

The Reign of Grace

Chapter 12

By Abraham Booth

HAVING taken a view of the person of Christ, and of his qualifications for the work of a Mediator, arising from his personal excellencies considered as Immanuel; we must now advert to that perfect *work*, through which grace reigns, and in virtue of which her favours are dispensed.

Grace reigns, says the oracle of heaven, THROUGH RIGHTEOUSNESS. Righteousness, in this place, I understand as including the whole of that obedience which the Redeemer, under the character of a surety, performed to the preceptive part of the law; and all those bitter sufferings which he underwent, in conformity to its penal sanction. Through this obedience grace reigns, in a way strictly conformable to the rights of Divine justice. By this most perfect work of Christ, the tenderest mercy is manifested to miserable sinners, and meets with the truth of Jehovah's righteous threatenings against sin. Here the righteousness of God, as the lawgiver, appears in taking vengeance on sin; so as to be productive of substantial and lasting peace to the sinner. Happy expedient! Wonderful grace! But let us a little more particularly consider the nature and excellencies of this evangelical righteousness.

As to its *nature*: it is a complete conformity to the Divine law. Whatever the precepts of Jehovah's law demanded, the adorable Jesus performed in its fullest extent. His nature being perfectly holy, the principle of his actions was absolutely pure; the end for which he did them entirely right; and the matter of them, and rule of their performance, without any defect. Whatever the law, considered as broken, threatened by way of punishment against the offender; to that he submitted in all its dreadful severity. For *he was made sin*; he *was made a curse*. He suffered —amazing love! unparalleled condescension! —he suffered the greatest shame, the most excruciating pain, that the malice of men, or the subtilty of devils, could invent or inflict; and which was infinitely more, the wrath of God. The duration of his passion was indeed comparatively short; but for this the infinite dignity of his person was a full compensation. When we consider that it was the SON OF GOD and LORD OF GLORY, who bled and died under every circumstance of infamy and pain; all the dreadful monuments of Divine justice inflicted on the sons of rebellion in past ages, and transmitted to posterity in the most authentic records; all the misery that awaits the licentious world, and is denounced in the Scripture; cannot raise our ideas of Jehovah's vindictive justice to so high a pitch, as a remembrance of the bitter, though transitory sufferings of

the Divine Jesus.

The *excellencies* of this righteousness appear from the characters it bears in holy writ. For to signify its unspotted purity, it is *called fine linen clean and white*. To denote its completeness, it is called a *robe*. To hold forth its exquisite beauty, richness, and glory, it is called *clothing of wrought gold, and raiment of needle-work*. To point out its unequalled excellency, it is called the *best robe*. It is better than the robe of innocence with which our first parents were clothed before the fall; yea, better than the righteousness of angels in glory. For theirs is but the obedience of mere creatures; of dependent beings. But this—which is the highest epithet that language can give—this is *the RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD*. Its nature and properties are such, that the Lord himself seems to glory in it, frequently calling it *His righteousness*. (Rev. 19:8. Isa. 112:10. Ps. xlv. 13, 14. Luke 15: 22. 2 Cor. 5:21. Rom. 10:3. Jer. 23:6. Isa. xlv. 13; 101: 5-8; 106:1)

It is an *everlasting* righteousness. (Dan. ix. 24) It is a robe, the beauty of which will never be tarnished; a garment that will never decay; and clothing that will never wear out. When millions of ages have run their ample round, it will continue the same that it was the first day it came into use; and when millions more are elapsed, there will be no alteration. The continuance of its efficacy, beauty, and glory, will be lasting as the light of the New Jerusalem; unfading as the eternal inheritance.

