



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Genesis 15: 1-6

“Abraham and Faith Justification”

TRANSCRIPT

The Scripture reading is in the 15th chapter of the Book of Genesis. While you're finding that chapter, let me remind you that in our study of the Book of Genesis, we are in the midst of that part of Moses' account that has to do with the life of Abram. Abram has made his way into the land then evidently out of the will of God to Egypt where God did protect him, and keep him, and bringing back into the land. Then after the strife between the herdsmen of Lot and the herdsmen of Abram, Lot chose for himself the plains near Sodom and move there while Abram lived by the Oaks of Mamre in Hebron.

And then in the 14th chapter, the immediately preceding chapter, we read and studied the account of the invasion of the kings from the East after the five rebel kings had rebelled against them in the land, and Abram won a great victory and retrieved Lot and also the spoils, which the kings from the East had taken in their victorious campaign. Then at the end of that chapter you'll remember Abram was approached by the King of Sodom who said, “Give the people to me and take the goods for yourself”, and Abram in this very majestic reply said, “I have sworn to the Lord God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth that I will not take a thread or a sandal thong or anything that is yours.” Last, “You should say I have made Abram rich.” It was a tremendous renunciation.

And now we read in Genesis chapter 15, verse 1 through 7 these words,

"After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision saying, 'Do not fear Abram, I am a shield to you. Your reward shall be very great.' (Incidentally in the Hebrew text at this point it is possible to render this in two ways. One way is the way that I have just read, I am a shield to you, your reward shall be very great. The other possibility for which there is some support is, I am a shield to you and you are exceeding great reward. It's very difficult to be absolutely sure of the rendering of the text here, but in the light of what Abram says in verse 2, "What will Thou give me," the reading in the New American Standard Bible and in other translations is probably to be preferred. Verse 2,) and Abram said, 'O Lord God, what wilt Thou give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?'"

He refers to his servant, a trusted servant, evidently the servant who went to seek a bread for Issac and that is described in Genesis chapter 24. We do not know in Hebrew tradition of the heir of someone without a child being a servant in the household, but we do know from the Nuzi texts of the 15th Century BC, texts that have to do with life to the East of the Tigris River, that it was not uncommon for individuals who were childless to make a trusted servant their heir in order that proper arrangements and proper burial might be carried out and another matters. And so, it is possible that Abram, so far as his condition was concerned since he had no children, as far as he was concerned his heir was likely to be Eliezer of Damascus.

Now Abraham was so concerned over this, he didn't bother to give the Lord a chance to reply to that. He replied before the Lord replied, and we read in verse 3 and Abram said,

“Since Thou has given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir.
(And notice the statement, one born in my house, because of course that could cover a

servant.) Then behold the word of the Lord came to him, saying, ‘This man will not be your heir, but one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.’ (And this is a vision. I remember in verse 1 it says these things came to Abram in a vision. The vision evidently as a vision of Abram in his tent, because we read in verse 4 the word of the Lord or verse 5) And he took him outside, that is outside the tent evidently. And said, now look toward the heaven and count the stars if you are able to count them. And the Lord added, and he said unto him, so shall you are descendants be.”

The Hebrew term is a collective term probably and it is simply so shall your seed be. But since that might be understood individually or collectively, personally, I think this is a mistranslation. We should simply have “so shall your seed be.” In that way the interpreter is able to look at the context and say is the seed singular or seed plural? But the translators are correct in this instance because surely a plural is what meant here, but the term itself has both meanings and sometimes it’s good to leave it somewhat ambiguous and require the student of Scripture to make the deduction himself.)

“Then he believed in the Lord and he reckoned to him as righteousness.”

