

## **WHEN ARE GOD'S PEOPLE JUSTIFIED IN HIS SIGHT?**

Obviously, this article concerns the issue of the timing of the justification of sinners before God, and this automatically concerns the timing of the imputation of the sins of God's elect to Christ as well as the imputation of Christ's righteousness to God's elect. God justifies His people upon the ground of Christ's righteousness which He has imputed to them. Let me make it clear at the outset that I have never considered the issue of the timing of justification to be a Gospel issue unless one's view of the timing either denies, confuses, or ignores the Gospel truth of the imputed righteousness of Christ being the only ground of salvation and justification before God and the only source and power of spiritual life in the new birth. I have always viewed the matter of justification before God by His grace and based on the merits of Christ's righteousness imputed as a many-faceted jewel of Gospel truth that forms the ground of salvation, the source of spiritual life, and the motivation for the

whole Christian life. By viewing justification this way, I have in the past described justification in the following ways:

(1) Justification involves God in eternity, before the foundation of the world, sovereignly and unconditionally choosing His people in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and literally giving them to Christ, entrusting their whole salvation to Him. This means that God conditioned the whole salvation of His chosen people on Christ and the work that Christ would come in time and accomplish for them by His obedience unto death. In other words, God the Father made Christ to be the Surety of His people. Christ is the Surety of the New Covenant (*Hebrews 7:20-22*), and the New Covenant is the actual fulfillment in time of all the conditions of the everlasting Covenant of Grace made before time. Christ has always been the Surety of the everlasting Covenant of Grace. A surety is one who is made responsible for the debt of others. This is when Christ obligated Himself to come in time and pay the redemption price with His blood (His

death) for their sins on the cross. So, what God had purposed before the world began was always sure and certain to be accomplished in time because Christ was (and is) the Surety of the covenant (**2 Corinthians 1:20**). So, it can be said that God's people were JUSTIFIED IN ETERNITY in the eternal mind of God as Christ has always been (and always will be) their Surety. This justification was always based upon what Christ would come in time and accomplish for them on the cross. **Revelation 13:8** expresses this in a negative by speaking of those who in the end would reject Christ and worship the unholy beast (the agent of Satan) and describes them as those "*whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.*" This clearly indicates that all for whom Christ was made Surety and for whom He would come in time and redeem them from their sins are those whose names were written in the Lamb's book of life (**Revelation 21:27**) before God laid the foundation of and created this world.

We must realize that if we believe what the Bible teaches, there has never

been a time when God viewed His people outside of Christ and without the merits of His death on the cross to be accomplished in time. Even when God's chosen people fell into sin and death by Adam, and even when they were (and are) born spiritually dead in trespasses and sins (by nature no different than the children of wrath), they were (and are) covered by God's everlasting covenant of grace in Christ and based on His righteousness imputed to them. This is in line with the Biblical revelation that all who are saved by God's grace were (and are) ***“the vessels of mercy, which He had afore prepared unto glory” (Romans 9:23)***, and objects of God's ***“purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began” (2 Timothy 1:9)***.

(2) Justification involves Christ as the Surety of His people also doing the work of a Substitute Who, as God in sinless human flesh, in time took their place under the law and redeemed them from sin by His death on the cross. It was on the cross that Christ established the righteousness based upon which God justifies all of His people.

This is the righteousness that God has imputed to all His people for their justification. Even the Old Testament saints were justified before God in their day based on the promise of God to send Christ in time to fulfil all righteousness on their behalf (*Romans 4:1-8; cf. Genesis 7:1; Psalm 32:1-2; Hebrews 11*). It is clear that the righteousness upon which God justifies all of His people was accomplished in time by Christ on the cross (*Isaiah 53:10-12; Daniel 9:24; John 19:30; Romans 3:24-26; Hebrews 1:3; 10:10,14*). Because of this, some view the actual justification of sinners in the mind of God as taking place at the exact time of the redemptive work of Christ in time – JUSTIFIED AT THE CROSS. Although it is true that this was the actual time that Christ paid the sin-debt of His people in full and brought in everlasting righteousness for them, it is not Biblically accurate to reason that because we are justified BY the cross that this means we were justified in God’s sight AT the cross. Some who state that God’s elect were justified AT the cross mean only that this was the time that the righteousness by which believers are justified was

established by Christ in His obedience unto death. This is in line with the Biblical revelation that all who are saved by God's grace were (and are) ***“justified BY His blood” (Romans 5:9)*** and ***“being justified freely BY His grace THROUGH THE REDEMPTION that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:24).***

(3) Justification involves God the Holy Spirit in time bringing God's people by God-given faith to see their own sinfulness and depravity and to see the glory of Christ as the Savior of sinners. They are brought by God to see who Christ truly is and what He accomplished for them in time as their Surety, Substitute, and Redeemer. God the Holy Spirit convinces them that Christ put away their sins by His blood and established righteousness for them by which they are justified before God. He convinces God's people of their sinfulness and that by nature they deserve and have earned God's wrath. He convinces them that Christ's righteousness, accomplished by His obedience unto death, is the only ground of their justification before God and the only source of spiritual

and eternal life. He convinces them that Christ died, was buried, and arose from the dead because of their justification (***Romans 4:23-25***). This is the work of Christ by the Holy Spirit to purge (or cleanse) the guilty and defiled conscience of chosen and redeemed sinners by giving them a saving knowledge of Him and His blood as the complete satisfaction to God's law and justice for them.

