Escaping the Inescapable
(Zephaniah 1–2)

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There are some texts in the Bible that provide happy consideration. There are some texts that the poorest of preachers can expound and transport hearers into the heavenly places. The great gospel themes of salvation deserve the attention of faithful preaching. But there is another side of the gospel that is never easy to preach and is often unpopular to pulpit and pew alike. But it is a vital message that highlights and intensifies the beauty of saving grace. God's sovereign love for sinners is understood to be all the more gracious in the light of His just wrath and judgment of sinners. It is on this hard word of judgment that I want to focus our thoughts in this address. We must understand that the way and end of transgressors are hard. Those outside of Christ must heed the warning of determined doom and flee to Christ. Those who know the safe refuge of grace must be ever grateful and increasingly diligent to see others enter the stronghold of grace and to flee the wrath to come.

Our text is from Zephaniah—not a household name among the prophets but one whose recorded pedigree is traced back to the good king Hezekiah. Zephaniah preached during the reign of Josiah, the king of Judah (Zeph. 1:1), in an era of corruption between the forgotten reforms of Hezekiah and the yet-to-come reforms of Josiah that Zephaniah most likely helped to foster. Josiah had a lengthy reign from 640–609 BC, but Zephaniah's ministry most likely did not cover that entire span, which is evident, for instance, from the fact that Nineveh's fall in 612 BC had not yet occurred (2:13). In addition, many of the sins cited in Zephaniah 1:3–13 were common before but not after Josiah's

reforms. Second Chronicles 34 and 35 indicate that Josiah's reforms occurred in two stages, one in his twelfth year (628 BC) and the other in his eighteenth (622–621 BC). So, Zephaniah's preaching would have been between 640 and 621 BC, the first half of Josiah's administration, making him a contemporary with the early days of Jeremiah.[1]

Politically, socially, and spiritually, the nation of Judah tottered on the brink of collapse. To this depraved and perverted society, God raised up this prophet and gave him the authority of heaven (1:1) to warn sinners of judgment to come. As a messenger of judgment, Zephaniah announced the terrors of the Lord. He declared impending doom, called sinners to repentance, and unfolded the mercy of God. Zephaniah preached the whole counsel of God, a message of judgment and salvation.

As common for the prophets of his day, some aspects of his message had near fulfillment in the Babylonian captivity. Other points leap forward to that ultimate divine judgment yet to come. It was a hard word to hear—a message of bad news—about the terrors of the Lord to be unleashed in impending doom on the impenitent. But the announcement of bad news opened the way for a call to repentance and for the unfolding of the mercy of God—the good news. The certain judgment of sinners is reason for repentance. Whether we consider God's past or future work of judgment, there are lessons that are timeless and warnings that are universal. The God of *then*, whether the then of the past or future, is the God of *now*. Indeed, Zephaniah's message of judgment and grace assures us that God controls all of time and will vindicate His name in the final victory over sin and the ultimate salvation of His people. Here, I want to consider Zephaniah's timelessly relevant message on how to escape the inescapable.

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1. For more background on Zephaniah, see my introductory notes in Joel R. Beeke et al., eds., *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 1307–8.

Divine Judgment Is Just

God's judgment of sinners is never capricious; it is always earned and deserved. Nothing is quite as fearful as getting from God what is deserved. Zephaniah gives two reasons for this fearful thought.

First, divine judgment is just *because of who the Lord is*. He is righteous; Zephaniah refers to Him as the "just LORD," that is, the righteous Lord (3:5). The root word for "righteous" or "righteousness" designates straightness and by extension conformity to a standard of evaluation. It is not necessarily a moral term. For instance, a path of righteousness describes a straight path, one that does not curve or bend; a righteous balance is one that is accurate in regard to the standards for weights. But when the standard is God's law, it refers to moral conformity to that law. When it refers to God, it means that God conforms to Himself; He cannot deviate from who He is. That God is righteous simply means that He can be nothing other than He is. As the psalmist declared, "the righteous LORD loveth righteousness" (Ps. 11:7). This straightness or conformity to the divine self-standard extends to the entirety of God's person and perfections, one of which is His infinite, eternal, and unchanging justice. Because God is inflexibly just—as is evident in His person and expressed in His law—He cannot ignore or tolerate sin, which is so contrary to His character. For sin to go unpunished would mean that God could waiver from Himself. His justice means that judging sin is the right thing for Him to do. Judgment is inescapable.

Second, divine judgment is just *because of who sinners are*. Zephaniah sums up the cause of the justly deserved judgment: "because they have sinned against the LORD" (1:17). The word "sinned" is from a root that means "to miss a target" and vividly pictures the sinner's missing the mark of God's perfect standard. This is no trivial matter, as Paul highlights with his all-inclusive assessment that "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Remember that God is righteous and cannot tolerate the slightest deviation from His holy law. Significantly, Paul's conclusion in Romans 3:23 follows a detailed exposé of

specific sins. Similarly, Zephaniah, anticipating the Pauline logic, supports the general statement of Judah's sin with overwhelming and condemning evidence.

The first piece of evidence is that the people of Judah were *idolaters* (1:4–5). They were guilty of breaking the first and greatest commandment. God requires total devotion (Deut. 6:5) and He prohibits having any other god before Him (Ex. 20:3). The people of Judah did not love the Lord, and they replaced Him with gods of their imagination and of the world around them. Their worship was a hellish mixture of Baal worship (a perverse fertility cult), astrology and magic (hence the reference to "the host of heaven") with the professed worship of the one true God: they swore (or pledged their allegiance) to both the LORD and to Malcham (a common designation for Baal). What a clear case of missing the mark of the first commandment as they brought these other gods "before the Lord"! Tragically, they followed religious leaders into these transgressions. The Chemarims were renegade, black-robed priests of foreign gods who worked alongside the Levitical priests (the supposed legitimate clergy) in leading the people in this worship of nature and fate mixed with a bit of orthodoxy. They were attempting to cover all the bases, appealing to whatever god they thought would do them good. Religion was a way of manipulating God (or the gods) to satisfy personal needs; theirs was a religion for profit.

The manifestations of idolatry may look different today than they did then, although there are striking similarities with earth worshipers and cults led by charismatic leaders who appeal to and abuse the Bible for personal gain. But whenever and however God is reduced to nothing more than an instrument to be manipulated for personal satisfaction, His law is violated and those who are guilty are in jeopardy of judgment as violators of the third commandment (Ex. 20:7). God demands love and total allegiance. He will not share His glory with another. Violating those demands is warrant for judgment.

The second piece of evidence is that the people of Judah were spiritually *insensitive*: they "turned back from the LORD; and … have not sought the LORD, nor enquired for him" (1:6). They recoiled from the Lord, drawing back and shrinking away from Him. Not seeking the Lord equates to spiritual ignorance (Ps. 14:2). Without spiritual perception, they were alienated in their minds, insensitive to gospel grace, and doomed in their ignorance. This ignorance or insensitivity is no excuse; rather, it is another reason for God's just judgment. To have no bent toward God is to be bent toward hell. To have no heart for the Lord is certain doom. That was true then, and it is true now.

