

Justification

By Faith

by

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THE CHURCH BOOK ROOM PRESS, LTD.
WINE OFFICE COURT
FLEET STREET, E.C.4

J 187

\$ 1.10

REPRINTED SEPTEMBER, 1983

D. S. FORD PTY. LTD., 44-50 RESERVOIR STREET,
DARLINGHURST, SYDNEY

JUSTIFICATION

JUSTIFICATION is the term applied to the judgment that God declares on a person to the effect that he conforms to His standard.?

In less technical language it may be said to be the expression of God's approval, of God's acceptance of a person. Thus justification must always precede fellowship. It is the act of God which admits a person to stand in His presence as accepted and approved.

When God's justification, His verdict of approval of men is under consideration it is plain that both the standards of God and the true state of man's condition in His eyes are the important factors to be known. A moment's reflection will show that both of these — God's standard and His view of man's natural condition — can only be known truly if God reveals them.

It follows that the doctrine of justification is wholly a doctrine of revelation and we cannot be arrived at it by reflecting on our religious ideas. Men and churches are frequently misled into holding wrong views about justification through, on the one hand, an inadequate conception of God's standards and on the other, too lenient and optimistic a view of man's moral condition as God sees it.

To put it in a word, God's standard is perfection. He is perfect in holiness, in love and in righteousness and He gives His approval only to those who reflect His perfections. His command is simple, "Be thou perfect" (Gen. 17:1; Mt. 5:48), and it is inconceivable that He should set any standard of conduct lower than this, for He is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity. He cannot look on perverseness (Hab. 1:13). The least deviation from perfection evokes His disapproval.?

It is only to those who continuously do all the things written in God's law, that the law promises life (Lev. 18:5; Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12). He that offends in one point becomes altogether guilty (Jas. 2:10). God cannot adjudge righteous, or just, those who are not righteous, even though their fault is small and circumscribed. He who is unrighteous in only one particular belongs to the class of persons deemed unrighteous, many of whom it may well be are more grossly unrighteous than he.

Though God has clearly indicated in revelation that the standard by which He judges is perfection and though indeed it is not possible to conceive of imperfection standing in His presence as approved, or finding any place in Heaven, an inadequate apprehension of these facts often

leads the man in the pew to imagine that he will be accepted by God because he is not as grossly unrighteous as some of his fellows. He is conscious that he has tried to do his best and to lead a decent life; but he is forgetful that it is no more possible for God to accept him on these grounds than it is for an engineer to accept a faulty casting on the grounds that it has less flaws than some other rejects. It must be flawless to be accepted.

Just as there is a natural tendency in thinking of the judgment that God passes on us, as He views us moment by moment or at the final day, to lower in our minds God's standard of judging to a level to which we think we are able to attain, so there is a natural tendency in all of us to minimize the degree of declination from God's will which is to be found in us. Accordingly, we must investigate not only what God's standard of judgment is as it has been revealed to us in Scripture, but also to examine the true state of our nature as God sees it as this has been revealed to us in His word.

Scripture makes plain that we come very far short of righteousness. It describes our best efforts as polluted (Is. 64 : 6). The uncleanness of man, says the Scripture, is very great and every imagination of the thoughts of his heart is only evil continually (Gen. 6 : 5). "I know," said St. Paul, "that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing" (Rom. 7 : 18), and the apostle described the natural condition of the ordinary man and woman as "walking in the vanity of their minds, being darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their heart; who being past feeling give themselves up to lasciviousness to work all uncleanness with greediness" (Eph. 4 : 17-19. Cf. Titus 3 : 3). Examples could be multiplied, but to be brief, the Scripture steadily testifies to the fact that we are very far gone from God's standard of righteousness. This is not a fact that we could have arrived at from observation. We do not naturally think this to be the case; and we are not likely to accept this description as a fact unless we are willing to recognise Revelation. But it is the plain teaching of the Scriptures. If we are undertaking to consider the subject of justification, that is, the principles on which God judges and approves men, we must submit ourselves to what God has spoken on the fundamental points, or else, disbelieving that there is a sure word from God on the subject, recognise that the matter is beyond us.

It is clear from the Scripture, that God's standard of judgment is higher than we imagine, being nothing less than perfection; and that our true condition in His eyes is worse than we had hoped. It requires little reflection to draw the conclusion that by nature none of us is approved by God, none justified, but that all are under God's condemnation. All are disapproved by God as He looks at us moment by moment. All will be condemned when they stand before Him at

the final day. And this conclusion is irrespective of the moral attainment of any individual. There are real differences of moral behaviour between persons, but they are not of a character to separate them into different categories. University life suggests a simple illustration. In a public examination there is a real difference between a candidate who obtains only 5% and one who obtains 35%; but there is no difference at all from the point of view of passing the exam. They both belong alike to the category of failure. Now the examination which we are considering, namely the test of God's approval, requires for a pass a mark of 100%. It could not be otherwise, and we all come short. The best of us and the worst of us together belong to the class of condemned.

This conclusion is amply supported from the Scriptures, which state "there is none righteous; no, not one . . . They are all turned aside, they are altogether become unprofitable. There is none that doeth good, no, not so much as one . . . There is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3 : 10, 12, 23).

FORGIVENESS IN CHRIST

In this hopeless but true situation, the grace of God shines clearly. For He has provided a way of justification, a way by which sinners may be accepted by Him and approved as perfect. Apart from this way of God's justification there is no other.

God's justification is through Jesus Christ. The initiative lay with God. "God sent forth His Son." The Word became flesh, God became Man, for our sakes and for our salvation.

Jesus Christ was not just one individual among many, but He is representative man and moreover corporate man. The Bible uses many terms to bring out this fact, a fact difficult perhaps to appreciate, but essential to comprehend if we are to understand how it is that in Christ we are justified, or accepted by God as fit to stand in His presence and to be His sons.

The term "Son of Man" which Jesus chose as a self designation is a corporate term, standing in Daniel's vision for "the saints of the most High." (A comparison of the vision (Dan. 7 : 13, 14) with its interpretation (7 : 18, 27) makes this clear.)