And I’d like to say just a word about that too. Notice the last two words as righteousness strictly speaking, the Hebrew text says simply, “Then he believed in the Lord and he reckoned to him righteousness.” Now we’re left somewhat in doubt as to the meaning, should this be and he reckoned to him as righteousness or should it be he reckoned to him as the means for obtaining righteousness unto or with a view to righteousness? Now you see this introduces a little bit of a problem, is faith itself righteousness? Or is faith the means by which the righteousness becomes ours? Now we believe, that is we will preach the word, we believe that faith justifies but not in and by

itself simply because it grasps the obedience of Christ in his sacrifice. In other words, faith is a means by which we lay hold of Christ. It's an instrument. The rest of the Bible makes that plain. So in this case, the translators of the new American Standard Bible have urged, now that translation is possible grammatically, but impossible theologically. And since the text permits a different rendering, we should, I think, render this, “Then he believed in the Lord and he reckoned to him with a view to righteousness.”

Now this is confirmed by the fact that this text is used in Psalm 106 in verse 31 and there Psalmist referring to the same idea, says, “And he reckoned it to him *tsdaqab* (and adding the proposition *love*, which means to or for or unto) unto righteousness.” And the Apostle Paul in the renderings of the New Testament also contains the idea of *unto* righteousness. So, we are not to think then that faith itself is righteousness, but faith is the means by which the righteousness that is found in the sacrificial work of the Lord Jesus becomes ours. Then he believed in the Lord and he reckoned it to him for, or unto, righteousness. The rest of the Bible makes that very plain.

May the Lord bless to us this reading of his word.

In the eyes of many the greatest problem with which the Bible deals, is how can a just God justify the unjust? Our subject this morning, Abraham and Justification by Faith, will seek to answer that question. We know from the study of the Bible that the law of God condemns all men. There are certain demands that are made, demands that mean the perfect fulfillment of all of the righteous demands of a Holy God.

Now there are two ways to meet the demands of the holy law of God. One way is to keep the law of God perfectly; anyone who puts himself under the Mosaic law is responsible to keep that law perfectly. The Apostle Paul puts it very plainly and forthrightly in Galatians chapter 3 in verse 10, when he says, “For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, “CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM

THEM.” So if it is necessary for us to keep the law of God perfectly in order to be justified, it’s clear from the teaching of the word of God itself that we have not done this and therefore we are under the curse.

If it were simply a matter of a human judge with whom we have to do, then things might not be so bad, because human judges may make mistakes. There is an old story of a brother who was arrested or a man who was arrested, charged with stealing a gold watch and chain. After all the evidence of the complaining witness had been heard the judge look down upon prisoner and announced, “The sentence of this court is acquittal.” Well, he was not very well educated and so he said, “Judge, I just don’t understand what that means.” He said, well, the sentence is that you stand acquitted. Well, what does that mean? He said it means that you are acquitted. And so he said, well, judge doesn’t mean that I have got to give the watch back? [Laughter] And so, it is an evidence of the fact that human judges, while they are judges, may err. In the case of the divine judge there is no error. If we have not kept the law of God perfectly, we shall not be acquitted by that law.

Furthermore, this under the law and therefore under the curse means everyone, not simply the ordinary person, but it’s true even of those who are most religious. There is another story of a certain bishop who was traveling incognito in England. And on the platform where the trains were coming, there was also an ardent, young evangelist who was seeking to win people who happened to want to board the train. So, he went up to the bishop, who was traveling incognito and he said, are you saved, brother? Well, the bishop betrayed his particular profession, because he stood aghast at the thought of the question about his salvation and he blurted out, “Do you know who I am? I am the bishop of Willich or Sandwich or whatever he was.” And the young man said, “We’ll don’t let that stand in your way.” [Laughter]

This morning at the breakfast table, we were discussing some of these things and one of the latest at the table had the nerve to say that in her opinion of the groups that

would be in hell, the largest two groups would be those of lawyers and preachers. Well, whether that’s true or not, she said as we left, I know you agree with me too. Well whether or not that’s true, we do know this, that not one of us has kept the law perfectly and so consequently we cannot meet the demands of the law by keeping the law.