The final piece of evidence proving their sin is that the people of Judah were *unbelieving* (1:12). These on the verge of judgment had no excuse for their ignorance because God had given them His Word of warning. Throughout Israel's history, God had revealed Himself and His law; His expectations and demands were clear. Perhaps preaching to these same people, Jeremiah had said that the Lord had sent His servants the prophets "daily rising up early and sending them [an idiom expressing earnestness]: yet they hearkened not unto me, nor inclined their ear, but hardened their neck" (Jer. 7:25–26). Likewise, Zephaniah addressed those who refused to believe the Word of God. He refers to God's searching thoroughly with a light to expose and punish those "that are settled on their lees: that say in their heart, The LORD will not do good, neither will he do evil" (1:12). The picture is of wine that has not been drained from its dregs and has become thick and viscid. The image describes those who are confirmed and hardened in their obstinate denial of God, His Word, and His work. They interpreted the delay of what the prophets had warned as evidence that God was inactive and incapable. Peter encountered skepticism in his day regarding the same issue (2 Peter 3:4–15). There is something about the status quo that lulls unbelievers into complacency and denial of impending doom. But unbelief is a deadly sin that damns the soul.

The evidence is overwhelming. Sinners are justly under the wrath and condemnation of the righteously just and holy God. Zephaniah is a pattern for modern preachers to be bold in exposing sin and faithful in proclaiming the righteousness of God that includes His just wrath "against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (Rom. 1:18). Part of gospel preaching involves warning sinners of impending and inescapable judgment.

Divine Judgment Is Terrible

It is a "fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31) who is a "consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29) and just in all His ways. Zephaniah highlights three reasons why divine judgment is so terrible.

First, divine judgment is terrible *because of its source*. The judgment is divine. The prophet designates this judgment as the day of the Lord (1:7, 14). The day of the Lord became a frequent theme in prophetic preaching. This expression occurs around twenty times in the Old Testament with corresponding designations occurring around fifty more times (a day belonging to the Lord, a day belonging to the Lord of Hosts, a day of vengeance belonging to the Lord, a day which is coming of the Lord, or simply "that day"). Significantly, some of the most detailed expositions of the day of the Lord are in the first of the writing prophets (Obadiah and Joel in the ninth century, at least if you date the books as I do), and it carries through in both the major and minor prophets. Zephaniah's description and development of the day is one of the most explicit.

The day of the Lord refers to God's intervention into time in spectacular fashion to bring retribution against wickedness and deliverance for righteousness. The day of the Lord is when eternity breaks into time. It does not refer to a literal, twenty-four-hour period; rather, it refers to an indefinite period of time when God interrupts human history in an extraordinary way, either for judgment or blessing. It will be a good day or a bad day depending on one's relationship with the Lord: the same day can be a dread

for sinners but a delight for saints. Indeed, there are components of this day that include punishment, salvation, and the blessings associated with the Messiah and His kingdom. It is true that God providentially governs the events and circumstances of time. Providence is His ordinary work. The day of the Lord, on the other hand, is His extraordinary and unique work. This extraordinary and unique work can be accomplished with or without the use of secondary means. But even when secondary means are employed, it is clear that they are just instruments in God's hand to accomplish His special purpose. For instance, locust plagues happened in regular cycles, but there was something about the locusts in his day that Joel recognized as extraordinary: "Alas for the day! for the day of the LORD is at hand, and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come" (Joel 1:15). And that was just a precursor of a more devastating one that was imminent, terrible, and irresistible (Joel 2).

It is important to understand that there have been multiple days of the Lord, all of which are typical or picture prophecies of the final, eschatological day that is yet to come. For instance, the day of the Lord against Edom (Obadiah) and Babylon (Isaiah 14) are matters of ancient history, but those past days point to the appointed day when God "will judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17:31). On one hand, some components of Zephaniah's announcement of the coming day of the Lord were fulfilled in Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem, but even those elements that are past illustrate timeless and universal principles. On the other hand, some components have yet to be fulfilled referring specifically to the eschaton. It is better to view the day of the Lord in these terms rather than in multiple fulfillments. Prophets often juxtaposed near prophecies with distant prophecies, telescoping the events without reference to time intervals that separated the events.

That this day of the Lord is extraordinary divine activity is underscored by all the verbs expressing the divine initiative. Consider the following verses: 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 12, 17. The prerogative and execution of judgment belong to God. It is not surprising

that Nahum asked, "Who can stand before his indignation? and who can abide in the fierceness of his anger?" (Nahum 1:6). It is not surprising that the psalmist answers the question, "the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment" (Ps. 1:5). There is no contest, no appeal, no excuse, no escape. Joel describes the inescapable terrors of this day: "Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision: for the day of the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision" (Joel 3:14). The thought here is not that those in the valley have the opportunity to decide their own fate; on the contrary, they are in the valley of that which has been divinely decreed. They have no hope; they have no way of escape. Amos illustrates this inescapability in almost tragic comedy when he compares trying to escape the day of Lord with a man who flees from a lion only to encounter a bear, then to be bit by a serpent when he thought he was in the safety of his home (Amos 5:19).

Zephaniah, in a most startling expression, puts in the bold the divine source of the judgment when he equates the day of the Lord with the Lord's sacrifice that He has "prepared," or more literally, "consecrated" (1:7–8). The sacrifice speaks of satisfaction. Justice must be satisfied. What a statement this is that stands as testimony to God's inflexible justice that must be appeased! That satisfaction will be made either by the sinner himself in eternal damnation or in Jesus who satisfied God's infinite justice in His sacrifice for His people. The message of judgment is the occasion for the message of grace.

Next, divine judgment is terrible *because of its horrors* (1:15–17). In verses 15 and 16, Zephaniah describes "that day" in six different ways linking the word "day" with some dreadful characteristic. I'm not sure how far to take it, but it is reminiscent of the six days of creation when God made everything good. Here it is as though God reverses creation, making everything bad.

1. It will be a day of wrath, referring to God's rage and fury—His passionate yet controlled outbursts of anger. Significantly, Peter describes the final day in terms of a fire that will engulf

the heavens and the earth (2 Peter 3:7, 10, 12). It is as though the heat of God's anger kindles the flames of destruction.

2. It will be a day of trouble and distress, referring to the effects of God's outpoured wrath. From every side, sinners caught in this judgment will feel pressure and suffocation as they are choked by the fumes of God's anger in the flames of hell.
3. It will be a day of wasteness and desolation, referring to the utter ruin and emptiness of catastrophe.
4. It will be a day of darkness and gloominess—without a ray of hope and with all the fears and anxiety associated with the dark.
5. It will be a day of clouds and thick darkness. The darkness image is repeated but the mention of clouds is suggestive of the clouds engulfing Sinai at the giving of the law, which is the righteous standard that sentences the guilty to the terrible day.
6. It is a day of the trumpet and alarm. The trumpet or ram's horn was the instrument used in the course of battle, either to warn of the approaching enemy or to signal advances or retreats. Here it sounds the alarm of danger, but it is too late to retreat. The battle has been lost; escape is impossible.

Verse 17 vividly sums up the horrors of this judgment: "I will bring distress upon men, that they shall walk like blind… and their blood shall be poured out as dust, and their flesh as the dung." Bringing distress literally has the idea of harassing or pressing hard against something or someone with hostility. Zephaniah's description of the objects of God's hostility as walking like blind men parallels Isaiah's when he pictures sinners as walking in darkness, groping for the wall like the blind, and stumbling at noon as in the night (Isa. 59:9–10). It is a picture of total hopelessness. That their blood is as dust and flesh as dung indicates the worthlessness of life. The point of the comparison is not so much the *quantity* of what is poured out but the *quality*. Blood, and by metonymy the life it represents, is as worthless as the dirt under foot. Their flesh is like dung. Even after employing every bit of my exegetical

skills, there is no way around it: dung is dung. It is not pretty, but it is a vivid statement of what is despised. If the six days of verses 15 and 16 allude to a reversal of creation, verse 17 is the climax of that analogy. In the original creation, man was made in the image of God, the apex of the creation week. But sin has corrupted and marred that image. In the final judgment, that which enjoyed honor in time is forever dishonored in death. The description of judgment is terrible. How much more terrible will be the reality!