Another Old Testament figure with which Jesus identified Himself and which was much in the minds of the first Christians, was Isaiah's Servant of the Lord, who is in the prophet's thought sometimes an individual, sometimes Israel, the people of God (Lk. 22 : 37; Is. 53 : 11; 44 : 21; etc.). Thus it was a term for a community as well as for the individual who is the quintessence of that community.

Again, Jesus described Himself as the true vine, while His disciples are the branches which make up the vine (John 15 : 1, 5-8).

In the Old Testament the vine was a well-known symbol for Israel; Christ is the true vine, the true Israel.

Paul brought out the same point when in speaking of the promise to Abraham and to his seed, he stressed the singular number of the noun, "He saith not, and to seeds, as of many; but as of one, and to thy seed, which is Christ," yet a few verses later the apostle says to the Galatians, "If ye are Christ's, then ye are Abraham's seed, heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3:16, 29). He still retained the word "seed" in the singular, yet applied it to all believers, showing clearly that in God's eyes Christ and His people are one.

St. Paul's terms, "the last Adam," "the second man," bring out the same truth that Christ is the corporate head of those who are created new men in Him. The image of the body, of which Christ is the head and believers the various organs, further underlines the corporate unity of Christ and those who are saved in Him.

Thus it comes about that what Christ did during His life on earth, He did not for Himself alone but as the representative and corporate Head of all those who are "in Him." His work for man may be looked at from two points of view. He lived the perfect life. Alone of all mankind His life was flawless, a life of perfect obedience, trust and love. Moment by moment, as God's eye rested on that perfect life, it evoked the judgment, "My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Christ is justified by the perfection of His life. God gives to Him the verdict of whole-hearted approval. Alone of mankind He stands in heaven by right, having fulfilled the conditions to which God had attached the reward of life. Christ stands before God, approved, crowned, exalted. We who are Christ's stand in God's presence covered with the robe of Christ's merits. We have put on Christ, says the Apostle (Gal. 3:27). We are "in Christ." As God has raised Christ from the dead and exalted Him to the highest throne of heaven, crowning His perfect righteousness, so we who are in Him are made to sit with Him in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6), for He is our righteousness, the sole means of our justification (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21).

Although Christ is perfect before God, it is as the representative, not primarily of perfect humanity but of forgiven humanity, that Christ is in heaven. It is justification through forgiveness in Christ on which the emphasis in the Bible falls. It was the gospel of the remission of sins which our Lord on His resurrection commissioned His church to proclaim (Lk. 24:47). The remission of sins was the fundamental benefit St. Peter offered his hearers on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38).

This remission is only through Christ. It is because He has borne our sins in His own body on the tree (1 Peter 2:24) that forgiveness of sins is available. St. Paul's statement that God made Christ to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21) corresponds to the prophecy of Isaiah: "The

Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all . . . It pleased the Lord to bruise Him . . . My righteous servant shall make many righteous and he shall bear their iniquities . . . He bare the sin of many" (Is. 53:6-12).

Because of the death of Christ, God forgives sins. This is very clear in the Scripture. The forgiveness of God is complete in its effect. From the point of view of His judgment of justification, His decision of approval or disapproval, the sin does not exist in His mind. He does not see it nor take note of it. Scripture has many ways of expressing this glorious and crucial truth. It states that God does not remember our sins any more (Jer. 31:34; Ezek. 33:16). He has forgotten them. He does not reckon them as our sins (Ps. 32:1; Rom. 4:8); He covers them out of His sight (Ps. 85:2; 32:1); He washes them away as in a fountain (Zech. 13:1); He blots them out as a thick cloud so that He can no longer see them (Is. 44:22); He casts them behind His back (Is. 38:17); He drowns them in the depths of the sea (Mic. 7:19). He puts them as far away from us as the east is from the west (Ps. 103:12).

These many phrases and images testify to the same fact that the forgiven man stands in God's sight without a blemish. No bar then exists to full approval and fellowship; in God's eyes he is perfectly righteous, and thus the sinner is justified from the moment that the forgiveness of Christ extends to him. In Christ God accepts him, adopts him as His son, seals him with the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the witness to our justification; "because ye are sons, God sent forth the Spirit of his son into our hearts" (Gal. 4:6). The gift of the Spirit is not to be thought of as the instrument of justification, as though our justification were the result of a union with Christ by the indwelling of the Spirit. Rather, the presence of the Holy Spirit of God in our hearts is the seal of our acceptance, for God's Spirit cannot indwell those on whom God's disapproval rests.

The provision of justification in Christ is complete and perfect. Christ has suffered the penalty which God must inflict on sinners, whose sins Christ bore, and we are forgiven in Him. Christ has rendered that perfect obedience which is the condition of life. Not as an isolated individual but as the head and representative of His brethren, He is seated at God's right hand crowned with glory and honour, justified, approved, accepted and exalted. And we reign there in Him.

We cannot completely understand how God reckons us one with Christ; but we have the plain testimony of Scripture that He does do so, and we have the testimony in our hearts that He has done so when we receive the Holy Spirit.

This justification in Christ is the provision of God entirely. It is God who sent forth His Son to redeem us. It was according to His plan. "Whom He foreknew, He also foreordained . . . and whom

He foreordained, them He also called, and whom He called, them He also justified . . . It is God that justifieth . . . ” (Rom. 8 : 29-33).

Reflection on what has already been said makes clear that there is no possibility of acceptance with God apart from being in Christ. Those members of the community at the present time who deliberately set Christ aside in their approach to the Most High do not please God but provoke His wrath by their presumption.

If we seek justification apart from Christ and are found to be outside Him at the last, we will be inevitably condemned by God's most perfect judgment, no matter how excellent our life has been in the estimation of ourselves or of our fellow men.