Now the other way is to pay the penalty. And we can all pay the penalty, but unfortunately, the penalty for the broken law is death and consequently we cannot pay the penalty and still live. Therefore it is a problem. How can a just God justify unjust men? Now it is with this question that Genesis chapter 15 deals. And it is remarkable that in the patriarchal age, right at the beginning so to speak of the biblical record, we find a clear-cut answer to the question, for in Genesis chapter 15 and verse 6 we read of an unjust man. Then he believed in the Lord, and he reckoned it to him for righteousness.

Now the Apostle Paul in the New Testament will use this same text in order to stress the fact that the way of salvation in the New Testament is the same as the way of salvation in the Old Testament. H.C. Leupold, the Lutheran Commentator has suggested that this chapter is really a monumental chapter. Well it is a monumental chapter, because it is a chapter upon which much of Paul’s thinking in the New Testament is built. He cites this very text, both in the Epistle to the Romans and in the Epistle to the Galatians.

And furthermore he cites the text of the Old Testament Prophet Habakkuk, chapter 2 versus 4, “the just shall live by faith,” which is built upon this Genesis 15 text at least two times and the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, who ever he was, also cites it, and so we have the text upon which this text, built upon this text, cited three times and we have this very text cited at least twice in the writings of the New Testament authors, and so consequently it’s clear that this is an important section of the word of God.

Martin Luther said concerning the doctrine of justification by faith that it was *articulus stantis, et cadentis ecclesiae*, which means “the article of a standing or falling church.” Now what he meant by that was that the way in which the church handles the

doctrine of justification by faith determines whether the church will stand or whether it will fall. Luther no doubt was right. This fundamental question does determine the Christian character of a congregation.

If this doctrine of justification by faith is believed and proclaimed fervently from the teaching platforms and in the personal lives of the saints of a particular church, that church will stand. But if this doctrine is not proclaimed, if it is hedged, if the doctrine is watered down, if it is covered over with error; that is it does not firmly and clearly and accurately go forth, that church will fall, it is the article of a standing or falling church.

Back in the Middle Ages and thereafter for a few centuries it was customary for men who were theologians and preachers to communicate with each other about the use of Latin. In fact it was, this was true for many centuries before that, but in the Age of the Reformation and the following decades in, which there was a great deal of theological thought and communication and also struggle, men communicated with each other by Latin, because Latin was the scholars’ language. If they did not know one another’s language they all knew Latin and so they could communicate.

Consequently certain Latin phrases appeared over and over again in theological writings. There are five great Latin phrases that occurred so often that they’ve even found their way into English, English writing on theology. And we often hear of *sola fide*, by faith alone; *sola gratia*, by grace alone; *solo Scriptura*, by Scripture alone; *solo Christo*, by Christ alone; *soli Deo gloria*, to God alone be glory. So, in the development of the Reformation phase, these ideas the Scripture, the Scripture alone is the foundation for our faith. Our salvation is traceable to what Christ alone did, what he did by himself in shedding his blood for us. That is a grace salvation, it is something that it comes to us by faith alone, and the ultimate aim and goal of all theological thought is the glory of God alone.

Now when we turn to Genesis chapter 15 and verse 6, we have one of those texts in which there is stressed, *sola fide*, by faith alone. Then he believed in the Lord and he reckoned it, faith to him for righteousness. Those five *solas* incidentally have been called “the Gospel of the Five Onlys.” And it is important that we understand them and really make them a part of our own thinking. The Latin adjective *solis a um* is the background of this, it means only or alone. There are two parts to Chapter 15 with the chief joint as Professor Von Ranke has suggested between verses 6 and 7. In the first section of the 15th chapter we have revelation from the Lord, and then in that revelation, a confirmation of the promise made to Abraham concerning great reward to follow through the birth of someone from his own body.

And then in the latter part of the Chapter, which we want to try to cover next week, the Lord willing, we have the ratification of the Abrahamic covenant by blood sacrifice in what is to my mind one of the most interesting and most important parts of this entire part of Genesis.

