

## JUSTIFICATION; SET RIGHT WITH GOD

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There once was peace throughout the universe. All the members of God's vast family trusted each other, and all of them trusted their heavenly Father. He in turn could safely trust in them. And where there is such mutual trust and trustworthiness there is perfect peace, freedom and security.

But something went wrong in God's universe. The Bible records a devastating breakdown of trust in His family, even to the extent of war in heaven. (Revelation 12:7-17) The brilliant leader of God's angels – once called Lucifer, meaning 'lightbearer', but now called Satan or 'the devil', meaning 'accuser' or 'adversary' – succeeded in persuading many of his fellow angels that God was unworthy of their faith.

**How sin came in.** Thus sin entered the universe, for as Paul explains, sin is in essence a violation and breach of trust. (Romans 14:23) Or, as John defines it, sin is an attitude of lawlessness and rebellion. (John 3:4, NEB)

All of God's children – both loyal and disloyal – have been caught up in the consequences of this revolt. Particularly have His children on this planet been disastrously affected by this epidemic of disaffection and distrust.

Through it all God remains our gracious and grieving Father. He does not want to lose any of His children. (2 Peter 3:9) 'How can I give you up, how can I let you go!' is His cry in Hosea. (Hosea 11:8) If only He could win us back to trust Him, He as our Creator could readily heal the damage done.

**Setting things right.** To set right what has gone wrong in His family, God must first persuade His deceived and hurting children to trust Him once again. All that He has done to make salvation possible, and all that He is willing to do for us is of no avail if we do not trust Him. There is no substitute for trust.

This explains Paul's answer to the jailer in Philippi. When the earthquake broke open the doors of the prison, the terrified man desperately inquired, 'What must I do to be saved?'

This was no time for lengthy explanation. All the jailer needed was Paul's memorably brief reply, ' "Put your trust in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." ' (Acts 16:25-34, NEB)

Some Bible translations quote Paul as saying, '*Believe* on the Lord Jesus.' Others have, 'Place your *faith* in the Lord Jesus.' Actually, all three words, 'faith', 'belief', and 'trust' are translated from the same Greek word used by the apostle.

**A question of trust.** All God has ever asked of His people throughout the universe is trust. But this is no trivial request. The faith that God desires is more than the mere acknowledgement of His existence and power. The devils have a faith like that, and in their distrust of so powerful a God they 'tremble with fear'. (James 2:19, GNB)

Our heavenly Father desires our love, our reverence, our admiration for His wise and gracious ways, our willingness to listen and obey – all freely given because we have found Him to be so utterly worthy of such regard.

But is it safe to trust in God? Surely it would not be wise to trust someone we do not know – and know well? God's enemies have charged that He cannot be trusted. Has God replied to these accusations? Do we find His answers a sufficient basis for our faith?

The sixty-six books of the Bible are a record of the lengths to which God has been willing to go to convince us of His trustworthiness.

There are no shortcuts to trust. Claims of trustworthiness prove nothing. The devil can make such claims. Hitler claimed he could be trusted, and history showed the folly of believing mere promises and claims without confirming evidence.

Even though God has been falsely accused, there is only one way to meet the charge. Only by the demonstration of trustworthiness over a long period of time and under a great variety of circumstances – especially difficult ones – can trust be re-established and confirmed.

**When God came among us.** This is why God in so 'many and various ways' demonstrated the truth about Himself, 'to our fathers' through the long centuries of Old Testament history. (Hebrews 1:1, RSV) Finally He sent His Son to live among us. And the way Jesus lived, the way He treated people, the things He taught about His Father, and most of all the unique and awful way He died, were the clearest revelation of the truth about the trustworthiness of God the universe will ever see or need.

What a price God has been willing to pay to restore and confirm trust in His family! And the costly demonstration was not only for the benefit of us sinful mortals. The whole universe has been involved.

Christ did not die for sinful men alone. He shed His blood for sinless angels too! For they, too, needed the faith-confirming message of the cross.

Paul explained this to the believers in Colosse. 'Through the Son, then, God decided to bring the whole universe back to himself. God made peace through his Son's death on the cross and so brought back to himself all things, both on earth and in heaven.' (Colossians 1:19, 20, GNB)

Twice in his letter to the Ephesians Paul wrote of God's purpose to bring His whole family back together again in unity and harmony. (Ephesians 1:10; 3:10) As Jesus said before His crucifixion, ' "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to me." ' (John 12:32, GNB)

**The cross – a magnet.** The 1611 first edition of the *King James Version* has Jesus saying that He will draw 'every man'. But later editions of this most famous of all English Bibles carefully indicate, by placing it in italics, that the word 'men' has been supplied. Paul's larger understanding of the involvement of the onlooking universe in the meaning of the cross indicates that the *Good News Bible* ' "I will draw everyone" ' is to be preferred.

Just how Jesus' death on the cross served to meet Satan's charges and prove the trustworthiness of God's character and government is too large a topic for this brief article. (See Romans 3:25, 26) But suffice it to say that ever since Christ cried out on Calvary, 'It is finished', the loyal angels have never tired of assuring God that He has won their everlasting love and trust. (Revelation 4:8; 5:11-14)

Only here on this planet are there any remaining doubts about the truthfulness and trustworthiness of God!