Because of this, some view justification as taking place at the time the Holy Spirit brings God's people to faith – JUSTIFICATION AT (OR BY) FAITH. Although it is true that this is the time when God's people are made aware of their justification based on Christ's righteousness imputed, it is not Biblically accurate to reason that when we are justified in the court of our own consciences by faith in Christ that this is the exact time we are justified before God in His court of justice. Justification at or by faith is only in the court of our own consciences (***Hebrews 10:19-22***). This is in line with the Biblical revelation that all who are saved by God's grace believe in Christ "***Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation THROUGH***

***FAITH IN HIS BLOOD, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; to declare, I say, at this time His righteousness: that He might be just, and the Justifier of him which believeth in Jesus” (Romans 3:25-26). It is in line with “having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience” (Hebrews 10:22).***

These views do not teach two or three justifications. Justification before God is a once-and-for-all matter in which God justifies His people in His sight. However, the working out in time of the righteousness upon which God justifies His people, and the application of the knowledge of that justification by faith in Christ are not the same as being justified IN GOD’S SIGHT. Also, the justification of sinners before God is not a process that takes place over time. It is a single act of God declaring His people to be forgiven of all their sins and righteous in His sight through Christ as their Surety and based on Christ’s righteousness imputed to them. However, the Bible clearly shows that all three of the gracious and powerful



operations stated above are involved in the blessing of the justification of sinners before God. All three are true and give us a comprehensive view, not necessarily of the timing of justification, but of what the justification of sinners before God in and by the Lord Jesus Christ involves. Whatever view of the timing of justification one holds, it is wrong to say that one or any of these operations of God excludes or denies the other. However, controversies and divisions have arisen amongst many professing Christians over the issue of the timing of justification. And, as stated above, we must realize that when we consider this, we are also considering the timing of imputation. Being justified before God involves the forgiveness of sins and being declared righteous before God based on Christ's righteousness imputed. Whenever God justifies a sinner, this means that God has imputed the righteousness of Christ to that sinner and does not impute sin to that sinner on the basis of the merits of Christ's obedience unto death (*Romans 8:33-34*).

Sadly, there are three positions concerning the timing of justification that have caused controversy and division amongst professing Christians. The first two are open denials of the clear revelation of Scripture and denials of the true Gospel wherein the righteousness of God is revealed. The third position can, and often does, deny the revelation of God's Word and the Gospel but more often causes discord and division among brethren. They are:

(1) DENYING THE NECESSITY OF THE REDEEMING WORK OF CHRIST AND DENYING THE NECESSITY OF GOD-GIVEN FAITH AND REPENTANCE – There are some who hold a view of eternal justification and wrongfully use it to deny the necessity of Christ coming in time to accomplish righteousness for His people and deny the necessity of the means and fruits of justification that God gives to His people in time. They claim that because God's people have been justified in eternity, it is not necessary for Christ to come and do His powerful work on the cross. I heard a man

preach one time that “God did not have to send His Son to suffer and die on the cross to save us from sin. He could just as well have snapped His fingers and we would be saved.” Whatever view of the timing of justification this individual held to, this statement is heresy, a denial of the true Gospel and the clear teachings of God’s Word. Whenever God justifies His chosen people, it is always on the just ground of the righteousness that Christ accomplished in time in His obedience unto death. Without Christ doing His work for His people in time, there is no justification at any time.

Others hold a view of eternal justification and use it to deny the necessity of the new birth, claiming that God’s people do not have to be born again in time, hear, and believe the Gospel of God’s grace in Christ. They take a fatalistic view of God’s eternal dealings with His people. It is the same with their view of the doctrine of election. They claim that because God chose His people in eternity, they could go through this life and never be born again and never hear and believe the Gospel finding out only at Judgment that they were

chosen by God. There are others who claim that all whom God chose and justified must be born again, but that the new birth does not necessarily include hearing and believing the true Gospel and being brought to faith in Christ and repentance of dead works and idolatry.

