

Comprehending

Justification

The theme we have taken up in this book is of immense practical importance to us. It raises the questions, 'How can a person be righteous before God?' 'How can a person have the past obliterated, so to speak, and proceed in life as acquitted from all guilt and forgiven all sin?' 'Even if God pitied us could He rightly count us as righteous when such an act would seem to be contrary to the law?' We might look enviously at those who claim they stand before both God and the law without being guilty, but we might shake our heads at such an arrogant claim.

This book does not evade the issues which need to be faced. The human conscience is linked with law, with the possibilities of judgment and punishment and of final failure of a person as a human being. The answer certainly lies within this written treatment of justification. It is worth the trouble of giving time to see what the author is saying. It is not trite to say that it could be life-changing if understood and if acted upon.

The Rev. Geoffrey Bingham, an Anglican clergyman, a teacher of interstate and international experience, has been a missionary with the Church Missionary Society, Principal of the Pakistan Bible Institute and of the Bible College of South Australia, and Executive Director of New Creation Ministries.



New Creation Publications Inc

www.newcreation.org.au



Geoffrey C Bingham

Comprehending Justification

Geoffrey Bingham

Other Books in This Series

Comprehending the Covenant
Comprehending the Family of God and Man
Comprehending Fruitfulness to God
Comprehending the Kingdom of God
Comprehending the Resurrection

NEW CREATION PUBLICATIONS INC.
PO Box 403, Blackwood, South Australia 5051
2002

Published by
NEW CREATION PUBLICATIONS INC.
PO Box 403, Blackwood, South Australia 5051

© Geoffrey C. Bingham 2002

National Library of Australia cataloguing-in-publication data

Bingham, Geoffrey C.
Comprehending justification.

ISBN 0 86408 250 9.

1. Justification—Biblical Teaching. 2. Justification.
I Title. (Series: The Comprehending books; no. 6).

234.7

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Inquiries should be addressed to the publisher.

Cover photograph by John Kammermann

Wholly produced and set up in
Adelaide, South Australia
www.newcreation.org.au

Foreword to the 'Comprehending Books'

For over twenty-five years New Creation Teaching Ministry (NCTM) has been developing Christian Resources, and by means of its Publishing Unit—New Creation Publications Incorporated (NCPI)—has brought these to the general public and is making them further available on the Internet. NCPI distributes books, booklets, other printed study materials, audio and video cassettes, some music CDs and is forming CD-ROMs. All of these are for use by pastors, theologians and other persons. NCPI also has an Imprint named Troubadour Press. By means of NCPI and Troubadour Press, we seek to cover Bible teaching, Bible commentaries, theology, history, personal counselling and certain devotional materials. It also publishes useful fiction and non-fiction volumes, including poetry and hymn books. In addition, it seeks out valuable out-of-print theological books and republishes them.

Many of our NCPI publications are quite substantial and deal with a wide variety of subjects. In some cases certain readers find they cannot take on board books designed to deal thoughtfully and in detail with their subjects or topics. These

readers would like smaller books or booklets which would give them the essence of the subjects they are seeking to understand. It is obvious that often a reader may find a substantial book too much to take in, and may even lose the essence of its subject. It is a pleasant fact that many of our booklets are in demand and are sufficient to inform their readers on a particular subject. One consideration, of course, is that our booklets are less expensive than those which deal in detail with their particular theme, though none of our books is really expensive.

Here, at NCTM–NCPI, we pondered the whole matter and came up with the idea that we would develop what we have called ‘The Comprehending Series’. These booklets would be in a format easy to handle, to read and to comprehend. By ‘comprehend’ we mean each title would deal with its subject so that it would be easy to understand. We decided that it should still have to have substance, and would not be designed for laziness in reading, or be superficial in its material. We had hoped the general public and those with minds for biblical truth would enjoy the Series and not find the books difficult to comprehend. We also hoped that thoughtful students and scholars would find them quite useful. We decided that the subjects should be those which constantly come up in conversation, confront us often in life, and would be helpful in gaining knowledge and wisdom.

We thought it would be good to have a regular format and a cover by which we could quickly recognise the Series. Of course, we send out these

slim volumes with a certain heart-trepidation. Doubtless some of them will be thought to be too simple, and others to be too difficult, but on the whole we feel they will fulfil a felt need and with a prayer and a tremor or two we send them out to the public. It could be that you might come to welcome and appreciate them. We hope so.

Geoffrey Bingham
General Editor
NCPI, 2002

Foreword

The theme we have taken up in this book is of immense practical importance to us. It raises the questions, 'How can a person be righteous before God?' 'How can a person have the past obliterated, so to speak, and proceed in life as acquitted from all guilt and forgiven all sin?' 'Even if God pitied us, could He rightly count us as righteous when such an act would seem contrary to the law?' We might look enviously at those who claim they stand before both God and the law without being guilty, but we might shake our heads at such an arrogant claim.

We need, then, to see the biblical presentation of the God of grace who both forgives sins and reckons as righteous, men and women who believe on Christ's work of redemption. That is, they believe that through that work they are now relieved of all guilt, and are as innocent of all wrong-doing before the law which would condemn them.

I suggest you give time to work at this little book, and obtain the rich reward it will give you when you come to understanding it and acting upon it. How different from others is the person who is sure that he or she is forgiven, justified and made righteous before God.

