

Lecture 1: Justification as found in the Old Testament Scriptures

In these lectures, ‘justification’ means that a person is regarded and treated by God as free from all wrongdoing and as possessing perfect holiness. Such a person enjoys God’s favour and blessing. Justification means more than mere pardon for sin; it means that the justified person is regarded as having kept all God’s laws perfectly.

God’s laws are the only rules by which we can be either justified or condemned. Surely, therefore, we must say that justification is not possible for us, for we have all broken those laws. How shall we ever be justified? This is the subject of our book. The gospel of Jesus Christ is able to solve the problem.

The Bible describes two methods of justification.

- i. There was a time when a man and a woman lived free from all wrongdoing. I refer to our first parents, Adam and Eve. They were created holy and happy and free from any sin. God revealed to them that, by keeping his commands, they could remain in that holy, happy state, justified by their obedience. Disobedience, God said, would result in the loss of divine favour and in their death.

The first method of justification was by obedience to God’s command. But this method was only suitable for those people who were already holy and sinless. No sooner had Adam and Eve disobeyed God than this method of justification could help them no more. God’s law, broken by their disobedience, must condemn them as law-breakers: it could not justify them; i.e. it could not declare them holy and free from wrongdoing.

- ii. From the time that Adam and Eve fell into sin by their disobedience, it has been necessary for justification to be possible for those who are already sinners. *A second method of justification* was revealed by God when Adam and Eve were summoned to appear before him (Genesis 3:14-16). The words God spoke to them then meant that he was taking their justification into his own hands; that he would send to earth a Saviour, born of a woman, who would rescue sinners from Satan’s grasp.

This first announcement of God’s merciful purpose was made in very general terms. Yet it contained the same truths expressed so fully in the New Testament gospel. It was a method of justification *by God’s grace*. A divine deliverer was to come — Jesus Christ — who would suffer for sin in the place of sinners. God has *sovereignly* taken over the justifying of helpless sinners by his gracious gift of salvation.

Because of God’s promise of a Saviour, Adam and Eve, and subsequent Old Testament believers, were aware of mixed feelings: on the one hand there was a dread of God because of their disobedience to him; and on the other hand there was hope in God’s promise of their deliverance. These feelings were expressed by the rite of animal sacrifices offered to God.¹

An animal was slain. Its life-blood was shed. That expressed the truth of God’s wrath in judgment. The animal was innocent, and yet was killed *as a substitute for the sinner*. That expressed the truth of a divine deliverer being provided.

¹ It seems extremely likely that animal sacrifice was an institution of God, not a human invention. Abel offered ‘by faith’ (Hebrews 11:4), i.e. believingly. He must, therefore, have had some divine authority as the reason for his action. Belief implies something to be believed: in this case, a divine instruction to offer sacrifices.

Such Old Testament sacrifices obviously described in symbolic form the work of Jesus Christ — ‘the Lamb of God’ who would take away sin (John 1:29). By offering such a sacrifice and believing what it signified, Abel ‘obtained witness that he was righteous’ (Hebrews 11:4). Clearly, in those times — as now — all believers in God’s way of salvation by the death of an innocent substitute were — and are — justified. Unbelievers who reject God’s way of salvation must remain under the judgment of God for their sin.

In the flood which destroyed everyone except Noah and his family (Genesis 7:23), God demonstrated both his wrath on the sinners who clung to their unbelief and his justification of those obedient believers in the ark.

After the flood the revelation of the method of justification by God mercifully providing the Saviour became increasingly clear. The most memorable case of this justification by grace in patriarchal times was that of Abraham. His case is often used in the New Testament writings as an example of this second method of justification (John 8:56; Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23).

The next great era in the history of justification in the Old Testament was that introduced by the giving of the law to Moses at Sinai. The purpose of this law was two-fold — to govern the life of the Jewish nation and to educate them to be ready for the promised Saviour through whom, as Abraham understood, ‘all the nations of the earth shall be blessed’ (Genesis 22:18).

In its relation to the first of these purposes — the law as a guide to national life — the physical welfare of the nation depended on their obedience to it. In this national sense, their prosperity depended on their deeds. The law could be thought of as a national ‘covenant of works’.

As far as the eternal salvation of believers is concerned, the second purpose of the law was to convict of sin and so educate the Jews in preparation for the coming of the Saviour. The apostle Paul used the law in this way, to prove the impossibility of anyone being justified by keeping the law, for it could not be kept perfectly by sinful creatures.

The law, then, was not contrary to the method of justification in which God graciously provided a Saviour. Instead, the law was designed to contribute to the knowledge of that method. All the legal ceremonies commanded to be observed were meaningful symbols of spiritual things. The whole ritual of the Old Testament church illustrated different aspects of the work of Christ the Saviour. So the devout Israelite, looking forward, was justified by grace through faith in Christ no less than the Christian believer of New Testament days who looks back.

During the period of the law, God sent the Jews a succession of prophets to explain both the national and the spiritual significance of his law. In the time of David and Samuel there was a great increase in the knowledge revealed about the coming Messiah. Afterwards, Isaiah and other prophets described him in great detail. These truths were the basis of the faith of the true believers of the Jewish church.

In the opening pages of Matthew and Luke in the New Testament we find mention of several true believers who looked for justification by God’s fulfilment of his promise, given long before, to send a Saviour. Zacharias, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna and others ‘looked for redemption in Jerusalem’ (Luke, chapters 1 and 2).

The Old Testament, considered as a record of knowledge of spiritual life, has no parallel in any other ancient philosophical writers. The Old Testament is full of the gospel truth that God gives justification freely to sinners who believe in him. Only because this gospel was known and believed in the Old Testament days could the apostles base so much of their teaching about this method of justification on the experiences of Abraham and David (Romans, chapter 4) and other Old Testament believers (Hebrews, chapter 11).