Well, let's look now to, first, the promise that was made Abram. According to the first verse of Genesis chapter 15, we read after these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision saying, "Do not fear, Abram." Incidentally it has been said by some students of the Book of Genesis that this, “do not fear” is a reference to the kings that he had just defeated. Do not fear them, Abram, thinking that perhaps Abram may have thought that they would return in order to take revenge upon him. It may be more likely that do not fear refers to what is evidently upon Abram's heart. How is the promise of a seed going to be fulfilled to me since I am childless. Do not fear Abram, don't fear the promises shall be fulfilled. I am a shield to you. Your reward shall be very great.

Abram has been tested in the realm of anxiety. He's been tested in the realm of ambition, but now the pressure will particularly built up around a new center, and that new center will be the promise concerning the Son that is to come. We know that he

came as Isaac. But Abram now will be pressured by the fulfillment of the promise of the descendant in whom all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

How will this great man of faith deal with the delay in the fulfillment of the promises of God? And in spite of many failures through this section you will notice that the faith of Abram shines forth. He's a man who fails in many ways, but fundamentally his faith is in the Lord, and he is looking for that seed that is to come.

In that respect he is very much like most of us who are Christians. We know we fail, we know that day-by-day we fail often, but fundamentally a transformation has taken place in our lives. We have been given new life. And even though we may do certain things that are displeasing to the Lord we do not want to do them, and further, we want to do things that please him. And the work of the Holy Spirit within the life of the believer is to gradually transform him into the likeness of Jesus Christ -- never completed as long as we are living, completed only when we enter the presence of the Lord.

It is the fundamental bent of a person's life that is the important thing. And you will see in Abram a fundamental change has taken place since those days in Ur of the Chaldees. Do not fear Abram, I am a shield to you. Your reward shall be very great. He has seen God's protective hand, when he was in Egypt he has seen the might of his power and defeat of the kings by his 318 men. But can God fulfill his promise of a son? Sarah, so far as he knows, is barren. He doesn't have any children.

And God now gives him a promise, which essentially is this, Abram, you've made a great renunciation when you said you will not take the spoils lest the King of Sodom should say, you've made Abram rich, made Abram rich. Therefore, your reward shall be very great. So, the great renunciation is answered by the great reward that the Lord promises.

Now, Abram I'm sure is like most of us. I think that if I had been in Abram's shoes, I might have replied exactly as Abram did. After all, a general reward is not the thing that is bothering Abram -- it's the specific fulfillment, the son that is specifically

disturbing him. And so, he blurts out then in verse 2, whether in despondent skepticism or not, he blurts out in expostulation that he set his heart upon the promises that have been made. And he will not be satisfied with any general reward, he wants some definition. So, he says, O Lord God, what wilt Thou give me, since I am childless and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? Since thou hast given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir. So he expresses the impatient misgivings of his heart.

Now, you might be inclined to think, well, that's an evidence of Abram's unbelief. Well, it is a kind of partial unbelief, we would have to grant, but fundamentally he believes those promises. He is impatient about them. He is disturbed they haven't been fulfilled, or they are not in process, so that he can put his finger upon it. But, he is concerned about the promise and he does believe that such a thing has been given to him and he is interested in it and he doesn't want any legal heir only, he would like to have someone from his own body.

And so, the Lord gives him a pledge in verses 4 and 5. "The word of the Lord came to him, saying this man shall not be your heir, but one who shall come forth from your own loins, or rather from your own inward parts, from your bowels, the Hebrew word is often translated in the Authorized Version. In other words, Abram, you're not going to have a legal heir only, but you're going to have someone who will come from your own generative organs. It will be from your own bowels, from your own body. And the one who comes forth that one will be your heir.

Now, I think that that must have increased Abram's – the paradox of this thing, because the Lord takes him out and says, now look at the stars, and look at all of those stars and see how many they are and see if you can number them, and have Abram thought about the vastness of those stars against the fact that he didn't even have one son – the Lord's pledge makes it even more difficult for him, if we look at it from the human standpoint.

