

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Taken from *Selections from the Religious and Literary Writings of John H. Boccock* (Richmond, Va.: 1891).

Preached in the Capitol at Washington, 1859, and published by the request of some who heard it, on account of its containing what they considered an unusually simple and clear statement of the plan of salvation.

"Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ." -- Rom. v.1.

One of the greatest blessings of Christianity is that the inspired oracles tell us clearly on what terms we may have peace with God; so that if any man wants to make a new religion, according to which we shall *not* be justified by faith, but by something else which man is to prescribe and point out and require, this cannot be done until the inspired oracles be silenced, or bribed, or muzzled, or made to philippize, like the Delphic oracle against the Greek orator. No man in this country can tell how much the free, open oracles, without the mediation of human priesthood, are worth, till he sits down and thinks of the difference between a free soul, bound only to the throne of God, and a priest-ridden soul, bound for salvation to the throne of a human mediation and mortal dispensation of eternal life.

The subject of the text, and of the sermon intended to be founded on it, is the justification of the sinner's soul in the sight of God, before the judgment bar of God, and in the eye of the law. Nothing hinders our salvation but sin. If we can tell how to be *justified* from sin, or delivered from sin, or properly counted and treated as *clear of sin* in the eye of the law, and of justice, and of God, we shall have found the way of peace with God, and of salvation in heaven.

I. The Condemnation. II. The Object of Faith. III. The Nature of Faith. IV. Result.

I. When the text says, "Being justified by faith, we have peace with God," it implies that we have not peace with God if we have not been justified by faith. That is, the text takes for granted our condemnation as sinners under the scepter of law and justice. It is a voice uttered upon the brink of an abyss just escaped from. It is the voice of a man just come out of a state of condemnation, telling how he got out of condemnation, taking that condemnation for a granted fact, and pointing back to its deeps to show the road by which he has walked through those dark and dangerous deeps, and gotten out of them.

To see more clearly the nature of the justification, let us look a moment at the nature of the condemnation which precedes it.

Both are the *voices of law*. Condemnation is the voice of a sentence which law has pronounced on soul, body, or estate. Justification is a sentence, in like manner, which law has pronounced upon us in some one or all of our relations to God, or to each other.

The condemnations and the justifications of this world, and of this world's affairs, may be unjust condemnations, or unjust justifications, pronounced by erring and fallible laws, and, in matters not understood, may relate only to body or estate.

The condemnations and justifications brought to our thoughts by this word of God are things laid upon a *man's soul*.

They are laid on him by just laws, in matters fully understood, and both of them--both the condemnation and the justification--are capable of immortality, and, in certain circumstances, sweep down unchecked through eternity.

In the darkness of mind and condition which precedes justification, the sinner is condemned by the *law of God*--that law given to Moses on Mount Sinai--which was then written on stone with the finger of God, and had been written long before that by the same finger of God, on the tables of man's soul. That law justly condemns us, because such creatures as we ought to do the things commanded in that law, and we do not do them. This, then, is our condemnation, that we ought to the things commanded in the law, and we do not do them.

From our relation to God, we owe him those things, and a great many more besides; and we fail to pay the moral debt. We are thus condemned. It is vain to try to get out of this condemnation by atheism, for it is nothing else than an immense idiocy--one vast and total want of sense--to look abroad on this world of natural and moral things, the most wild, wonderful, deeply involved and complicated piece of machinery, by a thousand per cent., that ever was put together, and turn and say, *there is no God* that made it. It is equally vain to try to escape the condemnation of the divine law by sophistry denying that we justly owe those duties to God which the law commands us to pay; for the whole frame of human law, justice, manners, and good morals, is built around those duties, just as a ship is built around its main timbers, or a house around its skeleton frame. It is vain to try to escape the condemnation of the law by the cry of persecution as if the law was too strict and too sharp-cornered, and too fiery, and too severe for it has an *ally* in our own bosoms when our own *conscience* speaks out, and says: We really *do owe* those things to God; we ought to love him with *heart, soul, mind, and strength*; and we ought to perform those duties to him and to our neighbor which are the expressions of love and goodwill, and there is justly and truly no hardship in them.