Geoffrey Bingham
March, 2002

Comprehending Justification

INTRODUCTION: THE MEANING OF THE WORD 'JUSTIFICATION'

There are reasons why some of us do not understand the word 'justification'. Probably the first is that it is a word we do not often use in everyday conversation. The second is that it is used as a theological word, and most of us do not see ourselves as theologians. We shy away from what we think is religious language. Yet, unwittingly, justification is a presence ever in our minds. Whenever someone accuses us of doing wrong, or not being right, we immediately justify ourselves. That is, we present ourselves as not doing wrong. It is a technique we bring into operation many times in one day. We are creatures of conscience; that is, accusations come freely from others, from our own consciences and from powers which are hostile to humanity.

Sad to say some people spend much of their lives justifying themselves in the sight of others. Having been accused of failure when we were only small children, we have spent a major part of

our lives 'showing them', that is, proving ourselves to others. We set out to show the world that we are worthy people. We have ambitions which are driven by self-justification.

On one occasion Jesus said, 'Wisdom is justified by her deeds'. He meant that when people follow true wisdom the outcome of it in their lives justifies wisdom as being true. On another occasion a brilliant young lawyer asked Jesus, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' and Jesus answered him by pointing to the two commandments which speak of loving God wholly and one's neighbour as oneself. 'Keep these commandments', Jesus said, 'and you shall live'. It is written that the lawyer, 'desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"' Jesus then told the story of the merciful Samaritan who found a Jew who had been beaten and robbed by thieves and cared for him, though Jews traditionally despised Samaritans. The lawyer who was a Jew was doubtless stunned. Doubtless this kind of mercy was outside his idea of loving a neighbour. His attempt at self-justification was unsuccessful.

WHO ARE THE JUSTIFIED?

I suggest we all know already what it is to justify ourselves, or other matters—such things as culture, nationality, personal attainment, sport, intellect, and so on—but I doubt whether most people see it that way. They take their own selves for granted, as well as what they do. This is considered

to be normal. In our most honest moments we acknowledge that we make many mistakes, some of which shame us. We admit to the self-justifying actions we have made and regret them. We also regret having accused others without reason, so that they have set about justifying themselves.

Wrong as these actions are, we meet the matter of self-justification at a deeper level. Indeed the action is at the deepest level of our life's experience. It is when we have failed badly, sinned deeply and have been told by our conscience that what has happened is dreadful, horrific, mean, nasty, despicable and so on. We have suffered in the guilt of it all, unable to justify ourselves. These are the times when we have moral sensitivity and hard realism. In fact these are times that are most valuable although they are painful. Those who cover over their failures by false self-justification are building up for disaster ahead. Some persist all their lives in denying they did wrong on certain occasions, and their repressed guilt takes away much of the joy of living. The old saying, 'confession is good for the soul', is certainly true. One act of honest confession, and self-justification dissolves and relief comes.

CHOOSING WHO IS THE JUSTIFIED PERSON

Jesus once told the story of a man who was a tax gatherer. In Palestine tax gatherers were deeply despised because they collected tax for their Roman

masters. The Jews hated the occupation forces and if a Jew were a tax gatherer he would be doubly hated. Although the hero of the story was a Jewish tax gatherer, the story was primarily about a man who was a Jew and a Pharisee. Jesus pictured him as standing in the temple court of worship, adorned in his Pharisee's robes and talking with himself. Maybe Jesus meant he was not really talking to God. This is Jesus' description; 'The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, "God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get."'

At that point the tax gatherer was in the court of sinners, because Israel judged him to be a sinner, excommunicated from their holy congregation. He was beating his breast because of how he saw his sin. For the moment we will leave him and go back to the Pharisee who said nothing of his own sin. He was congratulating himself on his righteousness. In fact no human being can congratulate himself until he is as righteous as God Himself. God's righteousness has never been achieved by a human being. Technically, righteousness is being right before the law, that is, never having sinned, and always having done only 'right things'. Here a reader might protest and say, 'God can be righteous because he is God, but surely you cannot expect a human being to be as righteous?'

What we must realise is that Man, being in the image of God, is called on to reflect God wholly, and so to be truly human is to be righteous. When Man fell in the garden of Eden he fell from being

truly human. Of course history has shown that we think we are righteous because we are not as bad as others, and because we see ourselves as better than others. That kind of righteousness—if it is indeed true righteousness—is merely comparative.

When we say the Pharisee has no right to call himself righteous we are on good moral grounds. Undoubtedly the Pharisee was not deliberately a hypocrite. From his own standpoint he kept the laws commanded in Israel. Yet the aim of Jesus is shown in the words of the narrator, 'He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others'. This tells us that the Pharisee trusted in himself that he was righteous, and that he despised others—in this case the tax gatherer. Self-righteousness is exalting oneself higher than others, and putting down others who seem to be sinners! How often we fall into that trap. Let me give an illustration.

A Sunday school teacher was warning against being hypocritical in the way the Pharisee had been. She said primly, 'Children, let us thank God we are not like the Pharisee'. Seeing her mistake we say, 'Let us thank God we are not like the Sunday school teacher!' It is a natural drive in all of us to be righteous because, as we have said, that is really a human drive.

To resume our story: the Pharisee is content to pray without any sense of self-condemnation. Not so the tax gatherer. He has a problem, a deep problem. He is a Jew. He understands the law. His own ugly sin has confronted him before the law, and his conscience is suffering. What is happening to

him is not a simple case of remorse. In any case remorse is of no help. It is just recognition that one has failed and whilst recognition is perhaps helpful it does nothing for the clearing of guilt. Indeed no human being has the power to clear another's guilt—much less his own. The tax gatherer has come to the temple to be helped, but he sees himself cut off from the altar at which relief would come were he to offer a sacrifice for his sins. However, *he is unable to offer a sacrifice because he is excommunicated from the altar*. Where, then, can he go? Only to this the nominated house of God, of God the great Creator and Redeemer. The prescribed sacrifice which would give him ease is denied to him.