Well, he takes him outside the tent, this is all in vision, and he asks Abram to look toward the heavens and count the stars if you can. This would made a great deal to Abram, perhaps more than we understand, because as I understand it, in the East when you look into the heavens at night you can frequently see vastly more stars then you can see in our Western world. And if that is true, then of course the vastness of the stars was a beautiful, illustrative picture of what God was going to do. It was a giant object lesson. It was something that was put on God's flannel board, and Abram looked and saw and it was a magnificent promise, but if we remember he only -- he doesn't have any son at all, the paradox is increased.

Now, we at this point by the narrator are turned from Abram who is stargazing, and the narrator now turns to us and adds the words, “Then he believed in the Lord and he reckoned to him for righteousness.” This is been called the biggest word in the chapter. Well, I don't know whether it is or not, but it's one of the big words of the Chapter. And it's one of the big words of the Bible. Then he believed in the Lord and he reckoned for righteousness. Now, I'd like to stop for just a moment and say a few words about the three important words of verse 6.

Now you'll remember that this text is the basis of Habakkuk 2:4, the just shall live by faith. So, we have then he believed by faith in the Lord, and he reckoned it, live, for righteousness, the just. So Habakkuk meditated upon this, thought about it, reflected upon on it and finally wrote unto the inspiration of the Spirit that magnificent compression of spiritual truth the just shall live by faith. That's what he saw from Genesis 15:6.

Incidentally, that shows us again how the students, the authors of Scriptures were students of Scripture. They studied the word of God. You must not think of them as being secretaries who waited in an office for someone to bring in a new tape so that they could sit down and type out the dictation that had been given to them. They studied the

word of God -- that's one of the reasons why they were the recipients of the divine revelation.

They were students of holy Scripture, they reflected upon holy Scripture, they made it part of that morning, noon and evening and even night time life as David may explain. They studied the Scripture and so they came up with these expressions under the guidance of the Holy Spirit that have been used by God: the just shall live by faith. That's Habakkuk's exposition of Genesis 15-6.

Now let's look at the first expression, then he believed in the Lord. Now this is the first occurrence of the word “believe” in the Book of Genesis and it's the first therefore in the Book of Bible. It is not -- this faith -- it's not described. Someone might say what is faith? What a good question. Moses would say, well I didn't bother to describe what it was I simply asserted it. Now theologians seeking to answer that natural question have suggested that faith includes knowledge; that is, if you have true faith you must have some substance that you believe. Knowledge, revelation, some word from the Lord. So when a man has faith, he must have some object of his faith.

He must be taught some truth, knowledge, *notitia*, then *assensus*, or assent -- he must assent to the truthfulness of that bit of divine revelation, the object of his faith. And finally *fiducia* or trust. Now, trust is simply the committal of a person to that particular bit of information, which he has received and which he has given assent. So faith is something that includes knowledge and it includes assent, it includes trust.

Faith is a strongly intellectual thing, then. It is not simply intellectual, but it is strongly intellectual. It is a belief of a particular proposition, which concerns usually a person as well as a truth. Now notice here, there is a great deal of debate in modern theology over the nature of biblical things. Are we to think of biblical things as propositional truths? For example, is the Bible a collection of propositional truths or is it simply a means by which we have an encounter in a personal way with God. Well of course we cannot solve a question like that, since the truth lies in the combination.

Notice this faith is personal; he believed in the Lord. Now the Lord had just said so shall thy seed be, but the text says he believed in the Lord. That is, he believed the thing that the Lord had said. He had knowledge, he assented to it, he trusted what the Lord said. By then so trusting it he believed in the Lord. But it was also propositional. The proposition he believed was, so shall thy seed be as he looked up and saw the stars. So it was a proposition to which he gave assent and credence, and faith, but it was also a proposition of a person. So his faith is personal and propositional.

Strictly speaking, it was a very broad kind of faith because when Abram looked up and was told, so shall thy seed be, why that particular promise stretched from the time of Adam, all the way down to the last soul that shall ever believe in the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, for there, all the sons of Abraham. In a sense it was a plan for history, it was God’s plan of the ages, so shall thy seed be, for that’s what God is doing.