The Bible teaches that all whom God has chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, all whom God has justified in Christ as their Surety based on the merits of His obedience unto death in time, will be born again by the Spirit under the preaching of the Gospel and be brought to faith in Christ and repentance of dead works and idolatry. No one has a proper Biblical claim of being chosen or justified by God until he is born again by the Spirit and brought by God to faith in Christ and repentance of dead works. In this matter, allow me to answer an objection raised by one who is adamantly opposed to any view of justification in eternity. He claims that anyone who holds ANY view of justification from eternity has people “walking around not knowing they have been justified.” This is the same objection that false Christians bring against God’s

election of grace. God's people were chosen by God in Christ before the foundation of the world, yet they are all born spiritually dead in trespasses and sins. They are all born lost, not knowing the right way of salvation by God's grace. Someone said, "We cannot tell people that they were justified by God before they believe." This is true! We cannot be true to the Scriptures and tell any sinner that they were chosen of God, redeemed by Christ, or justified in God's sight before the Holy Spirit brings them to faith in Christ and repentance of dead works and idolatry. Faith in Christ and true repentance are the first evidences of election, redemption, and justification.

(2) JUSTIFICATION BECAUSE OF FAITH – Though very popular amongst professing Christians, this is a view of the timing of justification that actually denies the Christian Gospel. The Gospel reveals that Christ's righteousness imputed is the only ground of justification and the only source and cause of spiritual life in the new birth. The Holy Spirit's work in the new birth to bring sinners to faith in Christ and true repentance is the fruit and result of

justification. But many today who claim to be “Christians” believe that they are justified before God because they exercise their “free will” to believe in Christ and accept Him as their “personal Savior.” Their view can be stated as follows – First, they believe, and then God responds to their faith by saving them, justifying them, and regenerating them. This makes their believing the ground and cause of justification and not the grace of God revealed in Christ and His righteousness imputed. This view of the timing of justification is heresy, and all true Christians are commanded by God to separate from those who hold to such a denial of the true Gospel. They ***“abide not in the doctrine of Christ” (2 John 9)***. Any view of the timing of justification that denies that Christ’s righteousness imputed alone is the ground of all salvation, including justification before God, and that His righteousness imputed is the only source of spiritual life in the new birth, is a denial of the true Gospel.

(3) **HARDLINE, EITHER-OR, POSITIONS** – There are professing

Christians who hold to one particular view of the timing of justification to the point of accusing anyone who disagrees with them of being a heretic (an unbeliever). They claim that unless a person agrees with their particular view, that person automatically denies the true Gospel. They, therefore, reject and break fellowship with anyone who does not agree with their particular view. So, in dealing with this issue, we must consider the question – Can true Christians disagree on the timing of justification (righteousness imputed to God’s people) and still believe the true Gospel and remain in the unity of true Christian fellowship? Is this a matter that determines the validity of our faith and the basis for our fellowship?

In my own experience of studying the Bible over many years, I personally have run the gamut on this issue. I began by believing that justification takes place at the time of faith, not before. Not because of, or based on faith, but that God simply imputed Christ’s righteousness to His people within the context of bringing sinners in the new birth to faith in Christ

and true repentance. I knew then, and know now, that faith is the fruit and result of Christ's righteousness imputed for my justification before God. I knew then, and I know now that justification before God was not based on any so-called "imparted righteousness." I knew then, and know now, that faith comes by the power of God the Holy Spirit in the new birth and not by any goodness, power, or act of my so-called "free will." I knew then, and know now, that if God had not imputed Christ's righteousness to me and sovereignly worked in me, I would never have believed in Christ and repented of dead works and idolatry.

After hearing two men whom I considered to be believers, brethren in the faith, and fellow-laborers in the Gospel, teach that God justifies His people AT THE CROSS and not before or after that time, I began to consider this view, and it made some sense to me as I knew that the time of the cross-death of Christ the righteousness which God imputes to His people was actually produced and established. I began to study this in light of other Scriptures, and although I had some serious questions that



needed to be answered from the Scriptures, I moved away from justification at faith and began to embrace justification at the cross. The questions that I had on this matter will be listed later, but at the time, I thought the two men who had become dogmatic on this issue had already studied and answered the questions and could help me answer them. I was wrong. I know that God's Word never changes. There is no new revelation. But I also know that we grow in grace and in knowledge of Christ. As there is no new revelation, there is new illumination as God shines more of His light upon the Scriptures that we may grow in grace and in knowledge. I also know that if this illumination is of the Lord, it will not deny, change, or confuse the true Gospel of God's grace in Christ, and it will not divide brethren. In my growth in these areas, the Gospel message of Christ crucified and raised from the dead, wherein the righteousness of God is revealed, did not change, neither in its doctrine nor in the way I presented it.

Not being able to answer the questions I had concerning a view of justification exclusively at the cross, I

began, along with other brethren, to study the view of eternal justification. I was reminded that justification is unilaterally God's legal declaration that His people are forgiven of their sins and declared righteous IN HIS SIGHT based upon the merits of Christ's righteousness imputed alone (*Romans 8:33-34; 2 Corinthians 5:19-21*). And even though God's justifying His people in His sight ALWAYS leads to their experiencing the new birth and being brought to faith in Christ and true repentance by the work of the Holy Spirit within them, the act of justification is NOT a work within God's people. It is totally and exclusively an act of God and involves not how they view Him, but how He views them.