So, locked off from the one way of relief—God's forgiveness—he beats upon his breast in a frenzy of conviction of sin, appealing to God to be merciful *without the prescribed sacrifice!* His cry was, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' Would God depart from the prescribed way of sacrifice and forgive this man? The answer is, 'Yes!' The cry that the tax gatherer gave which is generally translated, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' is literally, 'God be propitious to me a sinner'. 'Propitious' means, 'Please make propitiation for me a sinner!'

The thief has believed God would make propitiation for him, and so prove to be the God of mercy He had revealed Himself to be in Israel. In Exodus 34:6–7 God has given revelation of Himself:

The LORD passed before him [Moses] and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow

to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.'

Many, many times in the Old Testament Israel has reason to quote God's word to them about His own merciful nature. So often Israel failed its Lord by sinning, especially by idolatry, and the Lord punished them. At some point they would remember the revelation of Himself and His moral glory and they would speak God's word back to Him, and in that faith would know His fresh mercy. In our story the thief was only telling God what he had been taught, perhaps in a life of godliness before he had become—out of greed—a tax gatherer and lost his rights as a Jew. Now he was crying, 'God, be propitious to me, a sinner!'

And he was heard! Jesus said, 'this man went down to his house justified rather than the other', meaning, 'The thief was met by the mercy of God, but the Pharisee, seeing no need of justification, was left in his delusion of self-righteousness to think he did not even need such forgiveness'. We ought not to think that the tax gatherer's repentance was but a little thing. His beating his breast was no perfunctory exercise, and his groaning was not a passing change of mind. Every bit of him was in the yearning for deliverance, and his groaning was real and very moving. All this did not earn him justification. God's grace did that, but the man had already known the measure of that grace of God,

and his faith was that God, out of His kindness, would forgive him.

THE PRACTICAL MEANING OF JUSTIFICATION

Someone has said 'justified' means 'just-as-if-I'd-never-sinned', and this description comes close to the mark. It means having right standing with the law; that, so far as the law is concerned, justification means we are accounted as never having sinned against it. In terms of the law's judgment it means clear acquittal from the law. This is no light thing. We will see that the law is lethal, for it pronounced, 'The soul that sins shall die'. Paul tells us that there was a time in his life when he considered he was alive apart from the law, but when the law 'came' it killed him. His words are:

I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died; the very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good (Rom. 7:9-12).

The law, of itself, can only kill a sinner and never give him life. In Philippians 3:6 Paul said, 'as to righteousness under the law [he was] blameless', and he must have meant that was when he was 'alive'. In fact he never was alive, only living in an illusion. This was similar to the illusion the Pharisee

portrayed in the presence of the tax gatherer. We see, then, that some kind of a miracle has to happen in history for a human being to be acquitted from all guilt and so be accepted by the law as a righteous person, and shortly we will see that such a miracle has happened, and how a man can be justified before the law, which must also mean that he is justified before God, for the law is God's law, the very law which is His and in which He subsists.

A SIMPLE EXAMPLE OF JUSTIFICATION

There is a strange story in the history of Israel which bears out the true idea of justification. It concerns a man Shimei, the son of Gera, who was angry with David for what he considered was a terrible injustice towards Saul's family of which he was a member. David was fleeing from his son Absalom who had engineered an insurrection against his father. As David was passing, Shimei threw stones at David and cursed him. The account says:

And he threw stones at David, and at all the servants of King David; and all the people and all the mighty men were on his right hand and on his left. And Shimei said as he cursed, 'Begone, begone, you man of blood, you worthless fellow! The LORD has avenged upon you all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the LORD has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See, your ruin is on you; for you are a man of blood' (2 Sam. 16:6-8).

In Israel this meant that Shimei had cursed the Lord's anointed—David. This crime was punishable by death. Later Absalom was defeated and David was returning to Jerusalem and had, again, to pass by Shimei's home place. Shimei was doubtless terrified that he would be killed. The account is in 2 Samuel 19:16–23:

And Shimei the son of Gera, the Benjaminite, from Bahurim, made haste to come down with the men of Judah to meet King David; and with him were a thousand men from Benjamin. And Ziba the servant of the house of Saul, with his fifteen sons and his twenty servants, rushed down to the Jordan before the king, and they crossed the ford to bring over the king's household, and to do his pleasure. And Shimei the son of Gera fell down before the king, as he was about to cross the Jordan, and said to the king, 'Let not my lord hold me guilty or remember how your servant did wrong on the day my lord the king left Jerusalem; let not the king bear it in mind. For your servant knows that I have sinned; therefore, behold, I have come this day, the first of all the house of Joseph to come down to meet my lord the king.' Abishai the son of Zeruah answered, 'Shall not Shimei be put to death for this, because he cursed the LORD's anointed?' But David said, 'What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruah, that you should this day be as an adversary to me? Shall any one be put to death in Israel this day? For do I not know that I am this day king over Israel?' And the king said to Shimei, 'You shall not die.' And the king gave him his oath.

The plea for justification to King David was, 'Let not my lord hold me guilty or remember how your servant did wrong on the day my lord the king left Jerusalem; let not the king bear it in mind'. He

was saying, in effect, 'Hold nothing against me for what I have done. Let it be in the King's eyes as though it never happened, although indeed it did. Let it not be marked against me.'