And it is equally vain to expect to escape the law by merely *thinking* ourselves out of its reach--by choosing to count ourselves out from under God. If a man jumps from the top of a high building, or takes strychnine, or saws his throat with a razor, professing to believe, with some ancient visionaries, that there is no external world, and that it is nothing but the *idea* of a high building from which he jumps, or the idea of poison which he takes, or the idea of a razor with which he gashes his throat, he will die about as certainly as if he admitted the existence of high building, strychnine, razor and all!

And so the wickedest sensualists and libertines, who expect to protect themselves from the divine law by adopting sensualist and libertine opinions which deny the law, are in just as complete condemnation to it all the time as the brave humble man who looks the law in the face, and much more complete, indeed.

And the more we think of the law of God, and the more we apply its straight edge to our lives and thoughts and manners, and the more we try to think fairly on the subject, and the more we pray to the Divine Spirit to enlighten us, to guide us into correct views of the subject, the *worse*, the more *deeply*, the more *justly*, the more *thoroughly*, we feel under condemnation from it.

And the more we creep and feel around the barriers of God's dominion, and the dominion of his holy and just law, and try our soul's length of wing for escape, or try the height of the wall that we may leap over, or think of our powers of resistance or endurance, the more hopeless the whole thing, without divine

help, becomes.

How, then, shall man be justified before God? What a tremendous beam of light this book which answers that question casts upon this world!

II. The *answer* which this book gives to the question is, that we are justified by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The *direction* given the sinner to find the way is: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house"; and the invitation of the Redeemer himself is: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Let us strictly attend to the fact that faith in any kind of thing will not justify us before God. Faith in Moses will not justify, nor faith in Elijah, nor faith in Isaiah, nor faith in Matthew or Lute or Paul; but faith in Jesus Christ.

Saving or justifying faith, then, must be fixed upon the right *object*. Faith in a *wrong object* will not justify.

This shows why so much of the history of the dealings of God with our race is occupied with revealing his Son to be a great Prophet, Priest and King, Mediator, Redeemer and Saviour. It was necessary that there should be a proper object of faith for sinners to look to. That proper object of faith must be one who had kept the law which we have broken; and kept it not only for himself, but for us; some one who could dispel the moral darkness which hangs on us; some one who could defeat the enemies whom our sins have brought upon our souls. He must first work out salvation for man before he can be the object of man's faith, or have any salvation to give. He must be a man, because he must be under the law which we have broken, and which he is to keep for us. He must be God, because he has to render a magnifying and honoring obedience to the law--such as will flow over the measure of his *own debts*, and have some merit left for the salvation of those who shall believe on him. Now, this book which we call the Bible, or the Word of God, is the history of a long line of *priests*--human priests, most of them hereditary priests for some thousands of years. First, every man is the priest of his own family and tribe. Then comes the mysterious form of Melchizedek, king of peace and king of righteousness, like a long fresh shadow upon the dewy and golden morning light of history, in a peculiar priesthood, in which he is to have but one single successor, and that the great Son of the morning, the Son of God and Priest of salvation. And then come Aaron and his long line, through many rolling centuries, in a gorgeous and theocratic priesthood in a nation where the nation is the church.

But suddenly the line of the priesthood is *lifted from the earth* and from humanity, up into the realms of divinity. It ends in Jesus Christ. He is the other great Priest of the order of Melchizedek--the last great Priest of noble birth, that Aaron's line pointed to.

When the Son of God thus comes in his priesthood to finish all the types and shadows of other priesthoods, he too has a *victim* to offer. That victim is himself. He voluntarily delivers himself to Pilate, the Roman governor, and to the Roman centurion, who stand round the scene of his death as representatives of the Gentiles. He voluntarily delivers himself to Judas and to Caiaphas, and to the fierce multitude. He is condemned, derided, crucified, dead, buried. The earth quakes. The sun is darkened. The dead arise. It is the great sacrifice of the great real priesthood of the world, of which all other priesthoods are shadows, and after which there can be no other priesthood. And this sacrifice of himself is made that he may obey the law for sinners, which demanded their death, and thus be an object of saving faith for them.

This book contains also the history of a long line of *prophets*.