So, I have come from believing justification at the time of faith, to justification at the cross, to justification from eternity. But I can say without a doubt that as I have studied these views and arrived at my present position, the basic Gospel truth under which I was initially converted to faith in Christ and true repentance has never changed. The Gospel message wherein the righteousness of God

is revealed concerns the glorious Person and finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ as the only ground upon which God saves sinners. It is salvation conditioned on Christ Who, by Himself and for His people, fulfilled all conditions so as to secure their complete salvation. His righteousness imputed is the only ground of justification before God. WHEN God actually imputes this righteousness to His people is not a Gospel issue, again, unless one's view of the timing either denies or confuses Christ and His righteousness as the only ground upon which God saves sinners. True believers can and do disagree on this matter. To show this, let us consider each view in light of the true Gospel of God's free and sovereign grace in Christ Jesus –

## **I. JUSTIFICATION IN ETERNITY**

As stated, this is the view that God's elect have always been justified IN HIS SIGHT, even before the foundation of the world. And even though they all fell in Adam into sin and death, and because of their sin, they deserve and have earned nothing but God's wrath, God has always

viewed and accepted them in Christ as their Representative, Surety, Substitute, Redeemer, and Mediator. They are the subjects of an eternal and everlasting covenant of grace made between God the Father and God the Son before the foundation of the world. God chose them by His sovereign grace, gave them to Christ and from the beginning placed all responsibility for their salvation and eternal well-being upon Christ. They are (and have always been) ***“the vessels of mercy, which HE had afore prepared unto glory” (Romans 9:23)***. They are recipients of a salvation that was given to them ***“in Christ Jesus before the world began” (2 Timothy 1:9)***. They are the ***“election of grace” (Romans 11:5)***, and grace has always reigned ***“through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 5:21)***.

Some object to this view because they argue that if this is true, God’s elect do not need to be saved, and it was not, therefore, necessary for Christ to come and die for their sins. They also conclude that if God’s elect were all justified in His sight from eternity that it is, therefore, not

necessary for them to be born again and brought to faith in Christ. As stated above, it is true that there are some who hold a view of eternal justification that leads them to fatalism in denying God's appointed means to bring all whom He has chosen and justified to complete salvation. But this is not Scriptural. First, eternal justification does not mean that God's elect "have always been saved" in the sense of never having been lost in their sins. Justification before God is only one realm of salvation.<sup>1</sup> God's elect are not, in essence, born saved. They are born lost in their sins. And even though God has marked them out for salvation and has always viewed them in Christ, they are naturally born spiritually dead in trespasses and sins as enemies of and alienated from God. So, not only do God's elect need to be justified before God, they also need to be redeemed by the blood of Christ, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and glorified together with Christ. God's people need to be saved because they are all sinners who deserve eternal damnation and who are born lost in their sins. It is true

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<sup>1</sup> See Bill Parker's book, What is Salvation? A Biblical Study of God's Greatest Gift.

that in eternity God has been reconciled to them by the cross of Christ, but the redemption price must be paid for them by Christ, and they also must be reconciled to God by God-given faith in Christ. In fact, the Bible states that, as fallen in Adam and naturally born spiritually dead in trespasses and sins, there is no difference between the vessels of mercy and the children of wrath

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*Ephesians 2 – (1) And you hath He quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; (2) Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: (3) Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; AND WERE BY NATURE THE CHILDREN OF WRATH, EVEN AS OTHERS.*

Notice, this does not say that they WERE children of wrath, but that they were BY NATURE (as naturally born) no

different than the children of wrath. The fact that God chose them BY HIS GRACE IN CHRIST before the foundation of the world shows that they need to be saved from sin. If not for election and justification by God's free and sovereign grace, they all would be children of wrath. This is one thing that has changed in my preaching. I used to say that before God brought us to faith in Christ, we were under His wrath. I no longer say this. I will say that we deserve and have earned God's wrath, but not that we were ever under God's wrath. Why is this? Consider what God's wrath is!

(1) God's wrath is His just hatred of all sinners to whom sin is charged (*Psalm 5:5*). God loves His elect with an everlasting love, and that love is His purpose and intention to save them by His grace. His love for them was never earned or deserved by them, but His love for them has always been based on the just ground of Christ's blood and righteousness (*1 John 4:10*).

