

Having written about our Saviour's sufferings and His resurrection in my previous two articles, my mind then began to muse over the significance of his resurrection for us who believe in Him. It struck me just how vital the resurrection of our Lord Jesus is to the whole of the Christian life for time and eternity. As Paul was inspired to put it, "*if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins*" (1 Cor 15:17). The whole of Christianity, all of God's purposes and work, depend on the reality of the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. As I pointed out last time, the whole of the Bible is based on the assumption of Jesus' sacrificial death and miraculous resurrection: "*Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, he was buried, he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures*" (1 Cor 15:3,4). The authenticity, accuracy and reliability of the Bible depends on these historical occurrences.

The fact of Christ's physical resurrection from the tomb is of vital, foundational importance to the Christian message and the experience of true Christian people. That is why we commemorate and celebrate every Christmas and Easter. We particularly commemorate and celebrate our Lord's death every time we hold a Communion Service, which is done in remembrance of our Saviour. The Communion Service is also an ongoing declaration of the Lord Jesus as the risen, living Saviour of sinners who is soon to return. "*For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes*" (1 Cor 11:26).

In the meantime, however, before that great event occurs, we need to rejoice in the wonderful enrichments our hearts and lives have received as a result of the Lord's resurrection. So let's have a look at one of them. The first great result of our Lord's resurrection is **OUR JUSTIFICATION**.

Paul was inspired to write, "*Jesus our Lord ... was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification*" (Rom 4:24,25). We need to be clear always that *justification* is entirely a work of God to which we can make, nor must ever try to make, any contribution! It is exclusively "*God who justifies*" (Rom 8:33). It is exclusively the prerogative of God – He alone justifies. Furthermore, He justifies sinners as they are, 'without one plea', as sometimes we sing!

One of the most evident traits of our fallen human nature is that, whenever we come under any suspicion of wrongdoing, we inevitably resort to seeking to justify ourselves. We must never try to do that before God. He doesn't start to justify us if or when we start to make an effort to be 'a bit godly'. Justification is only for "*the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly*" (Rom 4:5). We are only in a position for God to justify us when we are "*one who ... believes in him*" – that is, when we accept without reservation God's verdict on our hearts and lives as being utterly ungodly, and fully concur with God's statement that we are "*unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment*" (Is 64:6). Believing means that we throw ourselves on His mercy, trust Him for His grace and rely exclusively on what He alone has done to save us. When we arrive in that position we are in the place for God to justify us.

The only aspect of justification that comes from us is faith: "*For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*" (Rom 3:28) We have to depend on God to do it for us. But what does being justified mean? It means to be:

a) **PRONOUNCED ENTIRELY GUILTLESS**, it is God's declaration of our being 'NOT GUILTY'! This thought takes us into the realm of the law court. "*Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God*" (Rom 8:33,34). Imagine the day of judgement – "*For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God*" (Rom 14:10) – and imagine the counsel for the prosecution appearing – "*the accuser [the devil] who accuses day and night before our God.*" (Rev 12:10) He stands up with a great long list of indictments that covers every moment of our lives! He has also lined up a very large group of witnesses against us – all the people we have ever wronged in any way, or failed to do good for when we could and should have done so. He stands there with an enormous list of accusations – sadly, all of which are totally justified! As the old priest Ezra acknowledged, "*our guilt has mounted up to the heavens*" (Ezra 9:6) so a verdict of 'guilty as charged' is surely expected.

However, the counsel for the defence steps forward, with the appearance of "*a Lamb, as though it had been slain*" (Rev 5:6). He presents the marks of His crucifixion and declares that He personally took upon Himself all the wrongs and failures of the accused. "*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree*" (1 Peter 2:24); He suffered the results of the guiltiness and endured the sentence due to the accused. The result is that "*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*" (Rom 8:1).

Once He has presented this defence, the judge pronounces, in the strongest possible terms, that the accused is unequivocally NOT GUILTY! The grounds of that verdict are because they “*have now been justified by his blood*” (Rom 5:9), and that is then fully confirmed by the Lamb who was slain being “*raised for our justification*”. The Lord Jesus was raised so that, just as the Old Testament priest took the blood of sacrifice into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, so the risen Saviour “*entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves, but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.*” (Heb 9:12). He could never have done that for us had He remained a prisoner to death!

So our justification from the guilt of our sin depends on both the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, His resurrection confirms that the sufferings of His atoning death completely satisfy the demands of divine justice on our behalf. As Paul was inspired to put it, when preaching in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch, “*Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.*” (Acts 13:32–39). Almost all other translations have ‘justified’ instead of the ESV ‘freed’. I think that that makes the verse much more ‘powerful’: “*everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.*” (NIV)

Being justified by God the Father, on the basis of the death and resurrection of His Son, means that we are considered guiltless and free from condemnation. “*Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.*” (Rom 5:9,10). So we can, with full assurance, “*wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*” (1 Thess 1:10). As the old saying has it, ‘To be JUSTIFIED is to appear in God eyes JUST AS IF I’D never sinned’!

One of the most important features, that we must really hold to as strongly as we can, is that our justification cannot be a matter of ‘more-or-less’. We are either justified or we are not! There is not the slightest hint in Scripture that God only partially justifies sinners. To go back to our law court illustration, a verdict of partly or almost ‘not guilty’ is of little reassurance! When God justifies the sinner, on the grounds of His Son’s all-sufficient sufferings and glorious resurrection, he or she is justified entirely, completely. We can’t be a bit more justified tomorrow than we are today. Nor can our justified status in God’s eyes ever diminish. God never justifies sinners and then ‘un-justifies’ them – “*since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Rom 5:1): it is a done deal!