He is gathering together a vast number of people called the sons of Abraham who are believers as Abraham was -- that’s why we are all here. Now what part in this the gasoline crisis has I don’t know. But the reason you’re here is that you might have a particular relationship to this vast plan that God is carrying out, God’s plan of the ages. And so when Abraham believed in the Lord, he was in a sense simply giving faith or his belief in God’s plan of the ages. He believed in the Lord as he told him about that vast number of people like stars in the heavens who should believe.

When I was in the insurance business in Birmingham, Alabama after I had gotten out of college, Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer of Dallas Seminary came for a weekend of meetings, and I attended the meetings and we met on Friday night and Saturday morning and Saturday night and then Sunday morning in the Wylam Presbyterian Church, and Sunday evening in the Wylam Presbyterian Church in Birmingham. One of the messages that Dr. Chafer gave was a message on justification. And he referred to this text, Dr. Chafer is a man who didn’t know any Hebrew and he didn’t know any Greek, but he had

picked up a lot of things from Bible teachers who knew a little something about both of the languages.

And he did know that the word for belief in the Old Testament was the Hebrew word *aman* from which we get the very common expression in English, it has been translated later into Greek as amen and then carried over into our languages amen or amen, which we attach to the end of our prayers. It means simply, truly, verily. It's the word that the Lord uses when he attaches verily, verily to his statements. To believe was -- fundamentally, it was a word that meant to be firm, reliant, and so it has to do with a kind of firm credence. But anyway Dr. Chafer said now, since this is the word from which we get the word amen, let's render that way. And so, he said when God, said so shall thy descendants be, then Abraham amened the Lord. He simply said amen to what God had said and that is the essence of true faith. It is to acknowledge the truthfulness of the words of God and rest upon them.

Now, I want to add one another thing here before we move on to “reckon.” You'll notice that there is no legal work that Abram has to do before he is justified. He is simply shown the stars and the text reads he believed the thing that the Lord had shown him. So there were no legal works to be done. He was not to run out and be baptized in order to be saved. He was not to run out and do some other sacramental work in order for the benefits of the saving work of God to become his. No legal work was required.

Furthermore, no cultic work was required. He was not required to offer a sacrifice in order to be saved. So, no sacramental work, no legal work was necessary before he was pronounced righteous before the Lord. He believed in the Lord and he reckoned it for righteousness. Now, in a moment there is sacrifice that takes place and his faith works because he believes and then obeys the Lord. He gets the animals the Lord tells him to get, and he carries it out. In a sense he shows that his faith is genuine faith by the works that he does, but it was the faith that saved him, that by which he was reckoned righteous. So, he believed.

The second thing is he reckoned it to him. Now that's the source of the doctrine of imputation. You see what happens in a Christian salvation is that when he believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, righteousness is reckoned to him. Righteousness is imputed to him. He is regarded as being righteous when inherently he is not righteous. It is on the basis of this statement that we have the fully developed doctrine of imputation in the New Testament. I will say more about it in a moment, but in the Old Testament this term was used to priestly judgments in the law of Moses. When the priest did something according to the word of the Lord, he reckoned a certain thing to be true. It was a judgment by the representative of the Lord in the Levitical law. So here, this is a judgment not by an intermediary like a priest, but by the Lord himself. He reckoned Abram to be righteous by virtue of the instrumentality of his faith.

And then finally, the third word is righteousness. Righteousness refers to a right standing before the Lord. Now, we've had the adjective, righteous, before in the Book of Genesis, chapter 7, verse 1, but this is the first time that we have the word righteousness so far as I remember. It is a term of relationship, it means that the person who is righteous is a person who is in the right relationship to the Lord.

Now let me say a few words, by way of little bit of theology. I know what you're thinking, my goodness, what have you been giving us up to this point if that's not theology? Well, that wasn't theology really, that was simply exposition. It is a rather interesting thing to me, we live in an age that is dedicated completely to precision in its increasingly technological life. Have you noticed the way people throw around the letters of the alphabet in different combinations? Do you have ever feel a little ignorant when they talk about ERP or PCR or NOP or BOOB or whatever it may be. The last is what you feel like, isn't it? You are so embarrassed, you are afraid to even ask what do those things mean that you are talking about?