In the generosity of the victory over Absalom—and, for that matter, Shimei—the King justified the rebel, even though Abishai thought he ought to be killed. David had known his own days before God when he ought to have been punished for his sins, but God had justified him, so that David could later write:

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
Blessed is the man to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit (Ps. 32:1–2).

It was out of his own having been justified that David justified another sinner! Perhaps Psalm 143:2 was another utterance of David; 'Enter not into judgment with thy servant; for no man living is righteous before thee'. No one merited justification but he knew that the grace of God did justify sinful human beings.

GOD BRINGING MAN TO JUSTIFICATION

We cannot say less than that Paul was intoxicated by God's miracle of justification. As a fierce Jew he hated the Christians who came into his orbit. He consented to the killing of Stephen whom he saw

was so dynamic in his preaching of the good news of Jesus Christ. So sure he was doing the righteousness of God in this killing, he was later met by Christ on the road to Damascus. There his life was changed. He speaks of the effects of this meeting in Philippians 3:2–10. Looking back at his illusion that ‘as to righteousness under the law [he was] blameless’, he describes his heart change and ongoing attitude:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

In the Epistle to the Romans Paul set out to win his readers’ hearts to his understanding of ‘justification by faith’. It is worth following him closely in the first three chapters. This is the clearest account in all history of the way in which a person can become justified before the law. Stating that he owed a debt to all humanity because God chose to bring him to justification, Paul begins his message of deliverance from the harsh, accusing law.

Paul’s first aim is to show that all who sin are under the wrath of God. Wrath, he shows, is God giving up human beings to their sin. A man sins, and he is immediately guilty. Guilt can be described as that state of mind of a human being as, with his conscience, he faces the law he has broken. He

experiences many feelings, such as the sense of failure, of heaviness, of confusion, of pollution, of corruption, of being alienated from God, of being awry—and so on. These feelings are painful. It would seem that in successive stages Man is given up to the sin which produces guilt and the guilt which helps to produce sin, until the last and most frightening stage when the human mind becomes debased, almost incapable of moral discernment and in total rebellion against God. This, Paul explains, is God’s wrath bringing its judgment and pain to the human spirit.

Paul points out that all human beings who are outside the grace of God experience this wrath, for all are sinners. By the end of chapter 1, Jews would have agreed that this was the case of Gentile sinners, although Paul has not confined the wrath to Gentiles. In chapter 2 Paul demolishes any argument of the Jews who might have thought themselves blameless. He shows how Jews do things similar to what Gentiles do. In chapter 3, verses 9 to 18, he shows how sinful are *all* human beings. Indeed he quotes passages from the Jewish Scriptures and which were spoken primarily to Jews:

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all; for I have already charged that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one.’ ‘Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive.’ ‘The venom of asps is under their lips.’ ‘Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.’ ‘Their feet are swift to shed

blood, in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they do not know.'

In verse 19 he tells his readers, in effect, 'Look! The whole world of humanity has sinned. Everyone is under law, and the law speaks to everyone and every mouth is stopped because it cannot deny its guilt. Before God and through the law every person created is accountable. At the judgment none will have one particle of authentic defence. If a person thinks that he or she is righteous before the law and by the law, then how deluded that person must be. The law is there to give the knowledge of sin and not to justify a person.'

The knowledge of sin! What a powerful thing that is! When we look at the commandments of the law we can see where we have sinned and in what ways. Such knowledge is painful, yes, and horrifying. It breaks the delusions of humanity that any is righteousness of his own self. Yes, and further to this, there is the fact that from the cradle onwards we have so sinned and thus, by the law, known the dreadful agony of guilt, the ruthless law ever confronting us, though we might not have realised this to be the case.

Paul now has his readers at the point where justification seems impossible, and he tells them a strange and wonderful secret. 'There is', he says, 'the righteousness of God. God alone is righteous in the full sense of the word "righteous". None has ever been like Him, wholly righteous. Yet God's righteousness is such that it justifies sinners who believe in Him. Though every human being has

sinned, yet all sinners who believe are "justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus"'.

What does he mean? He means that God has done a great act of grace in setting His Son forth as the propitiation for all sins. Propitiation is that act of God whereby God judges humanity wholly, pours out His wrath upon all sins in righteous judgment, and so sets the basis for forgiving and justifying every human being who will believe in Him, in His act of grace. For us this means that all the sins and the guilt of the sins have been borne by Christ on the Cross, and that we can be accounted as righteous because there is nothing left by which the law can accuse and judge us.

This is an amazing truth, staggering in its proportions and effects. All through history there has been in human consciousness the pending judgment. Now the good news is that the judgment has passed. It passed on the Cross when God's wrath was upon His Son, and diverted from us. Now His grace has justified us, and we believe Him for this glorious fact.

To Jewish readers, who were undoubtedly astonished, Paul pointed out that whilst God seemed to have passed over much sin without judging it, that is no longer the case. It has been judged forever. All who believe are now righteous before the law. In this way the dignity and nature of the law are upheld. This goes for all—for both Jews and Gentiles—for He is the one God of all whom He has created. True morality is upheld; the law is unchanged, but believing persons

have right standing before God and so before the law.

What, then, is the powerful conclusion we draw? It is that God's righteousness is not only such that in it is no flaw and all is moral, but it is also a righteousness which justifies the ungodly by dealing with the judgment of their unrighteousness! What a righteousness His is, which has within it the flawless grace of justifying condemned sinners.