This conclusion is fully supported in Scripture. Our Lord said, “No man cometh to the Father but by me” (John 14 : 6). “He that obeyeth not the Son shall not see life but the wrath of God abideth on Him” (John 3 : 36). “He that hath not the Son of God hath not life” (I John 5 : 12).

FAITH

The justification which the love of God has provided in Christ is offered to men in the form of promises to be taken hold of by faith. The Scriptures abound with many promises of forgiveness, mercy, acceptance, justification. God's provision is made known to us in these promises, and is made ours by God when we respond to the promises. God conveys His promises to sinners by means of preaching, whether publicly in church or open air, or informally through His people testifying at home or at work. The preaching of the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ is the point of contact between the church and the world. It is the cutting edge for the advance of the Kingdom of God.

The response to the Gospel is described under different terms in the Scriptures. We are invited to come to Jesus. “Come unto me . . . ye shall find rest to your souls ; ” we are invited to drink of Christ the living water, to take the true bread out of heaven which the Father gives and to feed on the life-giving flesh and blood of Christ ; we are invited to open the door in response to the knock of our Lord ; we are invited to be baptised into the name of Christ (Acts 2 : 38) ; we are invited to call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ ; and, most frequently, we are invited to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

From its many synonyms in the New Testament it is easy to see that the response of faith to which we are called by the Gospel is a response of active faith, of self-committing trust, of utter reliance. One of the difficulties in expounding the doctrine of justification by faith is that the word ‘faith’ may also quite properly be used of mere intellectual assent, of belief in the truth of the historicity of the fact, apart from self-

committal to the trustworthiness of the Promiser. Logically, of course, assent to the fact of God's love ought to result in active trust in Him ; but because of sinful fallen nature, an intellectual assent to the truth of such a proposition may never issue in its logical consequence of trust and self-committal. It is all too common for men to acquiesce in the truth of God and yet never to allow this to affect their self-willed lives. This state of affairs is the result of sin. God has promised nothing to such faith. This is the dead faith against which St. James so strongly inveighs. Saving faith is altogether different, being a sure and firm confidence and trust in the goodness of God towards us in Christ, made known to us in His promises to us. It always contains the active element of response. “Coming to Christ” is faith by another name ; so is “calling on the name of the Lord” ; and so are all the other synonyms we have already noted.

It will be seen that saving faith is intensely personal ; it is for ourselves that we believe, acknowledging that the Son of God loved me and gave Himself for me (Gal. 2 : 20) ; that He is *my* Saviour as well as being the Saviour of the world. A faith that speaks merely in general terms and does not include personal trust and self-committal for oneself is in fact self contradictory. For if while we confess Christ to be Saviour and Lord, we are neither trusting in His saving death nor obeying His Lordship for our own lives, our actions show clearly that our faith is false !

It is of capital importance to realise that this personal response of trusting faith in God's provision is the only and all sufficient way of obtaining justification in Christ. God's word is clear : “Believe on the Lord Jesus and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house” (Acts 16 : 31). “Only believe” was Jesus' injunction to the ruler of the synagogue (Mark 5 : 36), and the principle of faith only is emphatically insisted on in the New Testament, especially in the Epistles to Romans and to the Galatians, as the way God has designated for obtaining His justification (e.g. Gal. 2 : 16 ; 3 : 6-8 ; Rom. 3 : 28). When we put our faith in Christ then God saves us. This His word declares and our experience confirms.

It is no arbitrary choice that has made faith the instrument of justification. Trusting faith has always been the principle of true religion. Adam in paradise before the fall lived by faith. He experienced the graciousness of God in that of every tree in the garden he might freely eat. His faith was exercised by the exception, “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou mayest not eat of it : for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die”. The command was clear, the sanction, certain death, was strong ; the Giver of the command was known as a wise and benevolent creator. But on the other hand, the tree was good for food, a delight to the eyes, and to be desired to make one wise. The problem Adam faced was, could God be trusted ? Was His command the best for Adam ? . . . or was it self-interested as the tempter suggested, because God knew that in the day man ate thereof, he would

become a god like Himself ? As we all know, man's faith and trust in God's goodness and provision failed in the test ; Adam decided he must look after his own interests. God could not be trusted. Man fell. But God has not left him, and the same requirement continues. If man is to be in fellowship with God, it must be on the basis of absolute trust in God's provision, not now in His provision of all the fruit of the trees of the garden, but in His provision of justification in Jesus Christ. The faith that justifies is directed to God and His provision in Christ, made known in His word through the promises it contains.

Since God's word makes so clear that all who come will be received and that all who ask will be forgiven, true faith carries within itself assurance of acceptance and justification. There could of course be no assurance if our justification depended partly on our own works and merits. For it would be arrogant and impious presumption to assume in our minds that our efforts were adequate or our merits acceptable with God. But since the Scripture is clear that we are accounted righteous before God only for the merits of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we have a sure basis for assurance of our salvation. We know that His merits are accepted and we know that their benefits are extended to all who ask. Since God says plainly "Ask and ye shall receive," we have only to pray, "God be merciful to me a sinner," to know that we are justified. In view of the many plain statements of Scripture that whosoever believes on the Lord Jesus Christ shall be saved, to doubt our salvation while we believe on Him, is to doubt God's word and is the negation of faith. Thus the fulness of faith carries assurance within it.

From what has been said of the nature of faith, namely that it is reliance on God and His word, it is clear that it is not in the power of sinners and rebels to have this faith for themselves. They cannot create it in themselves, but it is the gift and work of God.

Just as the beginning of faith is the work of God, so too is the fullness of assurance, for it is the Spirit that testifies with our Spirit, that we are children of God (Rom. 8 : 16). Moreover by the growth of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, we may perceive that He is leading us and that we are in very truth the Sons of God (Gal. 5 : 18 ; Rom. 8 : 14).