Finally, the judgment is terrible *because of its certainty*: "The great day of the LORD is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly" (1:14).[2] The language expresses both certainty and imminence. This is no idle threat; it is about to happen. This teaches us something important about the predictive words of Scripture. Predictive prophecy tends to use the language of imminence. This means that regardless of how distant the prophecy may be from its actual fulfillment, the prediction is made as though its fulfillment were impending, or about to occur. This intentional temporal ambiguity is one of the most significant features of prophetic language. Since the time of fulfillment is not specified, the application of the prophecy is not limited. For prophecies to be precisely dated would effectively rob a given prophecy of its purpose to affect the present of all the pre-fulfillment generations.

In one sense, the fulfillment of this day of the Lord prophecy against Jerusalem was intended for that specific generation. In another sense, this prophecy—like each of the multiple day of the Lord prophecies throughout the prophetic corpus—project an eschatological day that will signal the end of time as we know it. This does not mean that a single prophecy is fulfilled over and again. Rather, each prophecy finds single fulfillment. Nevertheless, even the past days typify the final eschatological day. Every judgment of the ungodly parallels and points to what God will do on that final day.

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2. Compare with verse 7, where "at hand" is the same as the word "near."

My point of application is this. Just as certain as Jerusalem's destruction occurred in the sixth century BC, so certainly will the climactic day of the Lord occur when God has determined. Do not misinterpret the longsuffering of God that delays its execution to be evidence of divine inactivity. Heed the warnings now while there is time and opportunity so that when the day comes, you may be "found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless" (2 Peter 3:14). Otherwise, the judgment is inescapable.

Divine Judgment Is Discriminating

Zephaniah gives a glimmer of hope in what is mostly a hopeless message. Two thoughts set the tension.

First, judgment is *inescapable to unrepentant sinners*. This is true because of its extent. God's ultimate judgment is universal. Verses 2 and 3 reveal that no part of the world is exempt. The prophet depicts a destruction of man and beast that is as wide and sweeping as the flood that destroyed the world in the days of Noah. Note Peter's link between the flood and fire of judgment (2 Peter 3:5–7). There will be no place to hide in that day (see Amos 5; Revelation 6). The judgment is also particular in that it extends to every class of man from royalty to servants (1:8–9). This contrast is an example of merismus, a literary device that uses opposites to designate totality. Referring to the extremes of royalty and servants includes all classes in between. God is no respecter of persons—not in salvation, not in judgment.

This judgment is also inescapable because of the futility of human efforts. Verse 17 pictures the helplessness of sinners who walk around as blind men groping and grabbing what they can but to no avail. Verse 18 describes the absolute inability: "Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the LORD's wrath." All buying power is deflated; they cannot buy or bribe their way out of judgment. Psalm 49 makes it clear that self-redemption is impossible because the cost of the soul is more expensive than any can afford; every attempt is futile (Ps. 49:8). This is why Peter says we are not redeemed with corruptible

things like silver and gold (1 Peter 1:18). Man has no currency recognized by God. Self-salvation is impossible.

Second, judgment is *escapable to repentant sinners*. There is a message of hope after all. There is a way to escape judgment that defies or at least is contrary to human reasoning. At the sight of danger, common sense says to flee the potential destruction: go as far and as fast possible in the opposite direction. But when the danger is divine wrath, faith demands that we run to the source of the destruction for mercy.

Zephaniah gives the invitation to those in jeopardy under the sentence of destruction: "Gather yourselves together, yea, gather together, O nation not desired" (2:1) and then "Seek ye the LORD, all ye meek of the earth" (2:3). The invitations are instructive. The word "gather" comes from a root meaning "to pick up stubble." It pictures one who is stooping down; it is a picture of humiliation. The expression "not desired" literally has the idea of turning pale, depicting the shame resulting from the consciousness of sin. It is an image showing the contrition and confession that are such essential components of repentance. Seeking the Lord is a form of the verb (*piel*) that functions as an iterative—a repeated and habitual seeking. The meek are not those who are humble as a character trait, but rather those who are poor and needy who are helpless in themselves; those without any resources to care for themselves. To so seek the Lord is to find Him for His promise is that He allows Himself to be found of those who seek Him with all of their heart (see 2 Chronicles 15:2; "if ye seek him, he will be found of you"—tolerative *niphal*). Rather than trying to outrun judgment, running to the Judge is the only hope. It is those who acknowledge they are helpless who find help in Him.

Zephaniah offers the hope of safety for those who repent: "it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the LORD's anger" (2:3). This is not an expression of doubt but of hope. It is not presumption but faith that God will be found of those who seek Him. The unbreakable promise is that those who come unto Him He will in no wise cast out (John 6:37).

But the prophet as a preacher of the gospel presses the urgency of this invitation to repent. Verse 2 iterates the urgency: "Before the decree bring forth, before the day pass as the chaff, before the fierce anger of the LORD come upon you, before the day of the LORD's anger come upon you." Once the day of the Lord comes, it will be too late: escape will be impossible. Do not find yourself in the valley of decision; flee to God against the coming day. And the day is coming; like the chaff blowing in the wind, the day is rushing ever near. It is both foolish and impossible to speculate or set dates for the coming of the day of the Lord. But one this is absolutely certain: today it is nearer than it has ever been before. Today is the day of salvation; tomorrow is the day of destruction. Be certain that justice will be served—either in self forever or in Christ.

The paths to eternity may differ—either through death or Christ's return, but the destination is the same. Outside of Christ, there is nothing "but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation" (Heb. 10:27). There is no escape. In Christ, we have the hope of glory (Col. 1:27). The only way to escape the inescapable is through Jesus, the only way, truth, and life.

Abiding in Christ
(John 15:1–17)

Rev. Bartel Elshout

Beloved, when we read the first books of the Bible, we can quite readily relate to the historical narrative of Genesis and certainly to the opening part of Exodus. Exodus tells us the amazing story of God redeeming the people of Israel to be His peculiar people. Whenever we read the law, we are reminded that Jehovah delivered them, redeemed them from the bondage of Egypt, and led them through the Red Sea. However, when we then consider the book of Leviticus with its various prescribed sacrifices, its detailed descriptions of animals to be sacrificed, and the profuse shedding of blood, one may wonder what the overriding purpose of this elaborate sacrificial system is. What helpful instruction can we extract from this as New Testament believers?

The profound truth that emerges is that God was not merely interested in redeeming a people unto Himself, but rather that His ultimate objective and desire was to bring His redeemed people into an intimate and functional relationship with Himself. Through the sacrificial system, and thus on the basis of shed blood, God provided everything necessary for His redeemed people to live in daily fellowship and communion with Him.

The Lord achieved this primarily by instituting the morning and evening sacrifices. In so doing, He perpetuated the worship pattern established in the Garden of Eden, where He met with Adam and Eve every morning and evening in the cool of the day. For our first parents, these daily encounters with God were the highlights of their day—sacred moments when God drew near

to His son and daughter and communed with them, and they, in response, worshiped Him.