ELEMENTS OF THE JUSTIFICATION OF MAN BY GOD

Because his exposition of justification is so amazing, Paul sets out not to prove it, so much as to demonstrate its truth. The first illustration he uses is the story of Abraham. This he does in Romans chapter 4. Speaking warmly of Abraham as 'our forefather', he shows that the patriarch has believed God and that this belief was accounted to him for righteousness, that is, Abraham was justified by faith (Gen. 15:6). Abraham was an idolater who lived in Mesopotamia, and, as Stephen later put it, the God of glory appeared to Abraham. Abraham was changed from an idolater to a worshipper of Yahweh. Both Abraham and his wife Sarah were aged when God promised them they would have a child, and from that child of promise they would have children as many as sands on the seashores and the stars in the heavens. Abraham believed that God was the God of His promises and in this

way Abraham was recognised as a righteous man, that is, *God justified him*.

Paul also takes a powerful example in King David. I was once asked a question when I quoted Paul as saying that both the law and the prophets bear witness to God's justifying righteousness. The question was, 'Show me in all the Old Testament when God's righteousness justified sinners'. My first answer was, 'God justified Abraham the idolater'. My second answer was, 'Read Psalm 32. David the adulterer and virtual murderer was justified.' Then I explained what had happened.

David had sinned with Bathsheba, and by having Uriah the Hittite killed in battle. He seemed to have no remorse about this but God sent Nathan the prophet who charged him with his sin. David was stricken with remorse, and indeed he repented as we read in Psalm 51. Psalm 32 is a song David composed after all the events had happened. We will quote the first five verses:

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
Blessed is the man to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.
I acknowledged my sin to thee,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD';
then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin.

David first expresses the delight a person knows from sins forgiven and covered, and justification—

'to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity'. He then recalls the days of his refusal to acknowledge his dreadful sin and to confess it to God. Those were terrible days. Look at verses 3 and 4. These describe the wrath of God in the conscience of the sinner; the terrible, explosive guilt which disturbs a human being profoundly and puts all his wits out of action, and makes his mind and heart turbulent, even down to physical anguish in a disturbed body.

'Then', said David, 'I acknowledged my sin to thee, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"; then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin'. That was when the blessing came. When the seemingly impossible happened, he was forgiven and justified. One can feel through the fifth verse the enormous relief. This is the case with all who are justified. What a thrill to be relieved of burdening guilt—'thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin'. Notice the mention of both guilt and sin. Now the body is at peace, the mind calmed, the spirit refreshed and energised by grace.

THE PEACE WHICH COMES THROUGH JUSTIFICATION

First we should look at the matter of justification as it affects us in the days of our flesh. In Romans 8:1 Paul says, 'There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus'. He goes on to substantiate his claim by speaking of the work of the Cross. Taken as it is written, this verse

is powerful. It is saying, 'For those who by faith have believed in Christ Jesus and are now joined to him, the matter of the judgment of him for his sins is finished. Such a person lives life without the threat of condemnation.'

In 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 Paul states:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

Here Paul speaks of three works God has done in a person by reason of Christ and his cross: (i) the person is purified from sin's pollution; (ii) the person is sanctified, which means he has been set apart for God's service by consecrating him, having opened for him the way of practical holiness of life; and (iii) the person is justified from all accusation that might be brought against him because of his sins. From this it can be seen that the new person in Christ is not only relieved legally from the wrath and judgment of the law, but also he has had such a change as to be a new creature, and to live in a wonderful, new manner.

Again, in 1 Corinthians 1:30 Paul wrote, 'He [God] is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption'. Some translations have, 'He [God] is the source of our life in

Christ Jesus whom God has made to be our wisdom in righteousness, sanctification and redemption'. Here the word 'righteousness' is 'justification'. The latter translation is preferable, for it shows that we now have a wisdom in living which is composed of justification, sanctification and redemption. This differs from a human life which lacks these things. Seeing these elements of justification shows us what power there is in our life. In this context it shows us that we can only have wisdom and its elements if we are 'in Christ', that is, joined to him by faith and having his life lived in us.

Yet again there is Romans 5:1, 'Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ'. 'Peace' here means, 'we are at peace with God', or, 'we have been reconciled to God and so know His peace. We are now at one with God.' In the following ten verses Paul shows us the remarkable dynamic of living at peace with God through justification. He speaks of having access to God, of standing in grace, of believing we will one day share God's total glory. He talks about being able to go through tribulation and having our character strengthened by suffering. He speaks of being confident in faith because of the love that God has given us.

Further on in this same chapter he talks about two men. One is Adam and the other is Christ. Adam brought ruin upon the human race through sin and death. Christ brought life to the human race by his act of obedience. Adam's act of disobedience has affected every human being born of him, bringing condemnation through sin. Christ's

act of obedience has affected all who by grace and faith have come to be in him. Paul describes it thus:

If, because of one man's trespass [Adam's], death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness [justification] reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:17).

We see, then, that justification is dynamic. Because of God's act in justifying us, we 'reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ'.

Paul's conclusion makes the matter quite plain:

Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous [justified]. Law came in, to increase the trespass; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness [God's justifying work in Christ] to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 5:18-21).

We see, then, that a person's security in the face of his sin, his conscience and the law, can only be secured in peace by justification. It is no wonder then that Paul said:

Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law,

but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness [justification] from God that depends on faith (Phil. 3:8–9).

We do not exaggerate when we say that justification, rightly known and experienced, is the power to change humanity from being sinful into being people of new life and power. Justifying grace can change persons, clans, tribes and nations.