There are Moses, bringing down the words of God to the people from the awful mountain top, and Elijah, and Isaiah, and Daniel, speaking in God's name in the kings' palaces; and Ezekiel, lying mourning and weltering in captivity by the eastern rivers, seeing visions of God, and telling them to the people; and Jonah, speaking in the name of God to Nineveh, that great and crowded, but dimly historic city of the East; and Micah and Malachi, beholding the coming messenger and the glory of the latter day. This long line of persons had it for their office to speak the words of God to men, in the name of Jehovah, their God. This line of prophets comes to an end in a greater prophet than any of them--the Son of God! They spoke in God's name. He speaks in his own name. They cannot say, even if it is to save life, one word more or less than God commands. But he gives full and copious instructions in language which sinks into the very deeps of human thought, and reverberates through all the realms of the human conscience and reason. He goes about teaching *who shall be blessed, who shall be saved*, wielding the *key of knowledge*, opening the door of salvation, settling in a single sentence great deep questions, which had hopelessly puzzled and confounded all the sages of Greece and the East. The Divine Spirit of light and truth is given to him without measure. The eastern magi come to him. The line of the prophets sends out wings and ascends above the earth, and ends in this Divine Prophet. All prophets afterwards are his mouth-pieces. He is the Great Prophet; that he and his teachings may be the objects of justifying and saving faith to sinners; that they, being thus united to him, may receive light and life from him.

The book contains also chronicles in various forms, of a long line of *kings*. There is the first king, Saul, a head and shoulders taller in body than other men; there is David, shepherd, warrior, musician, poet, sinner, penitent, and royal friend of God, whose pen has furnished the chief part of the heart-language for the church of God in all ages; and Solomon, the wise man and the sinner; and Ahab, and Hezekiah, and all the royal line, down to a blind man, bending like a worm in abject dependence to the court of Babylon, and down to old Herod who killed the infant children, and young Agrippa who heard the Apostle Paul preach. But this long line of kings comes to an end in another of the tribe of Judah--a Bethlehemite and a Nazarene--the son of David and the Son of God. The scepter which was departing from Judah and falling away from earthly hands came into his hands. The crown alighted on his divine brow. He claimed to be a king. He expressly told Pilate so on the occasion of his trial for rebellion against Caesar: "*Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world.*" He makes war as David did, with his own and his people's enemies. He encounters Satan in temptation in the desert, on the temple's pinnacle, and on the exceeding high mountain. He turns Satan out of his haunts in the souls of men. He beholds him fall from heaven. He conquers sin by enduring the penalty due for it. He conquers death by enduring it and raising some from bodily death, and raising many more from spiritual death; and he conquers the carnal heart of thousands of men by subduing it to himself by his grace. As a great spiritual king, he is on a throne of grace, subduing men to himself, ruling and defending them, and restraining and conquering all his and their enemies, that thus as a king, he may be the object of justifying and saving faith to sinners, and by his power eternally defend and save them.

III. What, then, is *this justifying faith* which looks to this great object as prophet, priest and king, for salvation?

1. It is not a mere assent of the judgment to a historical proposition. It is that, but not that only. It embraces that, but it embraces more than that; for that is the faith of the *cast out fiends, who believe and*

tremble, but are not saved. It is a free act of the soul, between which and its God, in that free act, no human authority has a right to come. "*With the heart man believeth unto righteousness.*" Neither is it a dry and lifeless and inoperative faith; for while we must conclude with St. Paul that a man is "*justified by faith without the deeds of the law, and that God can be fully just and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus,*" yet we must also lend an ear to the voice of the Spirit of God by the pen of St. James: "*Even so faith, if it have not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?*" *As the body without the soul is dead, so faith without works is dead also.* While we must ever cling to and rejoice in the clear simplicity of the great truth, that the soul may look to Jesus Christ and live, independently of all that man can do; and that this is the very knife which cuts the cords of all religious hierarchies and despotisms over the souls of men; and that it is the article of a standing or a falling church; yet we must also keep in view that the faith which justifies and saves the souls is not *dead faith*, not *idle faith* nor *empty faith*, but faith which works by love, and purifies the heart.

2. And what *relation*, it may be asked, has this saving faith to Jesus Christ, its object. The method of salvation stated in Scripture is a looking to Jesus Christ with the eyes of the heart: "*as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life.*" In this place, the looking of a man bitten by a serpent in the Hebrew camp to the brazen serpent, the symbol by which he was healed, is made an illustration of the act of faith of the heart in believing in Jesus Christ. LOOK AND LIVE is the brief, clear plan of salvation; and faith is the lifting up of the soul's eye to Jesus Christ the Redeemer, where he hangs, suspended in view, in history, in all the glory of his priesthood, his prophet's office, and his high, bright, unearthly crown. He is a sacrifice and propitiation for his people's sins.