This “*peace with God*” produces the “*peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, [and] will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*” (Phil 4:7), even during a Covid-19 pandemic. Whether we succumb to this disease, or some other condition, if we know the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour we shall always be able to rely on the fact that we have been, and are, justified by God. It is His work based on the fullness of the satisfactory sacrifice of Jesus Christ and does not depend on us.

I do trust that you have such confidence in God our heavenly Father and in His risen Son. If so, you can sing with full confidence:

The price is paid,
Come let us enter in
To all that Jesus died
To make our own
For every sin
More than enough He gave
And bought our freedom
From each guilty stain

The price is paid
See Satan flee away
For Jesus crucified
Destroys his power
No more to pay
Let accusation cease
In Christ there is
No condemnation now.

Well might we include, ‘The price is paid, Alleluia, amazing grace’, for which we can never thank God enough.

However, that is not all there is to say about justification. All illustrations have their limitations, but this is the best I can think of just now. We have seen the accused sinner pronounced not guilty, but let’s imagine that, although he or she now has the luxury of being considered innocent under God’s law, they nevertheless have no money, no home to go to, nothing to eat, nothing to wear except what they stand up in. Yes they are entirely innocent but utterly impoverished. Then the Judge, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ proclaims, ‘I am going to make you fabulously rich!’ That is where the second part of justification comes in. The person pronounced innocent is then

b) **PROCLAIMED PERFECTLY RIGHTEOUS.** It is the realisation of this that was the cause of overflowing joy for the prophet Isaiah: “*I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed*

me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness” (Is 61:10). On the cross, Jesus was clothed with the filthy rags of our sinfulness; when justified, we are clothed with the beautiful robe of His righteousness. The Lord Jesus was “For our sake made to be sin who knew no sin, that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor 5:21) A crucial point here is to take careful note of the fact that “the righteousness” is the Lord’s and not ours! In the little illustration above, the ‘innocent’ person is made rich by the wealth of the Judge: it is a gift. He or she did not work for it or earn it, and made absolutely no contribution to it. It is entirely from God in “Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor 1:30).

An essential element of the good news of the gospel is that “*the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law*” (Rom 3:21); or, as the Lord is recorded as saying, “*My righteousness draws near, my salvation has gone out*” (Is 51:5). Paul was not ashamed of the gospel because “*it is the power of God for salvation*”, and “*in it the righteousness of God is revealed*” (Rom 1:16,17). Notice that the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel, and the gospel is all about Jesus Christ: there is no gospel of God outside of Him. Therefore the righteousness so revealed is the righteousness of Jesus. It is the righteousness of His perfect obedience, the righteousness of His total submission to His Father’s will, the righteousness of His sinless life. It is the righteousness of His pure being. As His disciples came to realise, “*we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.*” (John 6:69)

When God the Father justifies sinners, He not only pronounces them not guilty of all their sinfulness but, along with that, He credits to them the perfect, pure, holy and complete righteousness of His Son. From that moment on, the Christian is viewed by God the Father as perfect as is His Son; from that moment on, every Christian has full acceptance with God as His friend; from that moment on, he or she is welcomed into God’s family and made fit for eternal glory in His presence, “*blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*” (Eph 1:3). The only thing that stands between the Christian and being in heaven is time and space, and they will soon be no more!

So, the vital question is, when does God impute the righteousness of His Son to sinners like us? The answer was discovered centuries ago by Abraham, who “*believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.*” (Rom 4:3) God promised Abraham what seemed to him utterly impossible – a son in his very old age, when Sarah his wife was well past child-bearing age! Yet, in spite of the obvious impracticality of it all, he believed what God said. He accepted that His promises were entirely reliable and that God would be completely true to His word. It was then that God put His righteousness to Abraham’s account – it was credited, or imputed, to him.

The Holy Spirit went on to inspire Paul to write that “*the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord*” (Rom 4:23,24). The amazing blessing of being credited with the righteousness of God is for “*the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness*” (Rom 4:5). We receive the tremendous gift of the imputed righteousness of Christ at the same time, and in exactly the same way, as we receive the forgiveness of our sins – simply, and only, through faith: it is “*the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ*” (Rom 3:22). When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, He becomes “*The LORD ... our righteousness.*” (Jer 23:6)

As we conclude, a most important point to notice is that, when we are saved by grace – justified, forgiven and made righteous in God’s sight – we still retain the faults and failures of the old nature. We do not suddenly become the most holy and godly people on the planet! Paul knew this very well and expressed his great concern to “*gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith*” (Phil 3:8,9).

This is very important to remember, because our natural propensity is to go back to relying on what we think of as our righteousness, even as Christians! We are easily drawn into thinking that our standing and acceptance before God somehow depends on the fact that we now read the Bible, have our quiet times, go to services and do some work in the church! However, when we fail to do some of these things, or our conscience tells us we are doing them very badly, we then feel less accepted with God. We feel as though our standing before Him has diminished in some way. To think like this is to begin to deny the great truth that “*Jesus our Lord ... was raised for our justification.*” (Rom 4:24,25).

It is true, of course, that Christians are called to live a righteous life: “*O man of God. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.*” (1 Tim 6:11). But that call concerns another of the rich results of Jesus’ resurrection, which is ‘Sanctification’. Maybe we can come back to that another time...