As a continuation of that foundational pattern of communion with Himself, God prescribed that a lamb would be slain every morning and evening. By way of these sacrifices, God communicated daily to Israel, "I am your God, and you are My people." These sacrificial lambs, of course, pointed to the Lord Jesus Christ, who, as the Lamb of God, would come in the fullness of time to take away the sins of the world. Because of these sacrifices, God's redeemed people could live in daily fellowship and communion with Him. The Lord knew, however, that His redeemed people would remain sinful and thus be prone to stumble and ready to halt. Yet God, as a manifestation and affirmation of His covenant faithfulness, remarkably made full provision for such a people—a people bent toward backsliding.

Every morning at nine o'clock, by way of the bloody sacrifice, God reassured His people: "My dear people, I am your God, you are My people, and today I am ready to forgive your sins—your sins of commission and omission." At the end of the day, at three o'clock, another lamb was slain, and God, as it were, said to His people, "Though you have sinned against Me, I want you to know that I am still ready to forgive." Thus, God made daily provision for the sins of His redeemed people so that He could dwell in their midst and live in daily fellowship with them.

However, the slaying of the lamb was not the only component of this daily ritual. The crowning event of the morning and evening sacrifices would be the priest entering the sanctuary on behalf of the people of Israel. There, he would offer up the praises of Israel to God, thereby causing the entire nation to enter symbolically and representatively into His presence. Meanwhile, the godly would wait outside for God's response. Following the transaction at the altar of incense, the priest would emerge from the sanctuary and, on God's behalf, pronounce His blessing upon His people. In essence, He thereby communicated, "I have accepted the sacrifice. Because of this bloody sacrifice, I can bless you and keep you, and

I can cause My face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. I can lift up My countenance upon you and give you peace."

Why have I elaborated on this, dear congregation? To make the point that God redeemed His people for a purpose, namely, to have an intimate, loving, and functional relationship with them. The blessed application of this truth for us is that God also desires such intimate fellowship with His people today. Christ came into the world for that very purpose—not only to redeem us or save us from our sins, which is the negative aspect of His work, but also for the positive purpose of establishing a deep, personal, and intimate relationship with us.

Christ came into the world so that on the basis of His redeeming sacrifice, He could bring us back into an everlasting love relationship with God. My question, therefore, is this: "Do you have a vital and loving relationship with God in Christ? Is that a living reality for you?" You may respond, "Why do you ask?" My answer is that I wish to demonstrate that Christ has made full provision for His children to enjoy intimate and continued fellowship and communion with God through Him.

With God's help, we are therefore going to focus on John 15:4–5. Here, we read God's Word and our text for this sermon: "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: he that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing."

We will focus on abiding in Christ as the very essence and secret of a vital and fruitful spiritual life. Abiding in Christ involves at least three key aspects. First, we have a *pressing command*, for when Christ says, "Abide in me, and I in you," He is not making a suggestion; rather, He is issuing a loving command, an imperative. Second, there is a *profound reality*, expressed in verses 4b and 5a: "As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches." Third, we have a *precious promise*: "He that

abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing." In other words, "without abiding in Me, you cannot bear fruit."

A Pressing Command

John 15 is part of the remarkable discourse Christ proclaimed to His disciples in the upper room on the eve of His crucifixion. One could argue that there is no other portion of Scripture where Christ so fully opens His heart and fully communicates who He was and why He came as He does in John 14–17, and thus, certainly also in John 15.

In our text, Christ uses an analogy that would have immediately resonated with His audience, especially His disciples—the analogy of a vine and its fruit-bearing branches. Vines grew everywhere in the land of Canaan. Christ often used analogies from nature to communicate foundational truths. While commentators have speculated on what might have prompted Christ to use this analogy, the central truth is clear: He likens the relationship between Him and His children to the intimate relationship between a grapevine and its branches.

A vine by itself, without its branches, would be nothing more than a useless piece of wood. Apparently, the wood of a vine cannot be used for anything else other than sustaining its branches. Thus, what makes the vine useful and attractive is that it produces branches that bear abundant fruit. For seven years, I lived in southern Ontario and was surrounded by vineyards. Annually, I witnessed the process of vines bearing abundant fruit.

It should at once be obvious that there is an intimate connection between the vine and its branches. The vine finds its expression and identity in its branches and the fruit they bear. The glory of the vine comes to full expression in its branches and the fruit they produce. It is that profound connection between the vine and its branches that Christ uses to illustrate the essence of what it means for believers to abide in Him.

At the same time, however, it should be equally obvious that branches on their own—apart from the vine—are useless. Without being connected to the vine in a real and living way, branches cannot but be fruitless and useless. Such branches will be good for only one thing: to be cast into the fire. Though such branches appear outwardly to be connected to the vine, their fruitlessness and barrenness prove that there is no living connection with the vine—and, thus, that they are dead branches.

As to the living branches of the vine, our text beautifully illustrates that all of Christ's energy is devoted to the branches that are united to Him. His focus is on causing those branches to bear spiritual fruit. At the same time, He wishes to underscore our complete dependence on Him as believers—as living branches. He does so, however, to encourage us that everything we need to be spiritually fruitful is to be found in Him. He wishes His people to delight in the fact that in Him there is an inexhaustible and abundant supply of spiritual grace and strength.

What is unique about this vine is that, by nature, no one is a branch of it. By nature, we are branches of the wild vine of Adam, which produces only evil fruit. However, when the Holy Spirit performs His mighty, heart-renewing work in us, He unites us to Christ. Thus, the spiritual union that unites Christ and His people is forged by the Spirit of Christ, who thereafter dwells both in Him and in His people. When the Spirit performs His marvelous work of regeneration, He cuts us off from the old vine of Adam, and He grafts us into the new vine of Christ, who is the second Adam (or the last Adam).

Dear believer, this truth is both humbling and encouraging. To be grafted into Christ required something profound: the vine itself had to be wounded. Just as in nature, where grafting requires the vine to be cut to receive a new branch, Christ, the true Vine, had to be wounded so that you, a sinner and a child of Adam, could be grafted into Him. In the realm of nature, even skilled horticulturalists sometimes fail in their grafting efforts. However, when the Holy Spirit cuts us off from Adam and grafts us into

Christ, His grafts never fail. Once He unites us with Christ, that relationship is permanent and abiding.

In the opening verses of this chapter, Christ tells us that His Father is the husbandman. The Father, as the husbandman of the vine and its branches, is wholly committed to ensuring the fruitfulness of the branches. Why? Because the Father loves His Son, and consequently, everything He does is for the glory of His beloved Son. Dear believer, the overarching purpose of your redemption is the glory of God's Son—a redemption and a glory that will endure forever.

The Father's eternal objective is that you would begin to resemble His beloved Son. Thus, He chose you in His Son in order to become like His Son. Paul tells us that believers have been predestined to be conformed to the image of God's Son (Rom. 8:29). Dear believer, to achieve this, Christ declares that His Father will not hesitate to use the pruning knife of affliction in your life. I witnessed this pruning process firsthand when I lived in the Niagara region of southern Ontario. Every spring, vineyard owners and their servants prune the vines to ensure that they will be as fruitful as possible. Similarly, the Father's pruning in your life—by way of affliction and perplexing providences—is designed to bring about abundant spiritual fruitfulness for the glory of His Son.