THE ATTACKS ON JUSTIFICATION

The truth above being the case it is no wonder that justification is attacked savagely. One of the reasons is that it leaves no place for the autonomous action of Man in his endeavours to justify himself. Man is proud, although a sinner. Being a sinner often drives him to being religious, for religion is Man's way of justifying himself. Some will allow God's grace partly to justify themselves, provided they can claim part action in their salvation. Generally the truth of justification gets covered over by human endeavour. In the history of the church new power comes as justification is discovered afresh. By nature of the case, justification cannot be destroyed for the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are ever working to bring it clearly to the human spirit. The effects of the Cross are working constantly to bring sinners to repentance and to faith in Christ, and so to justification. The opposition to God's grace of justification happens often, in many ways and many times.

Let us look at one attack on justification. The story is found in Galatians 2:11–21. The occasion happened at Antioch in Syria where there was a church composed of both Jews and Gentiles who had become Christians. It was a live and active congregation, but certain Jewish believers from Jerusalem came down and sought to have the Gentile believers circumcised, saying that they needed to have this rite to make them complete in the faith. Peter feared what was called 'the circumcision party', and he withdrew from eating with the Gentile Christians. To eat with uncircumcised people according to Jews was wrong. The Jewish Christians followed Peter, and that great-hearted man Barnabas who had reported to the church at Jerusalem that he had seen the grace of God at work in the church, also was drawn away by the pressure of the circumcision party.

To Paul this was a terrible scandal. The whole gospel of grace was being put into jeopardy. If the Gentile Christians had to be circumcised then the law of circumcision had precedence over justification by grace. Paul stood up against Peter in his terrible action of denying grace, though probably Peter did not see it was this at first. Paul's reasoning was clear. If, up to this time, Peter had never demanded that the Gentiles had to be circumcised and now agreed that they should be, then he made circumcision a condition for justification, and this was tantamount to being justified by law—a fearful doctrine.

Paul knew that the circumcision party were saying that the offensive matter of Paul's gospel was

that it was wholly a matter of grace, and so was saying that Jews were sinners and needed this grace. They were putting all their emphasis on a rite of the law. Without circumcision Gentile Christians would be incomplete, that is, their salvation would be incomplete. This meant that the central doctrine was not the Cross but circumcision. Later, in his Galatian Letter Paul wrote to the Gentile Christians:

Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness (Gal. 5:2-5).

For Paul the Cross was God's justifying work. He is very serious about the matter, especially in his rebuke of Peter:

But if I build up again those things which I tore down, then I prove myself a transgressor. For I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with 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. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose (Gal. 2:18-21).

In this passage Paul says that in the Cross he died to the law by being crucified with Christ, and thus was restored to life, and so he now lives by the faith of the Son of God. If he goes back to the way

of the circumcision party then he nullifies the grace of God and builds what was destroyed by the Cross, namely the old error of justification by works of the law. This means that Christ would have died to no purpose whatever.

In the Philippian Letter, Paul (as we saw) was glad that he did not have a righteousness—that is, a justification—which was of his own making, but the righteousness which comes from faith in the work of the Cross. He therefore warns his readers against anything or anyone which demerits the Cross. His words regarding this are in the third chapter, verses 17 to 21:

Brethren, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself.

KNOWING THE GREAT TRUTH OF JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE

In a small book such as this it is useful to talk about justification, although the subject could do with a wider and more detailed treatment. What we do need to do with such subjects is to get to the

heart of the matter of them. Justification is a word which, when it is uttered in a congregation, will have many shutting themselves off against it. Why would this be? It would be: (i) because it sounds very theological and thus would appear to be over the heads of those who have a bias against theology; and (ii) because the word, rightly understood, hits against the religious ego which fancies it can justify itself by its inner integrity. It does not need 'a grace thing' to get it right with God and its conscience.

Treating justification, then, has to break through an inbuilt prejudice. Suppose, however, that you as a reader have welcomed what you have read, and want to fix the idea of justification in your mind, and have it work out in your life. What can we do that will help us in such a situation? One thing is to read what I have written, and be assured that we have the objective facts straight and recorded in our minds. I mean that we are sinners, we do offend the law, we are under judgment, that our consciences do work against us as sinners, that nothing we do can justify us, that God did send His Son to bear the sin of the world and get believers out of the clutch of the law, and that by God's grace in the Cross of Christ we are justified when we believe in the work of Christ which was undertaken on that Cross. Also that God certified His Son as the bearer of sins through the Cross and the Resurrection—'He was delivered for our sins and raised for our justification', and, 'Likewise, my brethren, you had died to the law through the body of Christ'.

The second thing to do is to see by God's revelation what actually happened on the Cross, particularly in the matter of the law in whose bondage we were. I mean that when we are not theorising about what the Cross meant in regard to justification, but we are under the revealing power of the Holy Spirit to show us by what means we have been justified. Justification does not come by mere intellectual assent to the doctrine of justification, but by a heart understanding of the work of Christ which was completed. It is not foolish to speak of being deeply affected by God's love in what He did in and through His Son. We saw in 1 Corinthians 6:11, 'But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God', and so it is that all this has happened in our lives through Christ and the Holy Spirit. Christ did the work: the Holy Spirit reveals its nature and the effects that were wrought.

The truth is that as sinful human beings we have lived in guilt, and guilt has increased our liability to sin, and our actions of sinning. The law has always been repugnant to us. We already feel the judgment of the law in the wrath of God, which as we saw in Romans 2:18–32 was a matter of God giving us up to our sin and guilt, thereby compounding sin and guilt, and so bringing us to a devastating experience of life. As the hymn writer put it, 'Guilty, vile, and helpless we: Spotless Lamb of God was He'. The spotless One became 'Guilty, vile and helpless' in our place, by taking

into himself all humanity. Paul said, 'God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us'. No matter how we see these words it means that Christ stood in our place before the law, and all the judgment of the law, in which was the wrath of the holy God, came upon him. This was in the act of propitiation by which Christ suffered the terrors of the law, its judgment and its biting punishment, so that we should be free of the law. Because we were in Christ at the time of the Cross—'We are convinced that if one died for all, then did all die'—and so he suffered for us, with us.

