

God toward divine righteousness in interpersonal relationship under divine lordship (Rom 8:14, Gal 5:18).

Humans do not share a uniform response to (the issue of) the reality of divine goodness in their experience. Some people disavow the reality of such goodness in their experience, and some people have no regret for its absence. Our challenge becomes looking aright for divine goodness in our experience and life. A key question is: Where should we look for it, or in what features? Here we need to recall God's moral personality-traits in the fruit of the Spirit. God's goodness is found in those traits expressed in our experience, with righteous love as the top trait that includes merciful forgiveness.

Divine goodness has an intentional feature, probing us for a cooperative response, often via conscience. In being intentional, it represents an intentional, or purposive, agent, and not just an abstract principle. The psalmist thus remarks that goodness and mercy 'follow' him throughout his life (Psalm 23:6), and he means 'intentionally follow'. The personal agent in question can bring righteous life, even resurrection life, to cooperative humans in need, in the way a law cannot (Gal 3:21, Rom 8:3). Paul thus says that he died to the law in order to live to God (Gal 2:19). The difference is in the intentional power of a righteous God of self-giving love who raises the dead.

Knowing God in righteousness, as suggested by Jeremiah and Paul, requires sharing in a life of righteous love. So, such knowing cannot be divorced from living in righteous love. We are avoiding, and not seeking, the basis of such knowing if we fail to look for righteous love in our experience and lives. If we look for dominating power that omits such love, we are not looking for indications of God's reality and goodness. We are looking instead for a counterfeit.

The Pauline Epistle to the Ephesian offers a prayer that grounds faith in God and knowing God in divine love (the primary fruit of the Spirit), in a manner agreeable to Paul's undisputed letters. The writer prays

that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph 3:17–19).

This prayer appeals to the risen Christ who lives to 'dwell in the hearts' of his followers, thereby grounding their faith in God and their knowing God. His love 'surpasses knowledge' in that it cannot be reduced to propositional knowledge about God. Such love grounds, in actual experience and life, knowing God as people respond cooperatively to that love. It thus grounds faith and hope in God, as well (Rom 5:1–5).

9. Conclusion

Forsaking (rejecting) the fruit of the Spirit is forsaking (rejecting) God even if we do not know this, because it is forsaking God's unique moral character. Welcoming (appreciating) the fruit of the Spirit is welcoming (appreciating) God even if we do not know this. Our response to the manifested fruit of the Spirit thus matters in our relating to God. The relating sought by God includes human reconciliation with God in divine

righteousness, as a counter to human alienation from God. Such reconciliation is at the center of human salvation by God, and its lasting value relies on the resurrection of cooperative humans by God. We saw the value of internal, beyond external, reconciliation and resurrection in human salvation in righteousness. The internal feature assures the cooperative and responsible role of humans relating to God for their salvation. It confirms the interpersonal nature of the process as people respond to the fruit of the Spirit. It is part of a divine voucher and thus evidence, in human experience, for the coming full divine renewal.

Paul thinks of the primary fruit as countering a concern over lack of evidence for divine reality and goodness: 'Hope [in God] does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Rom 5:5). Paul would say the same of faith in God, and he has in mind divine love as evidence for God that removes shame regarding support for faith and hope in God. The remaining question for us is whether we cooperatively value and fear, with due reverence, God's perfect moral character, even given unexplained evil.