Your heavenly Father is, therefore, fully committed to your fruitfulness and will do whatever it takes to make you a fruitful branch. The more fruitful you are, the more glory it will bring to His Son, which is both His desire and ultimate goal. To achieve this, the Father will cut away everything in your life that prevents you from resembling His Son. Likeness to God's Son is the essence and defining feature of spiritual fruitfulness.

Dear believer, it is the Father's design that you would demonstrate Christlikeness, that is, that you would bear the fruit of Christ's Spirit as defined in Galatians 5:22–23. Without biblical evidence of growing Christlikeness, one cannot claim to belong to this Vine. It is impossible to be united to Christ without becoming like Him. Union with Christ will always manifest itself in likeness

to Christ because the life that flows out of Christ is, by its very nature, entirely focused on Christ.

This blessed, experiential interaction with Christ is the core element of Spirit-wrought spiritual life. Thus, Jesus says in John 6:45, "Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me." Consequently, if the Father, by His Spirit, works irresistibly in you, you will be irresistibly drawn and attracted to Christ. As already stated, the life that proceeds from Christ will always be oriented toward Christ.

This means that the Father, who, by His Spirit, will lead us to His Son, will therefore also purify and cleanse us by His Word, thereby molding us to reflect the image of His Son. This means, dear believer, that if you are facing trials or afflictions, you need to understand that the Father has one goal in mind: to make you die to yourself and conform you to the image of Christ. Paul has that growing conformity in mind when he writes in Romans 8:28, "All things work together for good"—that is, all things must and shall work together to conform you increasingly to Christ.

Dear believer, you have been chosen in Christ, given to Christ, redeemed by Christ, drawn to Christ, and united to Christ so that you may become like Him and live forever for His glory. This is the great purpose of your redemption. Yet remarkably, Christ tells us that while this vital relationship with Him is secure, He desires that our relationship with Him would be fully functional and that we would fully enjoy its benefits. Thus, because we are united to Him, He calls us actively to abide in Him by faith.

What does it mean to abide in Christ? Though it sounds so simple, the very essence of this spiritual exercise can prove to be rather elusive. A seasoned and teary-eyed believer once shared with me that he had read Andrew Murray's precious book, *Abide in Christ*, twenty times but still struggled to grasp its full meaning. His honesty was humbling, for abiding in Christ means more than merely coming to Him. Simply put, it means that we must stay with Him, walk with Him, live in fellowship with Him, and

cleave to Him. How profound and yet simple is Christ's loving and urgent imperative!

Christ here calls His people to enjoy the full advantage of their relationship with Him. Everything you need for your spiritual life is to be found in Him. Therefore, He urges us not merely to come to Him and then wander away, but rather to stay and abide with Him. By faith, we are to continually draw from the inexhaustible resources found in Him, appropriating all the blessings and strength He offers. Such abiding in Christ is the secret to a healthy, fruitful, and vibrant spiritual life.

The notion that Christ would only provide His people with an occasional and intermittent token of His favor is a profound distortion and misrepresentation of God's Word. Christ's desire—the desire of the very Christ who saved and redeemed you—is for you to reap and enjoy all the benefits of redemption. He longs for you to live out of His fullness and receive grace upon grace (John 1:16). What a beautiful statement this is! In the original Greek text, the phrase "receiving grace upon grace" conveys the image of one grace tumbling over another grace—grace upon grace. How consistent this is with what He declares in John 10:10, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." Christ, therefore, exhorts His people, saying, "By faith, you must abide in Me, appropriate your position in Me, and make Me the absolute priority and fountain of your spiritual life."

In Acts 11:23, Peter exhorts believers that "with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord." This is exactly what Christ is asking of us—to cleave to Him with purpose of heart. As you nourish your body daily, so you must also nourish your soul every day. Abiding in Christ requires abiding in His Word. Being alone daily with Christ and His Word in our closet is not an extraordinary expression of spiritual life but rather an essential discipline of a healthy spiritual life.

Despite the busyness of life, you must carve out time daily to be alone with Christ and His Word, for the more you abide in His written Word, the more you will abide in the living Word, Jesus

Christ. Many can testify from experience that seasons of faithful engagement with Christ's Word lead to spiritual flourishing, while times of neglect bring decline. Yet Christ makes it clear that your spiritual life need not decline. Everything you need for a vibrant, healthy spiritual life is to be found in Him.

Christ, therefore, lovingly summons His people to abide in Him—in His wounds, in the merits of His active and passive obedience, in His finished work, in His promises, and in His Word. Even more compellingly, He urges us to "continue" (or abide) in His love (John 15:9). Carefully note the wording here. He does not command us to abide in our love *for Him* but rather in His unwavering love *for us*—a love so profound and all-encompassing that we cannot fully comprehend it. That love is eternal, infinite, and steadfast. Christ underscores this by declaring that He loves His people with the same love with which the Father loves Him (John 15:9). This incomprehensible and unconditional love fuels His abiding commitment to our spiritual well-being and His desire for us to flourish spiritually.

By commanding us to abide in Him, Christ makes it clear that though we are entirely indebted to His gracious work in us, we must not be passive in our spiritual lives. Instead, He calls us to actively focus on Him and exercise faith in Him. His command is reasonable because, as true believers, we are partakers of His Spirit. Christ is not asking the impossible when He exhorts us, by virtue of His Spirit dwelling in us, to take full advantage of our relationship with Him. Christ wants believers to know and understand that the riches to be found in Him are unsearchable and inexhaustible. By abiding in Him, Christ desires, as stated earlier, to minister grace for grace to us out of His infinite fullness.

When we read of Enoch and Noah walking with God, Scripture sets before us a model for the Christian life. Though they were Old Testament saints, they were walking with (or abiding in) God—in the Christ yet to be born. Christ's message in John 15 is that walking with God—abiding in Christ—should be the norm of the Christian life rather than the exception. Christ, therefore,

lovingly reminds us, "My dear people, My dear branches, since everything you need to nourish and sustain your spiritual life is found in Me, abide in Me."

Peter beautifully emphasizes this profound truth when he writes, "According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue" (2 Peter 1:3). This verse could not be clearer: all things that pertain to life and godliness are given to us through Christ. As stated earlier, Christ said, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). Regrettably, however, believers often live far below these privileges. Why? Because we fail to abide in Christ.

The call to "abide in Me" is in the present tense, meaning that Christ exhorts believers to abide in Him continually and habitually—to abide in Him again and again. If you've ever read Andrew Murray's classic work on abiding in Christ, you will know how masterfully he unpacks this essential spiritual exercise. He explains that abiding in Christ is the most powerful and effective remedy against the commission of sin. Murray once stated, "You cannot consciously abide in Christ and sin simultaneously." He is not implying that Christians can live sinlessly but rather that abiding in Christ and sinning are mutually exclusive activities. When we are focused on Christ and are consciously abiding in Him, how can our souls then be attracted to sin? Yet we are so often vulnerable to sin because we have not learned to abide in Christ daily. This truth is one of the essential components of what Christ is teaching us here and should be deeply convicting to the believer.

A Profound Reality

In Colossians 1:10, Paul calls us to "walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God." Christ drives this point home when He says, "As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in

the vine; no more can ye except ye, abide in me." Fruit-bearing—demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit as described in Galatians 5—is impossible apart from abiding in Christ. While it is possible to live a moral, outwardly decent life without abiding in Him, such a life lacks true spiritual fruitfulness.