The fullness of faith not only includes assurance of our present salvation, that God has assuredly received us according to His word "He that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6 : 37) ; but it also includes assurance of our continuing and final salvation, that GOD IS FAITHFUL and will confirm us unto the end (1 Cor. 1 : 8, 9 ; 1 Thess. 5 : 24) ; that He will perfect that good work which He has begun in us (Phil. 1 : 6). It includes the conviction that He is able to keep that which we have committed unto Him against that day (2 Tim. 1 : 12) ; that those whom He has justified He will also glorify (Rom. 8 : 30). This assurance of our final salvation rests, as all faith must rest, in God. It must not for example rest in an impersonal doctrine, such as "once saved, always

saved", nor in the present strength of our Faith. Of ourselves, we have no right to assume that our faith (undoubtedly real though it may be at present), will continue to the end of life. But we dare not doubt the faithfulness of God. Moreover, we, like St. Peter, have the assurance of Christ's prayers. He has prayed for us, that our faith should not fail (John 17 : 9-24). He still prays for us, and on this our assurance rests. "He is able to save completely them that draw near to God through him, seeing he ever lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7 : 25).

Faith and hope are closely related. Hope is the outcome of faith, as the believer takes cognisance of the glorious promises of God to him, which are sure of a fulfilment. There is no uncertainty or dubiety in this hope, for it rests on the clear and unchanging word of God. Hope should characterise the Christian life, cleansing it of dross, energising it with vigour, and nerving it for perseverance as it confidently takes hold of the promises of the future glory (2 Peter 3 : 11-13 ; 1 John 3 : 3).

Faith and love are also very closely linked ; for love springs out of faith. When we perceive that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us, the love of God becomes plain to us (Rom. 5 : 8). When we hear that perishing sinners may have eternal life through God's gift of His Son, the depth of the love of God for the world is borne in on us (John 3 : 16) : when we see Christ laying down His life, we understand the greatness of His love for us whom He has chosen and whom He calls His friends (John 15 : 13-16). Faith perceives and believes the active love of God, and is the response to that self-giving love as it is focussed for us on the ground-glass of His promises. Faith in Him kindles love in our hearts — we love because He first loved us (1 John 4 : 11). A heart that does not love God, does not believe in God ; and a heart that loves is anxious to do His will and to walk in that way which pleases Him. So it comes about that good works issue of necessity from faith. Though works have no part in justification, works must follow justification, for the faith that justifies is a faith that loves to work God's will. The justified sinner cannot continue in sin. A believing heart brings forth good works in the same way as a good tree good fruit. "Make the tree good, and the fruit good". This, too, is the work of the Spirit. When a man is justified his heart is changed, and the Spirit of God dwells in Him ; and where the Spirit is, the fruit of the Spirit is manifest. Thus faith issues in works and a faith without works cannot save (Jas. 2 : 17) for it is no true faith.

Faith is inward and cannot be observed by the outsider, but good works are outward, open and manifest. Thus good works become a test of true faith. "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Mt. 7 : 20), and a man may rightly say to another, "I by my works will show thee my faith" (James 2 : 18). By works is the only way that faith can be shown, whether to God or to man.

What is true of this life is also true of the eternal judgment day. God will on that day judge every man according to his works. At that outward manifestation of God's righteousness, works are the proper criterion of judgment.

Christian faith is not only personal, sure, and loving, but also full of joy. Continuing joy, not merely snatches of joy, should characterise the Christian life, though the note of the song will change with changing circumstances. Joy is an integral part of the fullness of faith, on account of the object to which faith is directed. It is God all-sovereign and almighty on whom we believe. The acknowledgment of the sovereignty and Lordship of Christ is at the centre of faith. "Believe on the Lord Jesus and thou shalt be saved" the Philippian Jailor was instructed (Acts 16 : 31). "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord", St. Paul told the Romans, "and shalt believe in thine heart that God raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved" (Rom. 10 : 9). Such acknowledgment that Jesus is Lord involves not only a life of good works (for disobedience to the acknowledged Lord makes plain the hollowness of the pretended faith), but it also brings us a life of joy. For Jesus Christ is Lord. He is Lord of all (Acts 10 : 36), upholding all things by the word of His power (Heb. 1 : 3). Although circumstances may at times tempt us to disbelieve and to plunge into gloom as though the event which distresses us had broken through that beneficent sovereignty, yet faith soars above circumstance, acknowledging that even the hairs of our head are all numbered, and that not even a sparrow falls to the ground without the will of our heavenly Father who spared not His own Son but delivered Him up for us all. Faith affirms the continuing sovereignty of a gracious and righteous God. Fear is banished, and joy remains in obedience to the command, "Rejoice in the Lord alway" (Phil. 4 : 4).

Patience is an essential element in true faith. The church lives by faith in the promises of God, and faith matures through patience and requires patience for its testing. It is the will of God that by patient endurance we, like Abraham, should inherit the promise (Heb. 6 : 15). The patience of faith confidently awaits the fulfilment of God's promises though this may be delayed, and in so doing it glorifies God, proclaiming that in spite of appearances God is trustworthy.

Tranquil circumstances do not exercise faith. But adversity and manifold temptations deepen it and lead to a fuller experience of God's trustworthiness. Thus the life of the church — and maybe of the Christian also, is marked by sudden reverses of fortune, and by thorns in the flesh which buffet us. The devil is allowed scope for the exercise of his activities, as with Job, that our faith may be tested, to the glory of God. Prayer is the Christians' weapon to overthrow the machinations of the devil; and the manifestation of the devil's activities should be the

stimulus for redoubling our prayer and going forward in faith, for prayer is the expression of faith, and through it God's kingdom advances.

Success, as the world judges it, with crowded churches, full coffers and flourishing organisation, all of which our hearts naturally crave, is not the normal will of God for His church in the present dispensation. The time will come when the church of God will be openly manifested as a glorious church, decked as a bride for her husband. But now we live by faith in the promises of God, and our faith is tested and redounds to the glory of God as we persevere unswervingly in the principles which God has laid down in Scripture, though men speak ill of us and results seem slow.