(2) God's wrath is His punishment of those to whom sin is imputed. This wrath is eternal separation from God in eternal death and damnation. God's elect have never (and will never) experience such wrath because Christ's suffered the equivalent of this wrath on the cross for our sins imputed to Him (*Matthew 27:46; Philippians 2:8*). We have to ask ourselves, "When was Christ made to be our Surety? When were God's elect viewed by God to be His vessels of mercy?" One verse that some quote to object to this point is *John 3:36* – "***He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.***" The first part of this verse describes God's elect who have everlasting life as evidenced by their believing on the Son (*John 3:18a*). The second part describes the non-elect as evidenced by their life and death in unbelief (*John 3:18b*). It cannot be said of God's elect that they "***shall not see life.***" That can only be said of those who never come to faith in Christ. The wrath of God abides on them.



(3) So far from making the cross of Christ unnecessary, justification from eternity actually made the cross of Christ to be very necessary. God chose His people IN CHRIST and justified them BY CHRIST before the foundation of the world for His glory. This means that their election (as well as all blessings of salvation) had to be determined based upon a JUST ground. God cannot arbitrarily elect or justify sinners. He must be a JUST God and a Savior. Understand that this view does NOT say that God simply justified them in eternity. It states that God has always been reconciled to His people BASED UPON WHAT CHRIST WOULD (AND DID) ACCOMPLISH IN TIME ON THE CROSS. In the everlasting covenant of grace, Christ was made their Surety. This means that all their sins (including the sin of their fall in Adam) was imputed to Him. He willingly agreed to take their sins upon Himself and come to earth in time to redeem them by His blood. If Christ had not come in time to pay the ransom price for their sins and establish righteousness that God had already imputed to them, there would have been no election of grace, no

justification of the ungodly, and no salvation or spiritual life for them. What God purposed before time had to have its accomplishment in time for the praise of the glory of His grace.

(4) Just as eternal justification made the cross of Christ necessary, it also makes the new birth and faith in Christ necessary. Why? It is because just as sin imputed demands death and condemnation, Christ's righteousness imputed demands spiritual and eternal life (*Romans 5:21*). God's purpose in saving His people is not simply to populate the new heavens and the new earth. His purpose is to glorify Himself in saving His people from their sins and bringing them to Himself by faith in Christ so as to worship and serve Him as His true children (*1 Peter 3:18*). To accomplish this fully, the Lord Jesus Christ had to die for their sins imputed to Him and satisfy God's justice, and they must be given spiritual and eternal life and be brought to final glory. Because they are justified based on Christ's righteousness imputed, they must be born again, brought to faith in Christ, and preserved unto final glory. All of this is the

fruit and effect of God's sovereign power and grace based on the righteousness of Christ imputed to His people. Having been reconciled to His people in and by Christ, it is God's glory to bring them to be reconciled to Him in and by Christ –

*Romans 8 – (10) And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness.*

*2 Corinthians 4 – (6) For God, Who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

*2 Corinthians 5 – (19) To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. (20) Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. (21) For He hath made Him to be sin for us, Who knew no sin; that we*

*might be made the righteousness of God in Him.*

*Colossians 1 – (19) For it pleased the Father that in Him should all fulness dwell; (20) And, having made peace through the blood of His cross, by Him to reconcile all things unto Himself; by Him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven. (21) And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled (22) In the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in His sight:*

So, eternal justification does not render the death of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit unnecessary. Just as in the case of God's election of His people before the foundation of the world, the Biblical view of eternal justification by the grace of God in Christ makes the death of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit essential. Just as faith in Christ according to the Gospel revealed to sinners by the Holy Spirit is the first evidence of being elected by God

before the foundation of the world, faith in Christ is also the first evidence of being justified by God before the foundation of the world. A man once objected to this doctrine by saying, “We can’t tell people they are justified before they believe the Gospel.” This is true in the same way that we cannot tell people they were chosen by God or redeemed by the blood of Christ before they believe the Gospel. Believing the Gospel is the fruit of justification before God based on the righteousness of Christ imputed. Where righteousness has been imputed by God to a sinner, at some point in time appointed by God, that sinner will be born again and brought to faith in Christ. I believe the best summation of this view is the following statement – Neither the cross of Christ nor the new birth changed God’s mind towards His people; both revealed what God’s mind always has been towards His people.

## **II. JUSTIFIED AT THE TIME OF FAITH IN CHRIST**

This is a very popular view amongst professing Christians, but do not confuse

this with the heresy of “justification BECAUSE OF faith.” This view basically states that at some appointed time, under the preaching of the Gospel, God sovereignly and effectually imputes the righteousness of Christ to a spiritually dead sinner and subsequently gives that sinner spiritual life in the new birth bringing him to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and repentance of sin and dead works. True believers who hold this view are adamant to point out that believing is not the ground or cause of justification, and it is no part of the righteousness by which God justifies the ungodly, but it is the immediate effect and fruit of having Christ’s righteousness imputed for justification. This view is based mainly on the Scriptural term “*justified by faith*” (*Romans 3:28; 5:1; Galatians 3:24*) and other verses that connect justification before God with the gift of faith –