No written words or explanation can convey the terror and horror of the Cross happening. Christ was displaced as a person in history. From the tomb-like darkness, from the abyss in which his spirit suffered, he cried, 'My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?' and that cry conveys as closely as possible the state of Man being judged by the law and bearing the full operation of its punishment. If Christ had not borne that then we would have to bear it for all eternity. What that suffering was is hidden from us. Human flesh and blood would disintegrate under the full revelation of it. Most human beings have short visitations of penal horror and guilt judgments, but these are limited. Nevertheless they are indicators of what could happen in the whole.

If we have been led through some understanding of the Cross, and comprehend that it is God's goodness that He and His Son have dealt with the manner of human lawlessness, transgression and fracturing of the law so that justification can now

come about, then the human mind is dizzied by contemplation of such love. All of it is saying, 'God is love! God became Man to liberate me from my predicament! As Man, the Son of God went to the Cross to battle out the matter of my being guilty before God and His law.' With Paul we can gladly cry, 'But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit'. What, then, does this kind of language mean? Paraphrased, I believe it means, 'When I broke the law as a human being then ahead of me lay a life of guilt, and apprehension that I would be judged, and I had no joy from guilt or the idea of judgment. I guess I did try to serve God, but my service was all mixed up with self-righteousness, a fear of law, and a fear of God which never allowed me to live life freely. Now because Christ died, taking my sin and bearing out its judgment, I am freed from the fear of its judgment. Indeed I am free from its judgment, and I can now serve God not from a deadly obeying of the "letter of the law" legalism, but a gladsome obedience to the law as the Spirit within me gives freedom and joy to serve God.'

This statement of Romans 7:6 goes with one from Romans 6:7, 'For he who has died is justified from sin'. Both these statements tell us much and are closely related; Romans 6:7 meaning that the whole of life is freed from the bondage to law which troubled me. My death to law—that is, its judgment—has taken place in the death of Christ, and his death is my death. To be 'justified from sin'

is to be acquitted from it. The power of sin lies in guilt, but my guilt has gone. I am free to live life in Christ and his Spirit.

CONCLUSION: THE POWER AND WONDER OF JUSTIFICATION

Justification is not a *thing*. There can be teaching about it, but that is not justification itself. The statement of 1 Corinthians 1:30, 'He [God] is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness [justification] and sanctification and redemption', is one we presented before, and we said that God has made Christ to be our true wisdom in righteousness, sanctification and redemption. Whilst we have said that 'righteousness' here is justification, yet that should be amplified. In Romans 3:21–26 we saw that God's righteousness is His righteousness as we understand the rightness of action in terms of the law. Even so, there is the action of God's righteousness which justifies the ungodly so that they are now seen as right before the law. Indeed they are reckoned so, and so are right before the law. In Christ, then, we are right before the law, but this being reckoned as right kickstarts our righteousness of action. It gives impetus to 'serving in the Spirit'. We have a heart which is about acts of righteousness without thinking that we are righteous of ourselves or earn righteousness by our 'right deeds'.

I hope all this is not too confusing. It is the way I describe it in my patterns of thinking in trying to be

true to what Scripture says, yet knowing that the text of Scripture is often puzzling to some readers. I hope that we see justification as God's act of clearing us from the guilt and penalty of the law and setting us free to live in the ways of righteousness.

I constantly say to myself, 'Wherefore, being justified by faith I now have peace with God through my Lord Jesus Christ'. I constantly say this because all around me people are saying other things and talking other things, and I could be swayed by their ways of thinking. Also I am aware that I go through moods and feelings where I even accuse myself of having failed God, both in the past and the present. My only antidote to all this is to say to myself—and certainly not in mantra fashion!—the words of Romans 5:1. I also say the words of Romans 8:1, 'There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus'. Also very heart-warming to me are the words of an old hymn; heart-warming because Satan accuses me of all sorts of things, many of which have more than a grain of truth in them:

When Satan tempts me to despair,
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see him there
Who made an end to all my sin.

Standing fast in the reality that the Scriptures teach of this wonderful reality, we refuse accusation that is now untrue, and if it is true, then we accept it, secure in the knowledge that Christ has dealt with it and that it does not endanger the security of justification.

Appendix: Justification Is the Righteousness of God

IS JUSTIFICATION THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD BOTH IMPUTED AND IMPARTED?

In 2 Corinthians 5:19 Paul says that God gave the apostolic band ‘the ministry of reconciliation’, and added, ‘that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation’. We call this ‘non-imputation of sins’. Justification is also ‘non-imputation of sins’. We see from Romans 3:19–34 that God’s righteousness has brought us to justification. In the first part of this passage Paul said:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:21–26).