Well, it's amazing to me on an agent, which we talk about these technological precise terms that in the Christian church we should have people running around insistent

that precision in faith and creed constitute some kind of menace. It does not. To be precise in what we believe is simply to be true to the word of God.

Unfortunately, that is the reason that when people do speak theology, others sit and do not understand anything. I received a letter last month from a former student of a theological school. He said in his letter to me that it’s been two years since he was at theological school and he said that at the school he had only one series of lectures from me, which happened to be two lectures on Bultmann’s theology. But he said, “Since my graduation in 1977, I have listened to all of your 132 tapes on systematic theology and many others on the books of the Bible.”

And then he mentions (and I say this in the spirit of the Apostle Paul not to glorify myself but to glorify the Lord), “Your clear and pure proclamation of the grace of God and Jesus Christ has been so influential on my life and intellect that I’m hardly the same person I was two years ago, understanding not only what it means to be saved by grace, but also what it means to be kept by grace, I’ve experienced a new strength to cope with life’s battering and the unleashing of certain abilities, which I knew I possessed but could never marshal by means of my own rebellious will. To those who say that doctrine and theology are not concerned with real life, I have but one word, bunk.” [Laughter]

This man is presently working towards his Ph.D in Reformation-Renaissance History. Well, I believe with all my heart that he is absolutely right. We have to be interested in the precision of the teaching of the word of God.

Now let me for a few moments say a few words about the ground of justification, its fundamental principle and the means of justification. There are three errors that Christians should be especially concerned about. I have and others have called them a trio of theological relatives, kinsmen, in that they are each the illegitimate offspring of natural religion fertilized by the gospel of Jesus Christ; That is, they are a combination of natural thinking and biblical thinking so that they appear to us in the garb of biblical teaching but at the same time are heresies.

The first is Pelagianism. Pelagius was a religious man. But he believed that man was able to keep God’s commandments and be without sin, and thus he did not need salvation by the grace of God. Romanism, which teaches us salvation that is to be gained by stages through working of a sacramental treadmill. It is by virtue of the fulfillment of sacramental duties that a person may have hope of justification, but never certainty as long as he is in this life. And then the unwitting error of Arminianism, in that salvation is traceable to the decision of man’s free will. The grace necessary to salvation is added after man by his free will and his free will decision takes the first step.

Listen to what the Westminster Confession of Faith says about justification. I don’t accept necessarily every statement in the Westminster Confession of Faith, but it is a good statement of biblical doctrine and this is the way it reads in justification,

“Those whom God effectually calleth, He also freely justifieth; not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous. Not for anything wrought in them or done by them, but for Christ’s sake alone, *solo Christo*; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing or any other evangelical obedience to them as their righteousness, but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ under them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.”

There are three great acts of imputation. I’ll just state them for the sake of time. These are great reckonings by God. First, he imputes Adam’s sin to all men, for Adam was the representative head of the race. Second, he imputes the sins of believers to Jesus Christ so that our Lord Jesus Christ became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in him and then third, he imputes God’s righteousness to believers, so that we are able to say that we are saved through grace.

So Adam’s sin is imputed to the human race. The sins of believers are reckoned to be Christ’s sins, reckoned to be. He dies under the judgment upon sins of others crying out, My God, my God, why has Thou forsaken me?, as He was the sin offering, made sin for us and then as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit when we come to faith, God’s righteousness is imputed or reckoned to believers by the unmerited love and favor of God.

Now the ground of justification then is the imputation of the righteousness of Christ made available by the blood that was shed upon the cross at Calvary. That’s why we preach the blood of Christ, why we preach his atoning sacrifice, and it’s why we preach also the work of imputation by which there is reckoned to us the benefits of what Christ did for us.