Although many famous men are today joining in a eulogy of faith, it should be stated clearly that faith is of no virtue in itself, but takes its value entirely from the object to which it is directed. Faith in the true God glorifies Him, but faith directed to other objects besides God is a false, superstitious and idolatrous faith. Men and women are constantly turning aside from the word of God and making their own opinions the object of their faith. Then faith becomes superstition, whether it is the superstition of throwing salt over the shoulder, or of praying to an image, or of invoking a saint, or of going on a pilgrimage, or of trusting in one's own good works and moral life for justification.

Since the Christian life is a daily life of faith, and since faith must cling to the plain promises of God if it is not to degenerate into superstition, the regular reading or hearing of the Scripture is an activity which can never be dispensed with, for only in the Bible have we a sure word from God in which to trust. The godly man will meditate in the Law of the Lord day and night, and shape his life of faith accordingly. Christianity is rightly regarded as a religion of a book, for it is a religion of faith, and only the permanency of the written record gives faith a sure foundation. By the same token, it was necessary that God should give us Scriptures infallible and absolutely trustworthy on all matters which concern Himself. For faith requires for its exercise a firmer and more reliable ground than men's opinions about God, however pious and elevated those sentiments may be. God must tell us of Himself. The belief that God's infallible Word is accessible to us is an *a priori* necessity, if the religion of the Bible, complete trust, is to be a possibility. We must know for sure in what matters we may trust. Christian faith cannot be exercised without certitude. A belief in the full authority of the Bible is essential for the continuance of Christianity, for Christianity is a religion of faith. Mere probability is insufficient for exercise of faith.

The plain word of God that justification comes through faith alone, testified to as it is by Christian experience, is sufficient to establish the truth of that doctrine. Yet reflection will show how eminently suited to our case this method of justification is. Doubtless God could have

ordained other methods than faith by which we might have participated in the benefit of the justification which He provided. But the fact is that He has not. This is clear from His word. We must not attempt to force on God the claims of our own schemes for justification.

Justification by faith and justification by works are seen to be intrinsically incompatible when it is remembered that faith means utter trust and dependence on the dependability of God. If faith is thought of, as many erroneously understand it, as intellectual assent merely, then faith and works together would seem to be an eminently suitable method by which to participate in God's justification in Christ; but when it is remembered that the faith of which we speak is utter and complete reliance on the trustworthiness of God and His Word to us, it will be seen that once reliance on our own works enters in, in however subordinate a place, faith becomes less than faith; in fact it is destroyed at its centre, for the essence of Christian faith is the completeness of its reliance on God.

It is very fitting that sinners should be justified by faith only. For this doctrine focuses attention on the fact that the true position of man is one of complete *dependence* on God. As a result of the Fall mankind tends to believe that it is on an equality with God. We ignore Him when we wish, or treat Him as an equal, laying down what we think He ought to do with regard to our salvation. In spite of the absurdity, we regard ourselves as fellow potters, rather than as the clay under His hand. But for all our imaginings, the truth is that man was created to live moment by moment in complete dependence on God. Justification by faith lights up this truth. Had our own works been nominated as the way of justification, they would have had the effect of obscuring the fundamental truth of our complete dependence on God. But now everything, including our salvation, is clearly seen to be altogether the work of God and His free gift to us. Justification by faith underlines this, requiring us to cast away our pretensions and to come to God humbly, as sinners, conscious of our need and of His gracious provision. In insisting on our coming with nothing but faith in Christ, God has ensured that we come on the basis of reality, where alone He can treat with us, as we acknowledge our complete worthlessness and cast ourselves entirely on His sure mercies.

The doctrine of justification by faith not only brings us to an acknowledgment of our true position before God but it also *reveals the graciousness of God*. It is a doctrine that expresses God's inmost character. God is love, and the knowledge of the righteous love of God lies at the centre of faith. Unless we were assured of that love we would not be able to exercise any faith towards Him. We could not trust with utter dependence one in whom we did not have complete confidence as to His righteous and unswerving benevolence and favour towards us.

The gratuitous and donative character of salvation lights up wonderfully the graciousness and depth of God's love. Salvation is entirely God's provision and is free from beginning to end. Everyone that is thirsty is invited to come and drink, without money and without price (Is. 55 : 1). We are justified freely by His grace. Had works entered in, it would no longer have been of grace. Though any reparation that we could have rendered God to obtain justification would in reality have been insignificant compared to what God had done in our salvation, yet had God nominated our works, instead of faith only, as the means of our justification in Christ, this would have been sufficient to remove from our thoughts the graciousness of God. Our imaginations would have been occupied with our own merits. In requiring only faith in Christ, God's grace and free gift is unobscured.

Faith in God is the truest *form of worship*. If worship is defined as the acknowledgment and honouring of God by His creatures, then the concept of God held by the worshippers will decide the form that their worship takes. Similarly, their worship will reflect their concept of God. For example, the priests of Baal who cut themselves with knives on Mt. Carmel gave public expression to their views of the character of the deity they served. The Christian concept of God is that of a loving heavenly Father. This concept may be expressed in hymns and psalms of praise to God's goodness; but it is more suitably expressed in action than in words, and the action that corresponds to the Christian concept of God as a gracious Redeemer and Father is utter faith and reliance on God's fatherly goodness and saving power as these attributes are focussed for us in His promises. Thus faith is the truest worship, and through faith God is glorified, and His character publicly acknowledged. The eleventh chapter of Hebrews gives many examples of men who by their actions expressed the truth that God was trustworthy and His word so sure that they could build their whole life on it.

It is this worship that God looks for. God is glorified when men call upon Him in the day of trouble; when in the face of adversity they put their confidence and trust in Him, expecting His promises to be fulfilled to them according to His word. Psalm 50 clearly teaches that the worship of trust is the highest worship that can be offered by men. St. Paul cites the example of Abraham who against all appearances believed God's word and "waxed strong in faith, giving glory to God" (Rom. 4 : 20). Abraham's life was a clear indication of what he believed God's character to be, and Abraham was justified by God through this faith.