***Galatians 2 – (16) Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, EVEN WE HAVE BELIEVED IN JESUS CHRIST, THAT WE MIGHT BE***

***JUSTIFIED BY THE FAITH OF CHRIST, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.***

The truth is that justification IS connected with faith, but this does not tell us anything specifically about the timing of how God has always viewed His people in Christ. Justification is connected with faith in the same way that election is connected with faith –

***1 Thessalonians 1 – (4) Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God. (5) For our Gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.***

***2 Thessalonians 2 – (13) But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: (14) Whereunto He called you by our Gospel,***

*to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord  
Jesus Christ.*

Both election and justification are connected with faith because all whom God chose and all whom God has justified will be brought by God to believe in Christ. God-given faith is the evidence of their election and justification. I have already addressed the heresy of righteousness imputed **BASED ON** (or because of) believing in Christ. There are others who believe that our believing is the means by which God imputes righteousness to us. This also denies the Gospel doctrine of salvation by grace based on the righteousness of Christ imputed and received by God-given faith. Again, Gospel truth shows us that Christ's righteousness imputed is the ground and cause of our justification before God. Our believing is the fruit and effect of Christ's righteousness imputed to us. Those who hold to the doctrine of justification at the time of faith are well within the parameters of Gospel truth if they know clearly that Christ's righteousness imputed is the ground of justification and faith is the fruit



of justification. One thing that every true believer can say concerning matters of justification before God and faith is that when God brings us to believe in Christ, we can rightly say that we are justified in the court of our own consciences. But if we are truly justified in God's sight, this has already taken place in the court of God's justice before we believe in Christ.

### **III. JUSTIFIED AT THE TIME OF THE CROSS**

There are a few who insist that God's elect were not justified until the exact time of Christ's death on the cross because this is the point in time that Christ actually redeemed God's people from their sins and established the righteousness by which God justifies them. They also insist that none of God's people in the Old Testament were justified before God until Christ actually died on the cross. It is true that Christ came to earth at the time appointed by God for Him to accomplish the will of God in redeeming His people and establishing righteousness for them by which God justifies them –

***Galatians 4 – (4) But when THE FULNESS OF THE TIME was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, (5) To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. (6) And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.***

There is no argument that the ground of justification before God was established in time by Jesus Christ at the cross. But to hold to a belief that this is the exact time that all of God's elect were actually justified IN HIS SIGHT, and not before, raises some very serious problems in light of other Scriptural revelations. One major problem is that this view can confuse justification before God with redemption by the blood of Christ. Justification before God is the debt of the sins of God's people imputed to Christ and His righteousness imputed to them. Redemption is the actual payment of that debt in time. A person can take on the responsibility of paying another person's debt and pay that debt at a later

time. This is what Christ did for His people. He became Surety of His people in the everlasting covenant of grace made before time. As their Surety and Substitute, He came and paid that debt in time as their Redeemer. God's people are truly ***“justified by His blood” (Romans 5:9)*** because His blood is the actual payment of the debt of sin. This does not mean that God could not have imputed the merit of this payment to His people before the payment was actually made. I will deal with this later.

Another major problem that those who claim that justification before God took place exclusively AT the cross, and not before, is what the Bible states clearly concerning the Old Testament saints. For example, the Bible states that the Old Testament saints were all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. They believed in the promise of God to send Christ (Messiah) into the world to save them by His blood. We know from God's Word that just like believers in the New Testament, believers in the Old Testament were naturally born as spiritually dead in trespasses and sins. If they ever came to believe in Christ, this

proves that they were born again by the Holy Spirit. They had spiritual life from above. God's Word teaches us that the source of all spiritual life is the resurrection power and life of the Lord Jesus Christ Who, as far as the Old Testament saints were concerned, had not yet come in time to die, be buried, and raised again. The resurrection power and life of Christ comes from the righteousness He established by His death on the cross as the Surety, Substitute, and Redeemer of God's chosen people, Old and New Testament.

The question is then raised – How could God justify them and give them spiritual life before Christ actually came in time to redeem them and establish righteousness by His death? The answer is that **GOD JUSTIFIED THEM BY PROMISE!** It was like a promissory note guaranteed by the will, power, and faithfulness of God as well as the certainty of Christ coming in time to accomplish what He promised to do – ***“For all the promises of God in Him are yea, and in Him Amen, unto the glory of God by us” (2 Corinthians 1:20).*** Consider what the Bible states about some of these Old

Testament saints as it applied to them in their day –

**ABEL – Hebrews 11 – (4) *By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, BY WHICH HE OBTAINED WITNESS THAT HE WAS RIGHTEOUS, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh.***

**NOAH – Genesis 7 – (1) *And the LORD said unto Noah, Come thou and all thy house into the ark; for thee have I seen righteous before Me in this generation.***