It is a righteousness *already performed*. It is not something now to be wrought in us, by the operation of the Holy Spirit. No; it was completed when the Divine Redeemer cried, *It is finished, and gave up the ghost*. But here many persons fall into a fatal mistake. Ready' they are to imagine, that sinners are accepted of God in virtue of righteousness wrought in them, and performed by them, through the assistance of the Holy Spirit; which assistance, they suppose, was purchased for them by the death of Christ. But while such an imagination prevails, they never can experience what it is to be in a justified state. Besides, when the blessed Jesus died, he did not do something to assist our weak, but willing endeavours to save ourselves; he did not lay in a provision of grace, or purchase the Spirit for us, by which the defects of enfeebled nature might be supplied, and we rendered capable of performing the condition of our justification. But, at that awful and ever-memorable period, when he bowed his head and expired, he, by himself alone, perfectly finished that righteousness which is the proper condition, and the grand requisite of our justification. That the Spirit of grace and truth, as given to any, is a precious fruit of the death, resurrection, and glorification of Christ, is freely acknowledged; but that Jesus died to purchase the Spirit, to work in us any part of that righteousness, on account of which we are accepted of God, must be denied. For the principal work of the Spirit, in the method of grace, our Lord himself bearing witness, is to testify of him, and reveal his glory to the sinner's conscience. *He shall testify of me; He shall glorify me; for he shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you*. (John 15:26; 16:14. I Cor. 2:12) Nor does the Spirit of truth act as a sanctifier, till, in order of nature, we are perfectly justified:

and when justified, he effects our sanctification by that very truth which reveals the obedience of Christ as a finished work. To think otherwise, is according to the Popish scheme, which confounds justification with sanctification; but is very far from being the doctrine of the apostles. It is also contrary to the sentiments of our first reformers, and of all their genuine successors, both at home and abroad.

Notwithstanding what has been said concerning the matchless excellence of the Redeemer's righteousness, the reader whose mind is enlightened to behold the defects attending his own best performances, and whose conscience is affected with a sense of deserved wrath, may, perhaps, be ready to say; "As to the glorious nature and superlative excellence of this obedience, there is no dispute. But, is it free for a mere sinner? Is it not rather designed for those who are some way qualified for it, by a set of holy principles, and a series of pious actions; those who are distinguished from the altogether worthless and vile? Is there any possibility for a miserable sinner, a condemned criminal; one whose transgressions are great and whose corruptions are strong, to partake of it, and be made happy by it? And if there be, which is the way?" To these momentous inquiries the oracles of God furnish a substantial answer. For they inform us that there is another excellency attending it, which has a special regard to the manner of its communication; and therefore ought by no means to be overlooked. Yes, blessed be God! the unerring word warrants me to assert that this righteousness is absolutely free. It was wrought for the sinner; it was designed for the sinner; and is freely bestowed on the vilest of sinners. It is not matter of bargain, or the subject of sale; it is not proposed on certain *conditions*; as, the performing some arduous course of duties, or the attaining some notable qualifications; but it is a free gift. Grace, as a sovereign, is exalted to confer it; and grace, we know, deals only with the unworthy. As a gift it is imparted; as a gift, therefore, it must be received; and as for an absolutely free gift, the professor of it should be thankful. From these considerations we may with confidence affirm, that the mere sinner, the condemned creature; he who feels himself in a perishing condition, and is conscious that he deserves no favour; has the strongest encouragement given him to rely on it, as quite sufficient for his justification, and absolutely free for his use. Yes, disconsolate sinner, you have no reason to hesitate, whether you have a right to conceive it, and to call it your own. Believing the testimony which God has given of his Son, you receive it, and enjoy the comfort arising from it. Heaven proclaims your welcome to Christ, and eternal faithfulness insures acceptance to all that believe in him.

By a figure of speech that is frequent in Scripture, this righteousness is represented as *speaking*. Doubtless, then, so noble a righteousness must have a charming language; and a little attention will discover its import. The language of this righteousness is represented by Paul, as directly contrary to that description which Moses gives of *the righteousness of the law*; and thus it addresses the anxious inquirer. *Say not in thy heart who shall ascend into heaven? That is, to bring Christ down from above*; as though he had not appeared in our nature, to perform a righteousness for the justification of sinners. Nor does it bid thee

inquire, *Who shall descend into the deep? That is, to bring up Christ again from the dead*; as if he had not perfectly paid the debt (or which, as a surety, he became responsible; and received in his resurrection, from the hand of his Father, an acquittance in full for himself and his people. *But what saith it*, what then is its language? *The word of grace which reveals this righteousness is nigh thee*, sinful and wretched as thou art. *Even so near*, as to be *in thy mouth* to proclaim its excellence, *and in thy heart*, to enjoy its comfort; *that is the word*, the doctrine of faith which we preach. It further says, *That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus*, as dying an accursed death for the redemption of sinners, *and shall believe in thy heart that God hath raised him from the dead*, as a Divine testimony that the atonement made was accepted by eternal justice; *thou shalt be saved* from final misery, and exalted to the joys of heaven. (Rom. 10:5-9)