But the Bible records that through the centuries God has succeeded in winning back many sinners to be His trusting friends. One of the most celebrated of these was Abraham, and the Old Testament stories of his experiences and conversations with God are most encouraging examples of the kind of relationship our heavenly Father desires to have with His children.

Several times Abraham failed to keep faith with God. But finally he came to know and trust God well enough to be willing to sacrifice his son. The Bible offers a most enlightening explanation of how heaven evaluated this demonstration of Abraham's faith.

'Was it not by his action, in offering his son Isaac upon the altar, that our father Abraham was justified? Surely you can see that faith was at work in his actions, and that by these actions the integrity of his faith was fully proved. Here was fulfillment of the words of Scripture: "Abraham put his faith in God, and that faith was counted to him as righteousness"; and elsewhere he is called "God's friend".' (James 2:21-23, NEB)

This passage of Scripture, as translated in the *New English Bible*, contains the famous theological term 'justified'. Through the centuries Christian theologians have developed a considerable vocabulary of Latin origin to describe the provisions of the plan of salvation – such terms as 'justification', 'sanctification', 'propitiation', 'expiation', 'vicarious', 'substitution', and many more.

**'Justify' = set right.** These are grand old words and part of our Christian heritage. Jesus and Paul, of course, never used them. Jesus spoke Aramaic. Paul wrote in Greek. And, if you prefer, there are much simpler ways of translating the terms they used.

For example, the Greek word often rendered 'justify' may be understood more simply as 'set right', 'put right'. God has been working to put right what went wrong in His universe, to resolve the conflict of distrust in His family. When a person has been won back to trust, it can be truly said of him that he has been set right once again with God.

It is helpful to compare the *Good News Bible* translation of this passage in James about God's regard for Abraham's friendship and faith. 'How was our ancestor Abraham put right with God? It was through his actions when he offered his son Isaac on the altar. Can't you see? His faith and his actions worked together; his faith was made perfect through his actions. And the scripture came true that said, "Abraham believed God, and because of his faith God accepted him as righteous." And so Abraham was called God's friend.' (James 2:21-23, GNB)

Trusting friendship is the very essence of what God has always wanted of His children. He inspired Hosea to write to Israel, 'It is true love that I have wanted, not sacrifice; the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings. But they, like Adam, have broken their agreement; again and again they have played me false.' (Hosea 6:6, 7, Phillips)

For many years God pleaded with His erring people to come back and be faithful once again. Patiently He kept on calling, 'Come home, Israel, come home to the Lord your God! For it is your sins which have been your downfall. Take words of repentance with you as you return to the Lord; say to him, Clear us from all our evil.' And God promised, 'I will love them with all my heart.' (Hosea 14:1, 2, 4, Phillips)

The prodigal son did just this. He came home with words of repentance. And his father was so glad to see him that he didn't let him finish his confession. This is how our heavenly Father feels about every sinner who comes back, Jesus explained. (Luke 15:10-32)

But Israel in Hosea's day did not choose to come home. And God cried over them, 'My people are bent on turning away from me. . . . How, oh how, can I give you up, Ephraim! How, oh how, can I hand you over, Israel!' (Hosea 11:7, 8, Phillips)

God will miss us if we're lost. He will miss us if we don't come home. Think of the eternal void brilliant Lucifer will leave in the infinite memory of God.

But for many of us the revelation of the truth about our God, the picture of God presented through all of Scripture, leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4) and to faith. (Romans 10:17) In trust and confidence we look forward to seeing God.

Though our heavenly Father knows everything about us, we have no need to be afraid. God is forgiveness personified. He will cast all our sins behind His back. (Isaiah 38:17) He will 'send them to the bottom of the sea!' (Micah 7:19, GNB)

And He will not only forgive us but even treat us as if we had always been His loyal children. Remember how God spoke of sinful but repentant David as having always walked before Him, ‘ “with integrity of heart and uprightness” ’! (1 Kings 9:4, RSV) No wonder Paul could say that those who have been set right with God enjoy peace with their heavenly Father. (Romans 5:1)

How can we be sure that we have been set right with God? Or, if you prefer, how can we be sure that we have been justified?

Well . . . have we been won back to trust Him? Are we willing to listen and accept His forgiveness? Do we trust Him enough to allow Him to correct and heal us?

Have we, like David, welcomed the Holy Spirit to create new hearts and right spirits within us? Could we be trusted with the privileges of freedom and eternal life?

Has all rebelliousness gone, and has love taken its place? As more light has come, do we always say yes to the truth? For we have much yet to learn about our infinite God.

We may know as little theology as the thief on the cross. But if we love, admire, and trust in God’s Son as he did that crucifixion day, we are safe to admit to the kingdom. (Luke 23:39-43) Like Mary, it will be our greatest delight to sit at Jesus’ feet and hear Him tell us more about the Father.

You see, to be set right with God, all He asks of us is unreserved, whole-hearted trust.