The passage speaks of the righteousness of God which is apart from law, since God’s righteousness is shown by the law. The law and the prophets bear witness to the rightness of God, that is, that what God has done in Christ is right, and therefore God’s righteousness in justifying is not in any way destroyed. In fact His action to justify sinners is the very expression of His righteousness. So we state it, ‘God’s righteousness, which is His way of right doing—right actions—is to justify the ungodly’. Not for the first time has God done this. In the quotation below we see that in the Old Testament His righteousness is often linked with salvation:

God’s righteousness, besides being His own actions of righteousness, and His action of judgments, is a saving or justifying righteousness. The following Old Testament references show us that the righteousness of God is often coupled with the idea of salvation: Psalm 98:1–2, ‘Oh, sing to the LORD a new song! For He has done marvelous things; His right hand and His holy arm have gained Him the victory. The LORD has made known His salvation; His *righteousness* He has revealed in the sight of the nations’; Isaiah 46:13, ‘I bring My *righteousness* near, it shall not be far off; My *salvation* shall not linger. And I will place salvation in Zion, For Israel My glory’; Isaiah 51:5–8, ‘My *righteousness* is near, My *salvation* has gone forth, And My arms will judge the peoples; The coastlands will wait upon Me, And on My arm they will trust. Lift up your eyes to the heavens, And look on the earth beneath. For

the heavens will vanish away like smoke, The earth will grow old like a garment, And those who dwell in it will die in like manner; But My *salvation* will be forever, And My *righteousness* will not be abolished. Listen to Me, you who know righteousness, You people in whose heart is My law: Do not fear the reproach of men, Nor be afraid of their insults. For the moth will eat them up like a garment, And the worm will eat them like wool; But My *righteousness* will be forever, And My *salvation* from generation to generation'; Isaiah 62:1-2, 'For Zion's sake I will not hold My peace, And for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, Until her *righteousness* goes forth as brightness, And her *salvation* as a lamp that burns. The Gentiles shall see your righteousness, And all kings your glory. You shall be called by a new name, Which the mouth of the LORD will name.'

It is clear from these passages that God's righteousness is a righteousness which brings salvation. This, of course, is what Paul says in Romans 1:16-27 and 3:19-26. There is certainly a sense in which God's righteousness justifies unrighteous and ungodly persons provided we keep in mind the phrase 'who believe', that is, 'who believe that God justifies them'. The fact is that from Romans 1:16 to 3:26 Paul tells us *what* is the gospel. We shall now seek to see how the three elements of God's righteousness have their place in God's gospel.¹

When we see that God's righteousness is a saving righteousness, then we recognise that it accords with His holiness, goodness, truth and love also, for all these attributes of God work as one with the attribute of righteousness. To sum up,

¹ This is a quote from my sermon at the Farewell Gathering given at the New Creation Centre on 10/2/01. Scripture quotations here are from the *NKJV*.

then, we saw that God's justifying righteousness is one with His whole righteousness. There remains one question, 'What effects does God's justifying righteousness have on the person who is justified?' Is this only what we call a righteousness which imputes forgiveness of sins (2 Cor. 5:19) and justifies from the judgment of the law?

The answer is that not imputing sins to the believer, and counting him innocent of all judgment of the law, has a tremendous effect on the believer. He is relieved of the terrible load of guilt. He is counted as innocent. He is in a position to meet God face to face for he is counted righteous. This understanding of God's act of saving righteousness had brought immense relief to many a soul. Grace is both seen and felt, and so the new Christian is launched into spiritual life.

Imparted Righteousness

Even so, a question remains. Is the new Christian competent to exercise personal righteousness? Can he do upright acts? The answer often given is that God has not only *imputed* righteousness to the believer but has also *imparted* it. This is true, provided we understand the term 'imparted'. It is here we need to see that Man once had what is called 'original righteousness'. He also had 'original holiness, original goodness, original truthfulness and original love'. He was only truly Man when he had these attributes of God working in him and through him. Of himself he did not possess any of these attributes. They were derived

from God because given from God. When a person is justified by grace, through faith, then he becomes in union with God, and these attributes are *restored* by God and *activated* by Him. In that sense they are imparted afresh by God. In 2 Corinthians 5:21 Paul explains this, 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God'. This passage says that 'we might become the righteousness of God', yes, but 'in Christ'. That is, we become of the righteousness of God, and not only accounted righteous. Again, Romans 5:17 says, 'If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ'. The 'free gift of righteousness' should not, here, be limited to the act of justification, for the effect of receiving 'the free gift of righteousness' is that the person abounds in life.

The fact is that now the new believer *is* righteous! As he is righteous so also is he holy, good, truthful and loving. This is often called 'imparted righteousness'. If we think that God has imparted a thing called righteousness which we must take hold of and utilise in righteous living then we may misunderstand 'imparted righteousness'. One Corinthians 1:30 says, 'He [God] is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption'. So Christ is that righteousness, and as we live in Christ, so we do right acts and act righteously. So also we act out the other attributes

which flow from God to us and through us to others.

A helpful way of thinking about this active righteousness is in Philippians 2:12–13:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Paraphrased this means, 'Be simply humble and dependent as has been your custom, whether I am present or absent, so work at your salvation already given to you, but knowing all the while that God energises you from within to do that good work. He is dwelling in you to take each action. It is He who activates and enables you.' To this we could add Philippians 1:6, 'And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ'.

CONCLUSION TO THE APPENDIX

We asked the question whether justification means only that we are accounted as righteous before God, or whether also it means He has imparted righteousness to us so that we can do righteous acts. The answer has been that *God imparts Himself to us, and that Father, Son and Holy Spirit dwell as One within us and initiate good acts, and energise us for those acts and enable us to complete those acts*. We are faced: (i) with the fact that we are righteous

Comprehending Justification

(holy, etc.) and that therefore we should live as righteousness people; and (ii) that we cannot do this on our own, of ourselves, but need the presence and enablement of the Triune God within us.

This, we believe, is the full picture of God's justifying act.