Now secondly, the fundamental principle therefore of justification is grace. We do not do anything in order to obtain this righteousness. In fact, Peter, to settle the question in Jerusalem said, in Acts chapter 15 and verse 11 that we believe that by the grace of God of our Lord Jesus Christ we should be saved even as they, and Paul in Titus 3 and 11 says the same -- of 3 and 7 says the same thing, that we might be justified by grace, by the unmerited love and favor of God.

Now the grace of God is an essential principle of our salvation. Number one, because of our human sin, we cannot do anything to please God. Consequently, if it depended upon something that we do, we could never be justified since they that are in the flesh cannot please God. So it’s necessary that if we be justified, we be justified as the unmerited love and favor of God by grace.

Furthermore, how would you explain the death of Christ? If it’s possible for men to be saved apart from the Lord Jesus Christ, why did Christ die? Why it would be the greatest blunder in the history of God’s plan of the ages and the perpetrator of it would be God himself, because he would permit the only holy righteous person who ever lived to suffer that ignominious death at the hands of guilty men, wicked men.

And finally in all of the work of God, the ultimate aim is the glory of God and if our salvation depended upon what God did and what we did, then we defied the glory. That’s the basic, unwitting error of the doctrine of free will because the result is that God gets part of the glory and men gets the other part, the decision of his own free will by which the grace of God is added and justification ensues. That’s why I am an enemy of the doctrine of free will in spiritual things and will be till the day I breathe my last, unless I lose my mind before then. [Laughter] G.C. Berkouwer said concerning justification by grace that, “If it is not wholly of God, we cannot explain the death of Christ; God would be throwing himself away.”

Finally the means of justification is faith. Faith is an instrumentality. It is not a work of itself, it’s an instrumentality by which we receive the benefits of the work of Christ. If we regard it as a work, it is a work given by God and thus not a human work. It’s the gift of God as the Westminster Confession of Faith has put it, for by grace are you saved, through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God not of works lest any man should boast. Through faith, by faith upon the basis of faith, never on account of faith, in the New Testament.

Well, I could go on forever but that would be bad, wouldn’t it? So let me close by saying this, Job expressed the problem in his own words in the 9th chapter in the 2nd verse of his book. He said, “I know that it is all the truth, but how should man be just before God, a God who says he will by no means clear the guilty?”

Well, Job’s problem and the problems of others along the same line find their solution in the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 4 and verse 5, “But to him that worketh not, but believeth in him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted as that which brings righteousness”.

If you are here this morning and you have never believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, you are lost, your responsibility before God is to keep the law perfectly, something you cannot do. Just take a look at the commandments of God. Take a look at the Ten

Commandments and answer the question, have you fulfilled, kept perfectly the law of God? If you have not, you are guilty. You are under divine judgment and condemnation. You are headed for a Christless eternity. You are lost, hopeless and helpless but God announces through the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ that there is an atoning sacrifice and the forgiveness of sins is possible for those who brought by the Holy Spirit come to faith in Christ. May God bring you to your lost condition, may he bring you to realize that you are totally unable in yourself to find forgiveness of sins, may you cry out for mercy, may God the Holy Spirit bring you to repentance in faith and trust and the experience of justification. Righteousness.

William Cunningham used to say, “The righteousness of God is that righteousness which God’s righteousness requires him to require, and the blessedness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that when we have believed in Christ, we stand before him justified, righteous, acceptable to the Lord God, the fundamental question of life is answered.” May God speak to your heart, come to Christ. Don’t stay in your lost and condemned condition. Come to him who has offered the all atoning sacrifice. Let’s bow together in a word of prayer. Shall we stand?

[Prayer] Father, how grateful we are for these wonderful expressions of the fundamental principles of spiritual living. Abraham believed in the Lord and he reckoned to him as that which obtained righteousness. Father, our trust is totally in the atoning work of Christ; we do not trust in men, we trust in Thee. We do not trust in our good works or even our free will or our sacramental activities. We trust only in Christ. Christ alone is our hope. O Father, if there are some in this audience who have not yet believed in Christ, give no rest nor peace until they rest in Him.

For his name’s sake. Amen.