The whole of our Christian life is a life of faith, and therefore a life of worship through a moment by moment acknowledgment of God's trustworthiness. Our faith in God finds expression in petitional prayer. Thus it was that when our Lord was asked to teach His disciples to pray He gave them a prayer which consists of petitions only; not that adora-

tion and confession and praise have no place in prayer or worship, but the supreme place is filled by faith expressed through petition.

Faith is the distinguishing mark of the whole Christian life ; and consonant with this, justification, the beginning of the Christian life, is by faith. The only proper response that sinners can make to the gracious provision of God and all His " benefits towards us " which He holds out to us for acceptance, is to accept them believing them to be true. " What shall I render unto the Lord ", asks the Psalmist. " I shall take the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord " (Ps. 116 : 12, 13).

GOD'S JUSTIFICATION IS APART FROM LAW

Since it is a widespread conviction that we are justified by works, it may be well to enquire what place Scripture gives to works in justification. The answer is that works have no place there whatever. St. Paul in writing to the Galatians could not be more emphatic on this. The point in dispute between the Apostle and his opponents in that epistle was the ground on which God accepts men and blesses them with salvation. Does God receive us because of the things we do, the life we lead, the way we observe His laws ? This the apostle's opponents were teaching, saying that faith in Christ was not enough for justification ; God's law must also be observed. The Galatians had accepted this teaching, adopted circumcision and were observing days and months and seasons and years. They were not conscious that they had ceased to be Christians by doing so, for they still thought they believed in Christ. But justification by being in Christ and justification by our own merits are as different as oil is from water ; they cannot be mixed. St. Paul piled phrase on phrase to make the matter plain. He said that the Galatians, by their attempt to rest their justification partly on their own merits were severed from Christ (5 : 4) ; they were removed from God (1 : 6) ; they were fallen away from grace (5 : 4) ; they were disobedient to the truth (5 : 7). In their present frame of mind Christ would profit them nothing (5 : 2). The form of doctrine they were embracing made void the grace of God ; were it true, then Christ had died for nothing (2 : 21). It was not the true Gospel, and did not deserve the name of Gospel (1 : 6, 7). Whoever taught it, even though he were an angel from heaven or St. Paul himself, " let him be accursed " (1 : 8).

St. Paul and the Galatians were disputing about the observation of the Mosaic law. That was because the Galatians had come to believe that the Mosaic law was the will of God for His people. St. Paul did not argue that this code was outdated and no longer represented that will, but rather that the seeking of justification by observation of God's will was not the way of salvation of the Gospel of Christ. The same argument applies, no matter what we conceive to be the essence of God's will for

His people. The Judaisers of the first century took this to be the Mosaic code ; the average man today takes it to be the moral law, summed up in the Ten Commandments or the Golden Rule. The ecclesiastically minded person takes it to be the rites and sacraments of the church. Those who believe that justification comes from moral behaviour or from the use of the sacraments are one in doctrine with the Galatians who believed it was obtained through circumcision, for they too are basing their hope of acceptance with God on the fact that they fulfil His will. But there is no way of justification for sinners along this line. No law can make alive those who are dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2 : 1 ; Gal. 3 : 21). They must be quickened by the power of God, a miracle which God performs only in those who put their faith in Christ the Quickener (1 Cor. 15 : 45 ; John 5 : 21, 25).

THE SENSE IN WHICH THE SACRAMENTS JUSTIFY

A question suggests itself that if works have no part in justification, why does the New Testament speak of the sacraments as bringing forgiveness and participation in Christ ? For example, St. Peter stated that baptism saves (1 Peter 3 : 21). By it St. Paul washed away his sins (Acts 22 : 16) ; and the Corinthians are told that by partaking of the Lord's Supper they participate in Christ Himself (1 Cor. 10 : 16).

The answer is that the sacraments are nothing other than faith expressed in action. They are a means of taking hold by faith of the promises of God and so they save.

In Baptism and the Lord's Supper God's provision of forgiveness and spiritual sustenance in Christ is plainly depicted in the actions of the service as well as enunciated in the accompanying words. In these sacraments God holds out for acceptance His promises. They are, in fact, sacraments of the Gospel. By them the Gospel is preached and by them its benefits are appropriated. As faith takes hold of the promises, so God grants to the believer the promised blessing, as He has covenanted to do.

Just as the promises of God are bodied forth in the actions of the sacrament, so too is the response of faith. The worshipper not only believes in his heart but expresses his faith in his actions. By baptism for example, the sinner confesses not only his need of forgiveness, but also his faith that God washes away his sin for Christ's sake, according to His promise.

The worshipper's action in undergoing baptism is an expressed prayer that God would grant Him the forgiveness and the incorporation into Christ which the service symbolises. His prayer of faith is answered, and his sins forgiven. Thus Baptism expresses both the promises of God and the sinner's twofold response, of repentance with the confession of

the need of cleansing, and of faith in the God Who cleanses. That this is the nature of baptism is interestingly brought out by a comparison of St. Peter's reply to the Jerusalem crowd on the day of Pentecost with St. Paul's reply to the Philippian jailor. On both occasions convicted consciences ask the crucial question, what shall we do? In the one case the apostolic reply is, "Repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ," in the other, "Believe on the Lord Jesus" (Acts 2:38:16:31). Baptism and believing are equated, for baptism is the taking hold of God's promises for salvation.

Similarly in the Lord's Supper not only is the Gospel preached by action, but it is appropriated, the believer expressing his faith by his action of taking and eating, and his action in turn strengthening his faith. And God grants the blessing sought and believed in through the sacrament. The soul feeds on Christ, the living Bread.

Thus the sacraments bring blessing because they are the exercise of faith towards God's promises which are exhibited in them. They only bring blessing so long as they are the expression of faith. As the expression of faith, they may properly be said to save, and are so spoken of in the New Testament. But if performed merely as works which God has enjoined, no promise is attached to them. For the performance of good works is not the way of a sinner's justification.