**ABRAHAM – Genesis 15 – (6) *And he [Abraham] believed in the LORD; and He [God] counted it to him for righteousness.* God’s Word tells us also that Abraham had Christ’s righteousness imputed to him before he was circumcised – *“How was it [Christ’s righteousness] then reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision” (Romans 4:10).***

DAVID – *Romans 4 – (6) Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, (7) Saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. (8) Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.*

All these men, like Abraham, believed that what God had promised for their salvation by His grace through the promised Messiah and His righteousness, God was able and faithful to perform. *Hebrews 11:13* tells us that “*These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.*” These saints did not die in a condemned state under the wrath of God and remain so until the time of the cross. God’s elect have never been under His wrath, and the Bible states clearly that all who have been brought to faith in Christ are NOT condemned – “*He that believeth on Him is NOT condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned*

*already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:18).* The ones described as *“condemned already”* are those who NEVER come to faith in Christ and true repentance. They are the ones upon whom the wrath of God continually abides – *“He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him” (John 3:36).* This describes all who die in their sins without a redeemer or a mediator – without Christ.

The Old Testament saints died in a justified state based on the certainty of Christ coming in time to die on the cross under the wrath of God for their sins. This was the eternal decree of the sovereign God Who views things from the perspective of eternity (not subject to time), Who never changes, and Who is never unfaithful to His promises. He is the One Who *“calleth those things which be not as though they were” (Romans 4:17),* because reality in God’s eyes is in His sovereign purpose and decrees. We see things only as they unfold in time, but God boldly says,

***Isaiah 46 – (9) Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like Me, (10) Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure.***

Consider again that the timing of justification, in and of itself, is NOT necessarily a Gospel issue. The Gospel issue (of life and death) is the righteousness of God, which is Christ's righteousness imputed as the one and only ground of a sinner's justification before God. Again, some can hold views of the timing of justification that deny this basic and central Gospel truth, but this is why we have the Spirit of God and the Word of God revealed to us so that we can know without controversy what the ground of salvation actually is and not deny this truth. Let me conclude this by showing why I personally have come to hold the view of eternal justification.



First, consider that ***“IT IS GOD THAT JUSTIFIETH”*** (*Romans 8:33*). God alone is the supreme Judge of all people, and justification before God involves strictly how God views these matters and how God thinks upon His people. A man once told me that justification is more than simply how God thinks. But, technically speaking, it is NOT “more than simply how God thinks,” because the thoughts of God are everything in the salvation (and justification) of sinners. How God thinks is how God acts. How God thinks is truth and reality. When we see God’s revelation of Himself in the Bible, He is showing us His thoughts and His ways. When we see from the Bible what the justification of sinners involves, God is revealing to us how He thinks and how He acts for His glory and our good. God’s thoughts are righteous and true. By nature, our thoughts are sinful and false. God says –

***Isaiah 55 – (6) Seek ye the LORD while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near: (7) Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man***

*his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. (8) For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the LORD. (9) For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.*

Secondly, among the things that God reveals of Himself in His Word to His people is that He is eternal and immutable. He never changes, and this includes His thoughts towards His people – *“For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed” (Malachi 3:6); “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with Whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (James 1:17).* When it comes to our understanding and attempting to explain God’s eternal mind and the workings of God in time, we are sadly ill-equipped. We cannot comprehend eternity and immutability. Our whole realm of thought is subject to time. But this is not so with

God. God thinks in terms of eternity and without any change in His mind. We can conclude, then, that God justifies His people based upon what Christ accomplished in time on the cross, but the cross did not change God's mind towards His people. The cross revealed what God's mind always was, and always will be, towards His people. We can also conclude that God reveals His justifying purpose and righteousness in Christ to His people by bringing them to faith in Christ. But their faith in Christ does not change God's mind towards them. Their faith in Christ also reveals what God's mind always was, and always will be, towards them.

*Acts 15 – (18) Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world.*

*Romans 8 – (29) For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. (30) Moreover whom He did predestinate, them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified:*

*and whom He justified, them He also glorified.*

Any serious Bible student knows that God's foreknowledge is not simply a pre-cognition of future events. God is not a "crystal ball gazer" who looks down through some "telescope of time" and only foresees the future. Foreknowledge is God's foreordained purpose and will which cannot be altered or hindered. It is His determinative will in which He sovereignly and powerfully works all things for His glory and the good of His people in Christ *"in Whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will: that we should be to the praise of His glory, who first trusted in Christ"* (*Ephesians 1:11-12*). Many people interpret *Romans 8:29-30* as proof of an exact time order of justification before God. The problem with this interpretation is that the whole construction of these two verses in the original Greek is in what Greek scholars call the "aorist" tense. Now, one does not have to be a Greek scholar to

understand the Bible, but it is helpful to know something about this unique tense.