There are professing believers who appear to be connected to Christ the vine but are, in reality, fruitless branches. Christ makes it clear that it is impossible to be fruitful or Christlike unless you obey His loving command to abide in Him. When Christians fail to abide in Christ, which sadly happens all too often, it results in an experiential disconnect—not a real disconnect. Although the objective relationship between the believer and Christ is secure and unbreakable, the subjective experience of that relationship can be negatively impacted by sin and backsliding.

The experiential disconnect that will then occur between Christ and our souls will resemble what occurs when a child's disobedience negatively impacts the parent-child relationship. Though the relationship itself will never be in jeopardy when a child sins and offends the parent, a breach of fellowship will occur. That breach cannot be healed until the cause is addressed through repentance, sorrow, and forgiveness. Similarly, when believers neglect to abide in Christ, disregard His Word, and fail to walk in fellowship with Him, an experiential disconnect will manifest itself.

Christ urges His people to abide in Him because doing so is essential for consistent and enduring fruitfulness. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit unless it remains connected to the vine and draws life from it, believers cannot be spiritually fruitful without a real, living connection with Christ. Experientially abiding in Him by faith is the key to a flourishing spiritual life.

Again, Christ emphasizes in this passage that continual fruit-bearing should be the norm of the Christian life. However, this is only possible through continually abiding in Him. True, vital Christianity consists of a daily and functional relationship with Christ. As stated earlier, God instituted the morning and evening

sacrifice so that His redeemed people could live in daily fellowship with Him—fellowship that was possible because of the sacrificial offerings which anticipated Christ's ultimate sacrifice.

The apostle John reminds us in 1 John 2:1–2: "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sins." The more we abide in Christ, the more sensitive we will become to sin, and the quicker we will recognize that we have grieved the Spirit. In such moments, we must immediately return to Christ, repelling Satan's lies and distortions that aim to keep us from coming to Christ and abiding in Him. Thus, in order to abide in Christ continually, we must ever be mindful of the words of the apostle John: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). There is, therefore, no reason for a believer to continue living apart from Him.

Sadly, many Christians appear insensitive to sin because they are not abiding in Christ and thus are living at a distance from Him. However, if we walk with Christ daily, feeding on His Word and maintaining fellowship with Him—not just during our closet moments but also throughout the day—we will become increasingly sensitive to sin and more ready to confess it immediately. Failure to do so will not only interrupt our fellowship with Christ but will also render us unfruitful. Satan will, therefore, do everything in his power to keep us from abiding in Christ. Though he cannot rob the believer of his salvation, he can rob him of the joy of that salvation that issues forth from abiding in Christ—and consequently keep the believer from living a Christ-honoring and fruitful life.

Since habitual fruit-bearing is the mark of a healthy branch, habitual fruit-bearing is the only reliable evidence of being in Christ. The visible Christlikeness that manifests itself habitually in the lives of true believers is the legitimate evidence of our invisible relationship with Him. This invisible and vital union must become visible in a Christlike life.

In John 8:31, Christ says, "If ye continue in my word," or as it can also be translated, "If ye abide in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed." Professing Christians cannot claim to know, believe in, or love Christ—the living Word—unless they consistently honor His written Word in their walk of life. All who are united to Christ the living Word will naturally, as new creatures in Christ, desire to live in obedience to His written Word. These two experiential realities are inseparably linked: union with Christ always manifests in likeness to Christ—union with the living Word always produces obedience to His written Word.

A Precious Promise

Having stated the vital relationship between Himself and His people, Christ also gives us a precious and encouraging promise: "I am the vine, ye are the branches." This declaration is the last of the seven "I am" statements in the Gospel of John and is exquisitely beautiful. Simply put, because Christ, as Jehovah in the flesh, is the "I am," we, His people, are what we are. "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit." Notice that Christ is not merely speaking of a little or occasional fruit but rather of *much* fruit.

What a gloriously assuring promise Christ articulates here for all who abide in Him! How beautifully He reiterates and stresses the intimate, experiential, and unbreakable union between Himself and His people! Christ assures His believing people, "I am your vine, and you are My branches." This profound reminder of our extraordinary and real relationship with Him guarantees that He will support and sustain us in that relationship.

In light of this intimate and irrevocable relationship, Christ urges us to abide in Him—to live in daily fellowship with Him—and thereby fully embrace the blessings this abiding will yield. He desires that His people would have a functional, daily, and fruitful relationship with Him—a relationship marked by spiritual vitality and abundant joy. The Christ who declares in John 10:10, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more

abundantly," also declares, "These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full" (John 15:11). The Christ who has loved His people with an everlasting love, who secured their salvation by His death and resurrection, and ever lives to make intercession for them, is so desirous that they would also prosper and flourish spiritually.

This desire aligns with Christ's passionate desire to glorify His Father who had sent Him, and thus He declares, *"Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples"* (John 15:8; emphasis mine). Consequently, the more fruit believers bear, the more Christlike they will become, and the more Christlike they become, the more the Father will be honored in them. The Father delights in seeing the reflection of His only begotten Son in His people. Indeed, this is the very purpose of our redemption!

In the glorious future that awaits God's people, the Father will forever delight Himself in His redeemed people as He beholds in them the perfect image of His only begotten Son. They, as His redeemed and adopted sons and daughters, will, in turn, forever delight themselves in Christ, beholding in His blessed countenance the glory of the Father. However, this mutual delight already begins here on earth as believers cultivate a real, living, and genuine relationship with Christ by abiding in Him. And the more fruit we bear by abiding in Him, the more His and our Father will be glorified!

Therefore, a life of consistent Christlikeness should also characterize us, just as it did the early Christians, who were first called "Christians" in Antioch because of their pervasive and infectious Christlike and Christ-centered witness. Can that also be said of us? Paul writes in Philippians 1:11, *"Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God"* (emphasis mine). Such fruitfulness ought to be the desire of every believer—to bear the fruits of Christlike righteousness by abiding in Christ for God's glory and praise.

Christ reinforces this truth both positively and negatively. After urging us to abide in Him to bear much fruit, He admonishes believers that "without me ye can do nothing." This passage is one of the most misquoted passages of Scripture, often taken out of context and used, instead, as an excuse for spiritual indifference or inability. However, Christ's intention with these words is not to justify fruitlessness but rather to emphasize the urgency of habitually abiding in Him. When viewed in its context, He is saying, "Without abiding in Me, you cannot bear any fruit—you cannot live a fruitful Christian life."

Thus, His message is clear: "Apart from Me, you cannot make it. Without Me, you will not be fruitful. Without Me, you cannot bear fruit." These words are not meant to discourage us but rather to encourage us. By way of the negative statement, "without me ye can do nothing," Christ simply wishes to reinforce negatively what He has just stated positively, namely, that by abiding in Him, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:13).

Christ lovingly exhorts us that we should not attempt to live the Christian life in our own strength. He is saying, "Without abiding in Me, you will fail. Apart from Me, you will stumble, backslide, lose your witness, and become fruitless. Therefore, abide in Me." Thus, His loving imperative to abide in Him is both a reminder of our dependence on Him and an invitation to experience the abundant fullness of life that He promises.

How grievous it is when those who profess the name of Christ become fruitless, backslide, and become ensnared in world conformity! What dishonor they bring to Christ! This tragic reality is all too common, as many claim the name of Christ but live in ways that contradict their profession. Such a contradictory lifestyle deeply dishonors the Savior—and, by extension, His Father. In a worst-case scenario, it may even be that their connection to Christ is not genuine, despite their outward claims. Christ Himself addresses this reality, speaking of fruitless branches that appear connected to the vine but bear no fruit.