THE PLACE OF LAW

But though it remains true that works have no place in justification and that our degree of fulfilling the law of God is not taken into consideration in the matter of God's accepting and justifying us, yet law has a function to perform both before justification and afterwards.

The law is the expression of God's will for man. It is perfect and it meets with our approval even in our fallen state. Thus it is a mirror by which we see ourselves and by which we condemn ourselves. Our hearts approve the law that it is good; our consciences bear witness to it; and in that we turn from it so frequently, preferring our own way, we are condemned by our own consciences. At the last day, the day of its manifestation, the righteous judgment of God will be approved even by those in hell, when men will acknowledge that they willingly disobeyed God's law all their lives though it had been made known to them and was approved by them.

The revelation of the law of God also serves salvation. It brings sin to the surface of consciousness, in order that men might seek Him who saves from sin. "I had not known coveting," said St. Paul "except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet" (Rom. 7:7). We are so prone to imagine that we attain to God's requirements, that if justification by our own moral efforts is to be shut out of our thoughts, we must see clearly how far short we come of God's standards. The law indeed promises life

to those who keep it; to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and incorruption (Lev. 18:5; Luke 10:28; Gal. 3:12; Rom. 2:7); but in practice our well-doing is so spasmodic, our keeping of the law so partial that the clearer God's law is revealed to us, the more plain it becomes that we have forfeited the promise attached to law-keeping, and are under the curse uttered against law-breakers.

Thus the law fulfils an important preliminary role in the justification of sinners in Christ. By revealing the standards God requires, it shows them their impotence, destroys their confidence in their own abilities to overcome sin and to attain the standard, and sends them in repentance to Christ the sinbearer. It keeps straying feet on the road to the Cross. It is the *paedagogos*, or the attendant guardian slave, to bring the young heir to his true Master, Christ (Gal. 3:24).

In Christ, who has died for law-breakers, we are rescued from the demands and claims which the law makes for our condemnation. And so we are justified in Christ by faith without reference to the degree we have kept the law. But the revelation of the law of God has still an important part to play in the subsequent life of the believer. The law contains within itself the obligation to keep it, for it is known to us as the will of our Creator and its character is approved in our consciences both before and after justification. Man is always under absolute obligation to do God's will, but after justification the believer sincerely desires to do it above everything else. This is the result of the new creation that the Spirit brings about in the believer, taking away his stony heart and writing God's law on his heart (Ez. 36:26; Jer. 31:33). The revelation of the law of God contained in the Scriptures, both in the Old Testament and the New, but especially in the life and teaching of Jesus and in the writings of the Apostles, provides the believer with the knowledge of God's will. By reading it he daily learns with greater truth and certainty what that will of God is that he desires to follow.

Secondly, the law not only provides instruction to the believer but serves to stir up his sluggish will. It is the purpose of God in bringing us to glory to conform us to His perfect pattern more and more day by day. No doubt God could have accomplished this instantaneously, but that has not been His way. God normally works through means that are agreeable with our nature and the means He employs for our sanctification is His law which is a lamp to the feet and a light to the eyes (Ps. 119:105; 19:8). By meditating in it daily, we are stirred up to press on towards the goal, when the ordinance of the law will be fulfilled in us, when we shall be like Him, when we shall be conformed to His image. This is the prize set before us.

But as regards this daily walk, this daily growth in holiness, we must remember it is God who works in us both to will and to do His good pleasure. "We are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God afore prepared that we should walk in them" (Eph.

2 : 10). These good works are the result of the Spirit's indwelling (Gal. 5 : 22) and the Spirit is given to those who ask (Luke 11 : 13). The means whereby the Spirit effects God's purposes of sanctification in us is our meditating on His law and our asking for those virtues (or victory over the corresponding sins, to put the same thing negatively) which a reading of His Word stirs us up to desire (Luke 11 : 13). We are sanctified by faith, for we are sanctified by asking in prayer, *i.e.* by hungering and thirsting, for those Christlike virtues, those victories over sin, which are brought before us in Scripture and which only God can give.

Thus although the law has no place in our justification, and we are justified apart from law (Rom. 3 : 21), it has a ministry both before and after our justification. It behoves us never to neglect it. It should be our delight to meditate on it day and night.

THREATENINGS AND PROMISES OF REWARD

The fact that Scripture abounds with warnings and threatenings of punishment on evil living and at the same time holds out promises of the most glorious rewards for a life of good works, has been thought by some to indicate that our justification is the result of our works and our keeping of God's law. But an examination of the purpose of the threats and promises of Scripture will show that this is not so. Both the threatenings and the promised rewards derive from the goodness and grace of God.

Even if the existence of hell and eternal judgment had never been revealed in a single passage of Scripture, it would not have made the slightest difference to the fact that hell is the inevitable destiny of rebellious sinners. God is not mocked ; whatever a man sows that shall he also reap ; a fact which remains true whether men know it, believe it, spurn it or explain it away. The clear and awful warnings of Scripture on this subject spring from the grace of God, warning us beforehand of what is inevitably our fate if we continue wayward, yet warning us in the context of promised salvation if we repent. "Turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways. For why will ye die ? O house of Israel" (Ez. 33 : 11). It is no mercy in a preacher to hold back the truth of hell, and to cover it with the decent shroud of reticence in the pulpit. For the warnings and threatenings of Scripture are purposive, given to be used by the Spirit to bring us to Christ, the only way of justification. Bunyan has truly depicted in "Pilgrim's Progress" how often the Christian life begins with an awful realisation of the plight and doom of the soul dwelling in the city of destruction. "Fly from the wrath to come" was the warning of Evangelist as he pointed the way to Christ.

As the threatenings of Scripture serve to bring us to Christ for justification, so the promised rewards assist us on the path to glory. Their splendour so outshines any just recompense that our puny efforts towards goodness might deserve, that the regenerate soul, enlightened by

the Spirit as to the true worth of its own righteousness and taught by Christ to say, when it has done all that has been commanded, "we are unprofitable servants", is in no danger of mistaking the gracious character of the promises or of thinking that they are earned as remuneration for its own efforts, as though justification were by works.