The word “aorist” comes from a Greek word meaning “indefinite.” It is often defined as “an unqualified past tense of a verb without reference to duration or completion of the action.” In other words, it describes a simple occurrence of an action without reference to time. There is no direct or clear English equivalent for this tense. It is generally translated in English as simple past tense. I believe one of the best ways of understanding this tense is to view it as something that has already taken place and continues throughout time. **Romans 8:30** reveals the eternal predestinating purpose of God which, in HIS view, is all a past act, certain to be fulfilled in time, and which He accomplishes in time. All whom God has predestinated to be conformed to Christ will be called to Christ in the power of the Spirit through the Gospel. All whom God calls, He justified. Their calling reveals that God has justified them by His grace based on Christ’s righteousness imputed to them. All whom God has justified will be glorified. In God’s mind this is all an accomplished

fact. But in our experience of these things, they take place in time. Consider that none of us are yet **“glorified,”** but God reveals our glorification as an accomplished event. How can this be?

(1) It is because what God has purposed before time will most certainly have its accomplishment in time –

***Isaiah 46 – (9) Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like Me, (10) Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure: (11) Calling a ravenous bird from the east, the man that executeth My counsel from a far country: yea, I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it.***

(2) It is because all these glorious blessings of God’s grace are conditioned, not on us, but on Christ – ***“For all the promises of God in Him are yea, and in***

***Him Amen, unto the glory of God by us”  
(2 Corinthians 1:20).***

What we learn from all this is that a sinner’s justification before God is not a process that takes place over a period of time. Justification is an act of God as the supreme Judge of His people wherein He legally reckons them to be righteous in Christ, based on Christ’s obedience unto death as their Surety, Substitute, and Redeemer. God has always viewed His chosen people in Christ. And even though they fell in Adam into a state of sinfulness and death, God had already marked them out by choosing them and giving them to Christ. Christ was made to be their Surety and purposed by His Father to do for them what they could not do for themselves – satisfy God’s justice for their sins. As their Surety, Christ took upon Himself the whole responsibility of their sins. Like Paul said to Philemon, Christ said to the Father, “If they have wronged you, or owe you anything, put that on my account. I will repay it.” We all have certainly wronged God because we have all sinned against Him. The debt of our sins is something that

we cannot, and could not ever, pay. But before the foundation of the world, Christ was made our Surety. God ***“hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all”*** (Isaiah 53:6).

When God chose us in Christ and made us ***“vessels of mercy ... prepared unto glory”*** (Romans 9:23), He did so upon a just ground – the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, which righteousness Christ would come in time and work out for us on the cross. Because of our justification before God based upon the righteousness of Christ freely imputed to us, Christ sends forth the Holy Spirit to give us spiritual life and bring us to faith in Christ. So, technically speaking, God’s people were not justified before God at the time of the cross, but the ground upon which God has justified His people was established at the cross – ***“Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”*** (Romans 3:24). Also, technically speaking, God’s people are not justified before God at the time they are brought to believe in Christ, but the fruit of their justification is applied when they are brought to faith in Christ. They are justified in the court of their own



consciences when they are brought to believe in Christ, but this is the fruit of already having been justified in God's court

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***Galatians 2 – (16) Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.***

The phrase “*that we might be justified*” is another aorist tense verb phrase that has no reference to time but describes an ever-present standing of being justified before God by what Christ accomplished on the cross (His faithfulness to fulfil all righteousness for His people) and evidenced by the fact that we have believed in Jesus Christ. Again, all whom God chose before the foundation of the world, and all whom He has justified based on the righteousness of Christ imputed, shall be born again and brought by God to faith in Christ and repentance of dead works. No sinner has any Biblical right or basis to

claim to be chosen and justified by God until he believes in the Lord Jesus Christ and repents of dead works and former idolatry. I have stated the following many, many times throughout this book – Christ’s righteousness imputed is the one and only ground of a sinner’s justification, and it is the one and only source of a sinner’s regeneration and conversion.

In conclusion, let me emphasize that there is absolutely no reason for true believers, who know and confess that Christ’s righteousness imputed is the only ground of our justification before God, to divide over this issue. I told this to a brother in Christ who differed with me on the timing of justification when he was going to separate fellowship. He asked me, “Upon what basis can we have fellowship?” I answered with the following verse of Scripture –

***Galatians 6 – (14) But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by Whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world. (15) For in Christ Jesus neither***

*circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature. (16) And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.*

Brethren, let us all pray that the Lord will keep us all looking unto Jesus as the Author and Finisher of our faith, that He will not allow any of us to deny or compromise the Gospel by any view that we have on this, or any other, issue. Let us pray that He will keep us faithful to His Word and keep us together in His Word. Let us all ask ourselves, “In Whom and in what do we glory?” If we are truly brethren in the faith, we all glory in Christ and the merits of His obedience unto death for our whole salvation. With this in mind, let us state with the psalmist –

*Psalm 133 – (1) Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! (2) It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron’s beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; (3) As the dew of Hermon, and*

*as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.*