Granted, there will be ups and downs in the spiritual lives of God's children. There may even be times of serious regression and backsliding. However, the Father, the divine husbandman, will not permit such spiritual decline to persist indefinitely. He is jealous of the honor of His beloved Son and, therefore, is deeply committed to caring for the vine, which is His only begotten Son. Since the Father gave His Son and allowed Him to be wounded so that we could be grafted into Him, He will not forsake the work of His own hands. If we backslide or stumble, He will lovingly use the pruning knife of affliction and adversity to restore us so that we may abide in Christ once more.

Dear reader, are you a fruitful branch of the Vine, Jesus Christ? Are you abiding in Him? As Hosea 14:8 declares, "From me is thy fruit found." This is precisely the point Christ is making in the passage we have considered. He is the source and fountain of your spiritual life. Everything you need for the Christian life is to be found in Him, and He provides it abundantly. Christ assures us that those who abide in Him will never be put to shame. He promises, "If you abide in Me, I will abide in you." In John 15:7–8, He says, "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples."

Let us, therefore, examine ourselves. God forbid that our connection with Christ and His church is merely an external one, and we would prove to be fruitless branches in the end. Christ states in John 15:6 that the future of such branches is to be burned—to be consigned to that place where the wrath of God the Father will burn forever against all who have rejected His Son so freely offered to us in the gospel. However, what is impossible in the realm of nature is possible in the realm of grace. Christ, by His Spirit, still transforms fruitless branches into fruit-bearing branches. Therefore, while He proffers peace and pardon, flee to this willing and able Savior of sinners who will in no wise cast you out (John 6:37).

Finally, dear believer, if your spiritual life is weak, if you have grown distant from Christ or have become entangled with the world, repent today. Fall at the feet of the Savior and confess your failure to abide in Him. He is willing to receive you—seventy times seven times! He is gracious and faithful, ready to forgive your sin, cleanse you from all unrighteousness, and renew His call to you: *"Abide in me."* If, by faith, you (again) abide in Him and He in you, you will indeed bring forth much fruit. Amen.

The Free Gift of Justification: (Romans 5)

Dr. Maarten Kuivenhoven

Why does justification matter? It mattered in the sixteenth century because the recovery of justification by faith alone in Christ alone struck at the bondage imposed by the works religion of Roman Catholicism. Rome has and still teaches that justification happens in different stages. Cornelis Venema summarizes the Roman Catholic teaching that "justification commences at baptism ("first" justification), and it is subsequently increased through the believer's cooperation with God's grace imparted through the [seven] sacraments ("second" justification). However, justification is only completed at the final judgment after a period of purification in purgatory ("final" justification)."[1]

Justification matters in our day, not just because Rome still teaches this error, but within Protestantism, it has been recycled, repackaged, and sold under what is called the "New Perspective on Paul." This new (but actually old) error teaches that believers "get into the covenant community by grace but 'stay in' and are ultimately vindicated by their works…our 'future justification' will be on the basis of a lifetime of faithfulness…justification pronounced in the final judgment will be granted only to those who have maintained their justification by persevering in obedience."[2]

These errors strike at the heart of the gospel, claiming that the work of Christ is insufficient to count as a believer's righteousness

1. Cornelis P. Venema, "Justification and Judgment," *Tabletalk* 45, no. 10 (October 2021), 19.

2. Venema, "Justification and Judgment," 19.

before God once and for all. These errors deny the free grace and mercy of God in declaring sinners to be righteous before God. They attribute far too much to man's ability to maintain his own justification. They fall back on works, as either contributing something (if not everything) to salvation. They deprive believers of the certainty and comfort of being justified fully and finally by faith in Christ. They minimize Adam's sin and its consequences as the representative of the human race. They minimize the power of Christ's atoning sacrifice as the representative of all believers. They leave a person with uncertainty as to how God receives sinners by leaving it up to man to maintain his justification. And so we would do well to maintain and recover the biblical doctrine of justification as the free gift of a sovereign and gracious God in Christ. Our theme is "the Free Gift of Justification." We will consider 1) its benefits; 2) its basis; and 3) its Benefactor.

The Benefits of Justification

As we turn to Romans 5, we find that Paul is keen to highlight the certainty of justification. In Romans 4, Paul argues that Abraham was justified by faith when he was yet uncircumcised, proving that his religious pedigree was not the ground for justification, but only his faith in the promise, power, and performance of God. Paul then shows that justification was not only for Abraham, but it is "for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification" (Rom. 4:24–25). Paul demonstrates here that justification is available to sinners, both Jew and Gentile, both religious and non-religious, through the sheer mercy and grace of God.

In chapter 5, Paul continues his reasoning, demonstrating the "so what?" of justification: "Therefore being justified by faith" (v. 1). Now what? What happens when a believer is justified? What happens when you believe upon Christ? What do you receive? There are a number of benefits that Paul brings forward to highlight the certainty of justification. These benefits highlight the

security of justification that hinge not on our performance, but on Christ's sacrifice.

If Christ's sacrifice will not fail before the Father to atone for sin, then your justification, dear believer, will not fail. It is eternally secure because in the first place we have *Christ-centered peace with God*. Notice what Paul says in verse 1: "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." What a comfort and certainty that is! You no longer need to wonder whether God is favorably disposed to you or not. Through Christ, you have peace with God. The hostility that existed between a sinner and God is removed through God's justifying grace. The wrath of God is removed against sin. Jesus is our peace. When we are justified, we not only receive the benefits of Christ; we receive Christ Himself, who is our peace (Eph. 2:14).

And because we have peace with God through Jesus Christ, we also have *Christ-centered access before God*. In verse 2 Paul writes, "By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand." The justified sinner not only has hostility removed through Christ, but he now has access to God. This brings us back to the Garden of Eden, where the angel stood with a sword of flaming fire, barring access to the place of communion with God (Gen. 3:24). But now the sword of flaming fire is gone. The wrath of God is removed, and the sinner is given access to God. The way is opened up in Christ. There is no need for other intermediaries because Christ is the only Mediator. Dear believer, you have access to God by faith into this grace (or unmerited favor) wherein we stand (v. 2). Peace is one thing, access is another. Access refers to restored fellowship and communion through the unmerited favor of God.

And the third benefit of justification is *Christ-centered rejoicing in God*. Paul moves from access to God to rejoicing in the hope of the glory of God. It is as if he extends his thoughts into eternity and the hope that propels a believer forward to what is coming. Hope conveys certainty. A present faith in Christ is also anchored in the future in the fact that a believer will one day stand before

God without sin, fully remade into the glorious image of Christ. Paul is rejoicing in Christ alone. The glory of God will be reflected in every believer, in every justified sinner, where they will no longer be sinners, but saints in every respect who reflect the glory of God. Justification provides this rock-solid hope for every justified sinner. What a believer has now in justification will be realized to the fullest extent in glory. Let us rejoice in that prospect.

The fourth benefit of justification is *Christ-centered boasting in God*. Then too, a justified sinner is able to boast in God through Christ in the midst of tribulation. Paul writes in verses 3–4, "And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope." At times, when we are called to rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, it can seem so distant, so far off, so remote from our lived experience. But justification takes the believer into his present experience of tribulation and Paul shows here how that tribulation gives way to hope. When we suffer and experience trials, it works endurance. Our faith is tested, and when it is tested it endures—we persevere by grace.