The goodness of God towards His children exceeds all imagining. In daily life we know how true it is that He is wont to give beyond our deservings or our hopes. The same will be our experience of His future provision for our glorification. It is God's gracious purpose to exalt His sons to inexpressible glory and blessing in Christ Jesus. We are to be transformed so that we are like Him (1 John 3 : 2). The Scriptures speak of us already sharing the glory which the triumphant and exalted Christ has inherited (II Thess. 2 : 14 ; John 17 : 22 ; Eph. 2 : 6).

Already our glorification is in progress ; even now we are being transformed from glory to glory, even now we are being conformed to Christ's likeness (2 Cor. 3 : 18). In this process of sanctification, as it is called, God uses means, and one of the principal is the glimpses of our future blessedness. The New Testament abounds in promises of the heavenly reward, promises intended to strengthen our wills to persevere in the way of righteousness. It is part of God's gracious provision to let us know beforehand something of the good things which He has prepared for those who love Him, that our imagination being fired, we might do His will the more gladly. The rewards promised in Scripture are among the means by which God completes our sanctification. For our wills are weak and it is God's purpose to support and strengthen them. He does this in a way in conformity with our nature, by revealing the heavenly joys that He has prepared for those that love Him, joys which doubtless would be experienced had they never been revealed beforehand, but by their revelation our progress in glorification is accelerated.

It follows that a pastor ought to set clearly before his people the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, that all who have been called to inherit it might press on towards that goal (Phil 3 : 14). Like the apostle it should be his constant prayer that the eyes of his people's heart might be enlightened that they might know what is the hope of God's calling, what the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints.

The passage from which this prayer is taken illustrates the part rewards play in preaching : in the first three chapters of Ephesians St. Paul exhausted language to express the ineffable blessing which God has bestowed and will bestow on us. At their conclusion St. Paul showed how the knowledge of this blessedness is to be applied, "I beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith you were called" (Eph. 4 : 1). The exhortation is not to walk so as to earn the blessing, but having received it as a gift — by grace ye are saved — to realise the riches of the glory of the inheritance to which God has called us, and to walk worthily of this high calling of God.

Similarly, our Lord revealed to His disciples the breathtaking "reward" which it was their Father's good pleasure to give them, that through a knowledge of it their service of God might be free from fear and single minded (Luke 12 : 32, 33).

THE PURPOSE OF GOD

Our justification is not an isolated event but is a stage in the process by which God is carrying out His gracious purpose, determined from eternity, of conferring glory on His people by saving them from sin, conforming them to Christ, and exalting them to the highest heaven. "To them that love God, all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, he also pre-ordained to be conformed to the image of His Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren : and whom He fore-ordained, them also He called ; and whom he called, them also He justified : and whom He justified them also He glorified" (Rom. 8 : 28-30).

God's eternal purpose of grace towards His people lay hidden through the ages, but the coming of Christ manifested and declared the mystery (2 Tim. 1 : 9 ; 1 Pet. 1 : 19, 20 ; Eph. 3 : 10, 17). From this point of view justification may be thought of as the vindication of God's people whom he had chosen ; as the open declaration of His approval of them in the face of their accusers. In the Old Testament the word 'justify' often has this meaning, being used of the action of God in outwardly manifesting His approval of His chosen people and His making plain that they are His people, through His vindicating of them by saving them and rescuing them from the obloquy that oppression by enemies, or other distressful circumstances, involved them in, and from which onlookers might conclude, though falsely, that God's disfavour rested on them. This open manifestation of God's approval by His vindicating of His people is often referred to in the Old Testament as God's righteousness or His righteous acts. The salvation that He brings is called His righteousness or justification, for by it He justifies His people.

In the New Testament justification takes on a deeper meaning. Now the righteousness of God refers to the action of God in rescuing His people through Jesus Christ, from sin, from the condemnation of the law, and from the devil, and His setting His approval on them through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. The Resurrection and Exaltation to God's right hand of Christ, and of the people of God in Him, is open manifestation of God's approval, and may be spoken of as our justification. Nevertheless, the New Testament word for 'justify' does not lend itself as easily as does the Hebrew to this sense of vindication and open

manifestation of approval by mighty acts as of the battle field. It is rather a term of the law courts, the judge declaring within the court that those who stand accused before Him are guiltless ; its meaning being "to declare righteous", or "to acquit". But whether the image is that of the law court or the battlefield, the truth is the same. God declares us His.

Although the Greek word does not carry within it as does the Hebrew, the idea of vindication by mighty acts of victory, that concept is certainly to be found in the New Testament in connection with our salvation. Christ is the Rescuer, who rescues us from the Powers of darkness, and from the present evil world, and from the coming wrath (Rom. 11 : 26 ; Col. 1 : 13 ; Gal. 1 : 4 ; 1 Thess. 1 : 10). Christ is the Victor who has overcome our Enemy who held us captive, and we have been set free and even rewarded with gifts (Heb. 2 : 14, 15 ; Eph. 4 : 8). Christ has ensured our success in the law suit brought against us, by His obliterating the bond on which our suitors were resting their case, in fact He has taken it out of court altogether and nailed it to the Cross ! (Col. 2 : 14). By Christ's sacrifice on Calvary as a sin offering, God has ensured that sin loses its suit against us. God has condemned sin (Rom. 8 : 3).

All these actions of Christ on our behalf are the manifestation of God's approval of us which runs back to His promise before times eternal, in that He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and without blemish before Him in love, having foreordained us unto adoption as sons through Jesus Christ according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace (Titus 1 : 2 ; 2 Tim. 1 : 9 ; Eph. 1 : 5, 6).

One facet of the riches of that grace is the free justification of sinners through the merits of His Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, by faith.

Our salvation, of which our justification in Christ through faith in His death is the core, is God's provision from beginning to end. We are His work, through which He manifests to the whole creation His wisdom, His power, and the riches of His grace. To Him be the praise. Amen.