And faith is like the hand which the ancient Hebrew who stood by the altar and offered the sacrifice put forth and laid upon the head of the victim when he confessed his sins, and laid them on the victim's head. Faith is like the outcry of the soul up to God for help; like the outcry of sinking Peter, *Lord, save or I perish*. It is, so to speak, the *hand of the soul* which apprehends help extended to it, as the hand of the body of a man sinking in deep water apprehends a rope, or plank, or life-boat, thrown out to him. This faith is an act of *ours*, performed through the grace of God, and the inworking in our souls of the Divine Spirit's power, whereby we receive and rest upon Christ *alone* for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel. It is a *receiving* of Christ, offered as a *discharge*; a *coming* to him as a *friend*; a *drinking* of the fountain of life in him; a to him as a *beacon of hope and salvation*.

IV. The result of this act of faith is, that we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

This peace with God is not a mere fact of revelation, but it is a fact of the experience of individual men. It is one of those facts in religion which may be fairly put to the test of personal evidence. This gospel faith, it is true, might accomplish a mere legal reconciliation, without giving peace to the heart. But that is not the only peace which is meant. By *Peace of heart*, sensible peace is clearly meant also, *rest unto your souls*; the deliverance from burdens on the spirit; a peace which may become a matter of personal experience. Now, if it had not been the experience of unnumbered thousands, that faith in Christ does make our peace with God, experimentally, as *rest* to the soul, then experience would have been against this religion, or at least silent in its behalf. But infidelity is driven fairly out of court by the fact that the justified do experience this peace, the love of god being shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given them.

If ninety out of every hundred professors are hypocrites, the experience of the other ten fully, fairly and completely refutes infidelity and drives it out. Our peace with God is owing to the fact that *both parties* approved the Mediator and his work and scheme of salvation.

1. God approves of it, and man's conscience approves of it.

Every disease which Jesus healed by power above nature, proves God's approbation of him and his work. Nicodemus reasoned thoroughly correctly when he said to him, "*Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God, for no man can do these miracles that thou doest except God be with him.*" Not only do those express and audible voices of the very God himself, uttered from heaven, once at his baptism and once at his transfiguration, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased," prove that God is pleased in him as Mediator, but every soul in Palestine, whom his word of power delivered from its inhabiting devil; every man that had his blind eyes opened, or his deaf ears unstopped; every man from whom the ill-boding leprosy was dispelled; every Lazarus; every widow of Nain's son; every Jarius's daughter that he raised from the dead, proves that God was with him. Nay, those stupendous acts of his history--as stupendous as well attested, and as well attested as stupendous--his own resurrection from death and his ascension to heaven, and his opening the windows of heaven at the day of Pentecost, and pouring out the power of his Spirit on the hearts of men, prove the *divine* approbation.

And since that, earth, sea and air have been surcharged with proof that God is well pleased in him; the holiness which his word commands; his war against sin and Satan; his compassion for sinners; the kindred of the faith of which he is the object with every good thing, every holy thing, every blessed thing in all this life and the next, and the blaze of glory that his providence sheds around his word, his cause, his cross, and his crown, all go to the same point.

There is just as much proof that this faith satisfies the demands of our nature, the conditions of such a faith, and the cravings of our heart, as that it satisfies the demands of God's government. Every inspired shout of St. Paul in his Epistles; every joy in sorrow, light in darkness, and hope in despondency, which springs up in Christian souls; every song of the confessor in the midnight prison; every high and holy triumph; every death-bed on which is breathed out from the body a Christian soul, supported by divine grace; every heart cheered, supported, and made happy to in love; every company of hunted, persecuted worshippers in caves of mountains, made exultingly happy by psalms and songs of Zion; every company of worshippers, everywhere, who rejoice in the grace of God with full and thankful hearts, ripening for heaven, proves that man's nature is satisfied in Christ, and that he has peace with God, through the Lord Jesus Christ, "by whom also we have access, by faith, into this grace, wherein we stand and rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." Amen.