When a justified sinner endures, then that endurance works experience. The word "experience" here does not just mean a special spiritual experience, but it means that the result of being tested or proven. A person who begins a new trade is not experienced, but a person who has persevered and been tested in learning that trade has gained the experience necessary to become a master. Likewise, a justified sinner in the midst of trials learns the experiences necessary through testing and being proven. They are experienced—battle-hardened. And as they come out with this experience and maturity, trials give way to hope—the hope that Paul speaks about in the previous verses about rejoicing in hope of the glory of God. So don't lose heart! Justification benefits in the midst of trial and tribulation and brings Christ close so that we come to the one who is our hope beyond the veil (Heb. 6:19).

And this hope brings a justified sinner, finally, to the enjoyment of the *Spirit-shed love of God*. As Paul writes in verse 5,

"And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us." Time would fail me to explain all the glorious realities of this one verse, but this hope is certain because the love of God has found entrance into the hearts of sinners. The love of God as revealed in Christ and poured into the hearts of those who are justified. And we need to get what Paul is saying here—we not only receive the love of God in our hearts, but we also receive the Holy Spirit who is given unto us. The hope of a believer thus rests on the work of the Triune God in the work of justification. The free gift of justification has an unshakable foundation because of these Christ-centered benefits.

The Basis of Justification

The free gift justification also has an unshakable foundation because of its basis. The Word of God continues to point out how justification is not tied to any work or effort of man. It rests solely on the finished work of Christ alone. It rests first of all *on the timing of the death of Christ*. In Romans 5:6–8, we have a beautiful statement of the death of Christ in relation to our justification. If we go back to Romans 4 and consider when it was that Abraham was justified, it was while he was uncircumcised, while he was still in Ur of the Chaldees. That is where God found him and justified him. That is where Abraham believed the promises, power, and performance of God as he looked forward to the coming Christ who had justified him. And Paul picks up that same line of reasoning again and looks back at the death of Christ through the lens of the New Testament believer. He says, "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die, yet peradventure [perhaps] for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (vv. 6–8).

The free gift of justification rests alone on the death of Christ. You and I cannot contribute anything to our justification. The Scriptures do not say, "only when you work sufficiently does the

death of Christ apply to you." No, the death of Christ is for sinners who cannot find any life in themselves. The point of Paul's argument is to get us to see that the situation is only hopeful because of the death of Christ. That alone is the basis for a declaration, both now and in eternity, that you are righteous before God—because of the death of Christ. Your justification, dear believer, rests alone in the death of Christ. In the words of the answer to Question 61 in the Heidelberg Catechism, "Because only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, is my righteousness before God."[3]

Second, justification rests on *the purpose of the death of Christ*. Paul goes on to show how the death of Christ and the shedding of His blood not only justifies a sinner, but when a sinner is justified, he is also saved from the wrath of God. This is what Paul drives home in verse 9: "Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life." There is peace with God through Jesus Christ. There is no more wrath. "There is therefore no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). There is no more wrath in the present and there is no more wrath in the future. A justified sinner is eternally secure because of his once-for-all justification in the blood of Christ. You no longer need to wonder whether God will accept sinners based on what you do. How tenuous that is! How fear-inducing it is to live in this constant state of worry, wondering, "Will God really accept me? Does God really love me? How can He love me?" Here is the answer, dear child of God—the death and blood of Christ that saves sinners from wrath.

There is reconciliation through the death of Christ in the present. And because there is reconciliation, there is not just a state of neutrality, a blank no-man's land of emptiness. No,

3. The Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 61), in *The Three Forms of Unity* (Solid Ground Christian Books, 2010), 87.

justification brings us into fellowship with God, and we shall be saved through the life of Christ. This again speaks to the present realities and future hope of justification. It speaks to the security and certainty of a justified sinner in Christ. There is no undoing of justification because Christ's death has secured it. In the final judgment, there will be no undoing of justification for us as believers because our right standing is secured in the life of Christ and will be fully realized.

Our response to this should be joy in God. Paul writes in verse 11, "And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement." We joy in the God who gave His own Son so that we might justified in his sight: "So that, though my conscience accuse me, that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God, and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil; notwithstanding, God, without any merit of mine, but only of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ; even so, as if I never had had, nor committed any sin; yea, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me, inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart."[4]

The Benefactor of Justification

In all of this, Paul is keen to show us that justification does not come from humanity's side. It comes from Christ alone. In the closing section of this chapter, Paul draws a stark contrast between Adam and Christ as representatives—one of the human race, the other of believers.

The contrast is stark and cuts off man's contributions and exalts Christ's work and the free gift of justification, thereby underlining the certainty of a believer's spiritual state in Christ alone. Let's follow the contrast and then apply the comfort to be gleaned from it.

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4. The Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 60), in *Three Forms*, 87.

In verse 12–14, Paul points out Adam's contribution to the problem of the human race. In verse 12 he writes, "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." Adam sinned and as a result, every human being born after him inherited his sin nature and the guilt of that sin nature—what we call the imputation of Adam's sin. In verses 13–14, Paul shows that the law, both the verbal law to Adam and the written law to Moses, served to point out the guilt and penalty of sin: "For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come." There is not much hope in these verses. Indeed, the human race as comprehended in Adam is in dire straits under the guilt and condemnation and the penalty of sin. But the hope breaks through at the end of verse 14: "Who is the figure of him that was to come."

It is here that Adam is contrasted with Christ. Let's highlight that from the following verses. In verse 15, Paul contrasts the offense (sin) and the free gift (grace). Just as Adam sinned and many are dead as a result, just so the grace of God and justification through Christ abounds to many. The contrast is that Adam brought death, but Christ brings life. The contrast in verse 16 is that Adam's sin and consequent judgment brought condemnation, but the free gift means that Christ's righteousness removes the offences in justification. In verses 17–18, the contrast is between the death that Adam introduced as a result of his sin, and the life that Christ brings in through His own person and work and justification. In verse 19, the contrast is between Adam's disobedience which constituted us sinners, but through Christ many shall be declared righteous by faith. In verses 20–21, the contrast is between the function of the law in aggravating and convicting of sin, but grace prevails to overcome sin and bring eternal life through Jesus Christ.

So what is the comfort of this contrast and the comfort of the certainty of justification by faith alone in Christ alone? There is the comfort of knowing that justification by faith alone in Christ alone proclaims the gospel of done. There is nothing you or I can add to our salvation. In fact, we would only detract from the beautiful work of Christ.

There is the comfort of knowing that Christ alone holds eternal life. There is none better to run to than Christ. He is the second Adam, the perfect Adam, the obedient Adam, the righteous Adam. He is the one in whom we as the sons of the first Adam can find life for death, reconciliation instead of condemnation, perfect obedience for our disobedience, and perfect righteousness for our unrighteousness. There is also the comfort of knowing that our justification is secure, when we have believed in Christ. That security is found in Christ alone. What rest that gives as He gives the free gift of justification.

Do you believe this, dear friend? That is what is pressed home this morning from our text: "Therefore being justified by faith." Faith is the instrument by which we receive Christ in justification. The catechism picks up this Pauline emphasis as well. We enjoy this double imputation "inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart.… I cannot receive and apply the same to myself any other way than by faith only."[5] Faith brings us not only into the heart of what justification means, but it brings us into the very heart of Christ. Justification matters. It is not merely an abstract doctrine to be studied and dissected, but to be believed and embraced, because it brings us into the very heart of the Savior who accepts sinners solely on the basis of His finished work. Amen.

5. The Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 60–61), in *Three Forms*, 87.