

## The Certainty of Justification and Salvation

Every aspect of justification through faith assures us that we should be certain about it. Justification is the opposite of condemnation, and we think of both of them as before the judgment-seat of God. When people consider themselves before the Law of God and the wrath of God, which they deserve, there can be no certainty of justification and salvation at all. The Law and the fully-deserved wrath of God in the judgment can lead only to terror and despair. However, the Gospel is the antithesis to the Law. It tells the impious person that God declares him not guilty, for Christ's sake (Rm 4:5).

Justification and salvation come by God's grace. Grace means His favour, His mercy, His love, and His compassion. It is an insult to the gracious God to tell him that we are uncertain about what He offers us. Grace is not a quality in human beings that causes their justification. It is not infused into them. It remains in God, who shows His grace to sinners in Jesus Christ.

A person who is in debt is insecure. However, Jesus often used the wiping off of debts as a picture of what forgiveness is. Forgiveness and justification are not a process, which is built up over time as a person contributes to God's verdict by his good works. It is either-or. Either a person's sins are removed from him as far as the east from the west, or he is not forgiven at all because of his impenitence and unbelief. If the Word of God tells me that my sins, as debts, have been forgiven, I do not want to tell God that I doubt what He Word tells me.

David called the person to whom God does not credit his sin "blessed" (Ps 32:1-2' Rm 4:7-8). No one who is torn by monstrous doubt and uncertainty is blessed.

Forgiveness, justification, and eternal life are offered, conveyed, and sealed by the Word of God, which tells us that the cost of our sin has been paid, once for all. When Jesus died, He said, "It is finished." His sacrifice for our sin was complete. To say that we are uncertain about our forgiveness, justification, and eternal life is an insult to Jesus, who paid the cost of the sin of the world. The thought of death should also not make us uncertain, because God raised Jesus Christ, the sin-bearer, from the dead, as the guarantee that He will also raise us with Him. The promises of God, apart from the Law, assure the trembling sinner of God's favour.

God's great Day of Judgment is the occasion when He will deliver His verdict over every person, and no question ever trumps that one in importance (Rm 2:3-6). Many people are uncertain about their justification and salvation because they place faith and the Word of God the wrong way around. They look inside themselves to see whether they think that their faith is strong enough to rely on God's Word. The truth is that the Gospel is absolution. It tells us, "For Christ's sake, God has declared righteousness over the whole sinful world, including you." The Gospel is powerful for salvation (Rm 1:16). The Word of the Gospel creates and strengthens faith. And what is true now, that God declares me righteous, will also be true on the Day of Judgment. That will be when the righteousness of God comes into its own, visibly and finally. We sing, "Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness / My beauty are, my glorious dress, / Wherein before my God I'll stand / When I will reach the heavenly land. / Bold will I stand in Thy great day, / For who aught to my charge will lay? / Fully through these absolved I am / From sin and fear, from guilt and shame" (Hymn 327). By Jesus' "righteousness" we mean His obedience, actively and passively, in our place (Rm 5:18-19).

Our certainty about justification and salvation is also an aspect of what faith is. Faith is not merely a vague hope. It is not a leap in the dark that lacks any assurance. It is confidence, trust, and reliance. I can confidently lean against a wall if I know that it will not give way under my weight and send me crashing down. Faith leans on what Christ has done, yes, with Judgment Day in view. Paul wrote, "For I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him for that day" (2 Tm 1:12).

Often people are uncertain about their justification and salvation because they understand faith as if it were their decision or acceptance. Faith is purely passive in its origin, although in its nature it is actively clinging. Faith is receiving God's gracious gift. It is the receiving hand, which is stretched out because the Word of the Gospel causes it to extend, to receive God's forgiveness, justification, and life. Pietists obscured certainty because they were told to examine whether their repentance had been sincere enough. They looked at themselves and their own feelings about God's grace, instead of at Jesus Christ, their substitute. Christ's vicarious satisfaction is the object of saving faith.

Usually when people boast, they are sure of themselves. When a number of passages in the Bible say that justification through faith excludes boasting, they do not mean that believers have to be unsure of themselves. The boasting that justification through faith excludes is boasting about our own goodness, like that of the Pharisee in the temple. There is only one boasting for the Christian. Paul wrote, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world has been crucified to me and I to the world!" (Gal 6:14). Christ's cross should be our great boast. That is outside ourselves, but its benefit is certainly ours, as certain as the cure from snakebite that came to the bitten Israelite who looked up at the bronze snake that Moses had set up.

The Roman Catholic Church tries to keep its followers in uncertainty. The sixth session of the Council of Trent said, among other things: "No one can know with a certitude of faith that cannot be subject to error that he has obtained God's grace (Neuner and Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, 1534 (page 560). See also the canons of the sixth session, which anathematise the scriptural teaching of grace and justification. That is sadly and consistently the case. For them, faith is merely the beginning of a gradual process that extends throughout life and into purgatory. For them, faith receives its essential being through love. As a human virtue, it is still essentially the action of man. It is coupled with preparations and conditions. Their followers are told that no one can be certain, because works are coupled with God's grace and faith. How can anyone know when he has done enough good works to qualify? No one can ever say

when enough has been done to get a person out of purgatory. It is the very opposite to the certainty of St Paul in Romans 8. Since God has given His own Son, no one can condemn when He justifies. Nothing can separate us from His love in Christ. We are more than conquerors through Him who has loved us. If God is for us, no one can be against us.

In an article in *Logia*, Eastertide 2005, titled "Certainty of Salvation" (pp. 17-27), Gottfried Martens observed that Luther's "tower experience" should probably be dated 1518-1519 rather than 1512-1514. From the beginning of 1518 Luther had learnt to distinguish Law and Gospel. The point of departure for him was Mt 16:19, the promise of Christ, by which what is loosed on earth in absolution is also loosed in heaven. There is no longer merely prayer for forgiveness, but assurance that the Word of God itself generates faith through the promise of forgiveness.

Martens referred in particular to the several sections of the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, such as IV, 345-346 (*BSLK* 226; *Triglotta* 224-226): "For in civil courts and in human judgment, what is of right or of debt is certain, and mercy is uncertain. But the matter is different with respect to God's judgment, for here mercy has a clear and certain promise and command from God. For the Gospel is properly that command which enjoins us to believe that God is propitious to us for Christ's sake ... and this faith produces sure hope, because it relies upon the Word and command of God. If hope would rely upon works, then, indeed, it would be uncertain, because works cannot pacify the conscience, as has been said above frequently."

Martens points out that recent dialogue agreements, such as the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* between the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans, have become possible because the final judgment of God is largely obscured. The contrast between Law and Gospel has been marginalised. The connection between faith and the absolving Word of God has been obscured. The Lutheran certainty of faith has been allowed to be supplanted, through a progressive understanding of justification, by Roman Catholic certainty of hope. Rather, the believer must know that God not merely intends his salvation, but that He actually brings about this salvation. That is the certainty of faith.

We should not insult the sacrificial work of Christ by suggesting that it has been insufficient. We should not insult God's grace by treating His gift as incomplete. Paul wrote, "Moreover, in Christ Jesus, God raised us with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms, in order to show, in the coming ages, the immeasurable riches of His grace by being kind to us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. This is not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, that no one may boast" (Eph 2:6-9).