The language of this Divine righteousness is here described, both negatively and positively. *Negatively*, we are not commanded to do some arduous work, in order to obtain acceptance; nor are we required to do any thing at all for that purpose. Because it is evident that *believing in Christ*, which is here mentioned, is, in the business of justification, opposed to works and doings of every kind. (Rom. 4:5-16. Gal. 3:12-13) The faith here designed, is, therefore, to be considered as the *receiving* of Christ and his righteousness; or, as a *dependence* on him alone for salvation. Believing the gracious report, we receive the atonement; we enjoy comfort; and have the earnest of eternal glory.

But as the awakened sinner is ever disposed to imagine that he must do some great thing, in order to obtain the pardon of sin and peace for his conscience; therefore the language of this righteousness is also *described positively*. Thus considered, it plainly declares that the only obedience by which there is favour with God, and a title to happiness, is already performed: and that the anxious inquirer is not left in a state of uncertainty how it may be enjoyed; for it is brought near in the word of grace, with a free welcome to rely on it and use it as his own, to the everlasting honour of its Divine Author.

By comparing what the apostle says about the *righteousness of faith*, with what Moses declares concerning the *righteousness of the law*, we learn, That whoever thinks of doing any good work, as the condition of life, is ignorant of that obedience which the gospel reveals; is under the law, as a covenant; is a debtor to perform the whole; and, as a breaker of it, is obnoxious to its awful curse. This is his case, even when, with the Pharisee in the parable, he thanks God for assisting him to perform the supposed condition, whether great or small. For the righteousness of the law, and the righteousness of faith, are here directly opposed. This is evident from the scope of the place in general; and especially from the adversative *but*, with which what is said about the righteousness of faith is introduced.

This vicarious obedience is no less useful to the sinner, than perfect in itself. By

this work of our heavenly Substitute, that holy law which we have broken is highly honoured; and that awful justice which we have offended is completely satisfied. By this righteousness the believer is acquitted from every charge, is perfectly justified, and shall be eternally saved. In this consummate work, Jehovah declares himself well pleased, and in it all the glories of the Godhead shine. Yes, the obedience of our adorable Sponsor is perfect as Divine rectitude could require; and excellent as eternal wisdom itself could devise. Admirable righteousness! Who that is taught of God, would not, with Paul, desire to *be found in it?* and who, that is conscious of an interest in it, can cease to admire and adore the grace that provided, and the Saviour that wrought it?

Is the obedience of the Lord Redeemer so glorious in its nature, so excellent in its properties, so free in the manner of its communication to the ungodly, and so extensively useful to all that possess it? What encouragement, then, has the miserable sinner to look to it! How safely may he confide in it, as all-sufficient to justify his ungodly soul! For, be the demands of the Divine law and infinite justice ever so great, or numerous, or dreadful; the work of Christ completely answers them all. There is greater efficacy in the grace of God, and in the work of his incarnate Son, to justify and save from deserved perdition, than there can be demerit in the offences of a sinner, to incur condemnation and ruin.

Nor can it seem strange that the work of Christ should be thus efficacious. For God the Son performed it, in the capacity of a substitute. God the Father declares his delight in it, and treats as his children all those that are vested with it. And it is the principal business of God the Holy Spirit, as a guide and a comforter, to testify of it. So that every other righteousness, in comparison with it, is quite insignificant: if set in competition with it, is viler than dross, and worse than nothing. In this righteousness Christians of all ages have gloried, both living and dying, as the only ground of their hope. In this most perfect obedience believers are now exalted and the saints in heaven triumph. For the work of Christ finished on a cross is the burden of their songs. But who can point out all its beauties? Who can show forth half its praise? After all that has been written or said about it, by prophets or apostles, here on earth; after all that has been sung or can be conceived, by saints or angels in the world of glory; considered under its Divine character, THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF JEHOVAH, it exceeds all possible praise. The inhabitants of the heavenly world must; be conscious that their loftiest strains, though expressed with seraphic ardour, fall vastly short of displaying all its excellence. So that,

"When Gabriel sounds these glorious things, He tunes and summons all his strings."

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