

## Let Zion in Her Songs Record

*John Kent (1766–1843)*

Let Zion in her songs record  
The honors of her dying Lord,  
Triumphant over sin;  
How sweet the song there's none can say,  
But those who sins are wash'd away  
Who feel the same within.

We claim no merit of our own,  
But, self-condemn'd before Thy throne,  
Our hopes on Jesus place;  
Though once in heart and life depraved,  
We now can sing as sinners saved,  
And praise redeeming grace.

We'll sing the same while life shall last,  
And when, at the archangel's blast,  
Our sleeping dust shall rise,  
Then in a song for ever new,  
The glorious theme we'll still pursue  
Throughout the azure skies.

Prepared of old, at God's right hand  
Bright everlasting mansions stand  
For all the blood-bought race;  
And tell we reach those seats of bliss,  
We'll sing no other song but this—  
Salvation all of grace.

## ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

### *In the Nick of Time*

#### Justification and Life for All Men

*Michael Riley*

In Kevin Bauder's excellent series on Christian suffering, he made an exegetical case for the salvation of those incapable of believing, especially infants. While I agree with Kevin on the hope for infant redemption, I do not find his explanation for that hope rooted in Romans 5 convincing.

Kevin argues that there is a universal application of Christ's atonement so that Adamic guilt is not the basis for anyone's condemnation before God. He writes, "In other words, by His 'righteous act' (His death and resurrection), Christ has secured not only the provision, but also the application of justification for all humans *with respect to Adamic guilt*." It would follow that if Christ's work nullifies Adamic guilt for all, then those without willful, personal sin (including infants) are accepted by God as righteous.

Our disagreement is highlighted by the universal language of Romans 5:18: "Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men." What does *all* mean here? Kevin writes,

Plenty of interpreters have tried to explain away the words "all" and "the many" that are applied to Christ's work. Some have understood these words to mean "all of the elect," or "all who are in Christ." Others have understood the justification to be merely potential and not actual. Limiting the effects of Christ's righteous act, however, works no better than limiting the consequences of Adam's sin.

Kevin takes the position that *all* means *all*. The very same group of people who are condemned by Adam's sin are also justified by Christ's righteous act. However, Kevin is no universalist. To take the position that Christ's work justifies all people, he must take *justification* to refer to something other than what we ordinarily take it to mean—indeed, something other than Paul's otherwise consistent use of the term *justification*.

That is my first objection: I cannot agree that the context of Romans allows us two distinct definitions of *justification*. I see nothing that suggests that Paul is changing his topic from justification in the fullest sense—an unchangeable declaration of righteous standing before God through Christ, received by faith, rewarded with eternal life—to this interim justification



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that exonerates a person from Adamic condemnation and restores him to a pre-Fallen judicial condition (but with a post-Fall nature).

Romans 5:12–21 is undoubtedly a distinct unit of thought, but it is part of Paul's broader defense of justification by faith alone—an argument which depends on a consistent definition of *justification*. The epistle's opening argument culminates in humanity's universal condemnation: "by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight" (Rom 3:20). This is the prelude for Paul's announcement of the gospel: "but now" we "are justified by his grace as a gift...to be received by faith" (Rom 3:21, 24).

Romans 4 sustains the argument: justification by faith is no novelty; it has always been thus for the people of God. The same justification that Abraham received by faith is for "us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Rom 4:24-25).

The very next verse opens chapter 5: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God." Paul continues to elaborate on this theme of *justification* through the rest of chapter 5 (vv. 9, 16, 18). And having rested his case that we are justified by grace through faith, he begins Romans 6 by addressing an anticipated objection: that if justification is by grace through faith, personal obedience is of no significance.

The suggestion that in the midst of this one coherent discussion Paul has (without warning) substantially changed the meaning of one of his most central terms is implausible. While Paul has unwaveringly insisted that justification is by faith, this new kind of "justification" is obtained entirely apart from faith, as it must be if it is to apply to infant redemption. Paul's justification is one that grants us "peace with God" and assurance of salvation. The new "justification" might release us from Adamic guilt, but one's own personal sin places the "justified" person back under the curse of sin. Not only can this "justified" person be lost, he can then be justified again in the second (and more ordinary) sense.

Further, within 5:12–21, the benefits obtained through justification cannot be limited to the removal of condemnation of Adamic guilt. In particular:

- 17: "those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ"
- 18: "so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men"
- 19: "so also through the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous"
- 21: "grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord"

For my part, I see no way to restrict these Pauline phrases to mean merely "provisionally no longer condemned for Adam's sin." They are strong and

full promises of eternal life that come to all/the many. They speak of justification in the normal Pauline way.

My second objection is rooted in Paul's explanation of why "death reigned from Adam to Moses" (v. 14). Paul claims that all people everywhere have come under condemnation because of Adam's sin, not because of their own personal sin. To cement this point, he focuses on the time between Adam and Moses, in which there is no externally promulgated law from God. He declares that God does not count sin where there is no law to transgress.

To be sure, sin exists during these years ("for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given," v. 13), yet God is not counting that sin. There is then in the judgment of God *no personal sin* that leads to condemnation during these years. And yet all people in this era fall under the penalty of sin: all (except Enoch) die. Paul's explanation of this is that death reigned because they are held guilty of Adam's sin.

I have difficulty seeing how Kevin's reading of this passage accounts for Paul's argument here. Assuming his view that Christ's death has universally rescued humanity from being condemned by Adamic guilt, and if God doesn't count sin where there is no law, then why should those from Adam to Moses have died at all? Otherwise, what does Paul mean when he says that God does not count sin where there is no law?

While Kevin's position does allow for *all* to have a consistent meaning throughout Romans 5, I find it quite in accord with Paul's broader theology to understand him as referring to a condemnation that comes to "all in Adam" (which state we are all in by birth) and a full justification that is the possession of "all in Christ" (into which we only come by faith). Indeed, we see this kind of *all* earlier in Romans: "for *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and [implied *all*] are justified by his grace as a gift...to be received *by faith*" (Rom 3:23-25).

To be sure, in holding to hope of infant salvation, I would rejoice to find a passage that explains the way in which God justifies infants. I fully understand that this is no mere abstract theoretical concern. Even so, it is a theological and exegetical concern, and I remain unconvinced by the exegesis of my brother, mentor, and friend.



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This essay is by Michael P. Riley, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church of Wakefield, Michigan. Since 2011, he has served Central Seminary as managing editor of *In the Nick of Time*. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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