

“To Fulfill All Righteousness”

The Saving Merit of Christ’s Obedience

I. Introduction

A. What Must I Do To Be Saved?

To make things as simple as possible in introducing the topic of this paper we will ask a question not altogether unlike that posed by the Philippian jailor who asked Paul, “What must I do to be saved.” “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved,” was the apostle’s straightforward answer to this simple question. Why? Because faith in Christ--which is really a believing “into” Christ, a closing with, so as to make up a union with him--results in the reception of all things necessary unto salvation. Christ himself is made by God to be unto us “wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption,” and we “are complete in him” (1 Cor. 1:30, Col. 2:10). We need have no doubt concerning this in the light of the massive case made for it in the book of Romans. The glory of the gospel is that it demonstrates how God has been just in the justification of those who “have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” The sinner is “justified,” i.e., accounted as righteous, judicially *declared* to be righteous, so that he is subsequently *treated* as righteous in the presence of the just and perfect judge of all men, whose law stops every mouth (Rom. 3). This justification is a decree freely made apart from the law, i.e., to one who does not work and who is not foreseen to be working, indeed, to one who is, as a matter of fact, “ungodly” (Rom. 4), yet it does not nullify the law but establishes it (Rom. 3:31). Moreover, this decree of justification is perfect and final, there being nothing admitted between it and the state of being at peace with God, in which the believer rejoices in a sure and certain hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5:1-11). The reason for this is that he has been united with Christ, so that what *has* been true of Christ, in respect to Christ’s relation to the law, as being once under it and subsequently free of it, has happened to the believer, rendering him also dead to the power of sin (Rom.

5:11-7:6). As a result of this union with Christ, the sinner has also become the recipient of the Holy Spirit, who dwells in him as a seal, not only guaranteeing the future possession of this glory, but operating unfailingly to bring at last to a state of entire spiritual and physical sanctification and glorification, perfectly conformed to the image of Christ, the firstborn of many brethren (Rom. 7:6-8:39). Nothing less than all this is meant by the phrase “thou shalt be saved.”

The question which we must now address if we are to make sense of this doctrine that God is “just and the justifier” of them that believe on Christ, is not “what must *I* do to be saved,” but “what must *Christ* do in order for me to be saved?” What is it that Christ has done in order that God may be just. What is “the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” which enables God to “justify by His grace as a gift”?

B. What Must The Lord Jesus Christ Do?

All true Evangelicals would no doubt answer, “he must die on the cross. We are saved by his atoning death, when he died in our place bearing the wrath of God which was due to us for our sin.” This is, indeed, the testimony of many texts of Scripture: “whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood.” “We have now been justified by his blood.” To this the redeemed from all nations will eternally proclaim “Amen! To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.”¹

Nevertheless, the question remains, does the Lamb’s “worthiness” to take the scroll, and does the Savior’s ability to justify and sanctify and keep his saints arise only from his being a victim in their stead, or even from the fact that this victim is the eternal Son incarnate, or is something more necessary? Are they saved by his “blood,” i.e., his “death,” considered in and of itself, as a single act, or is it more accurate to understand that what makes this death “saving” is that it is the ultimate and task-completing work of one who has been the Servant of Jehovah all his life, fulfilling the terms of a covenant for their salvation. If the latter, then it is reasonable to ask, “What is the relation of all the Servant’s service, to the Savior’s salvation?” Is salvation the result of something done *to* Christ, or is it also the result something done *by* Christ. The life Christ lived—does it

¹*The Holy Bible : English Standard Version.*, Re 1:5-6. Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001. This version or the Authorized Version is quoted throughout this paper.

simply *qualify* him to be a worthy candidate for the death he died for me, or does that life of righteousness have a more direct application to my life? Does it do something for *me*, as well as doing something for Christ? These are the kinds of questions which are in view in the discussion of the role of Christ's "active obedience" or "active righteousness" in our salvation.

C. Terms and Background

It would be helpful at this point to clarify some terms which have been employed to describe the obedience of Christ. Questions like the ones just posed were debated even before the Protestant Reformation. Mediaeval scholastics spoke of the obedience Christ performed in his life and ministry up to his passion on the cross as his "*active* obedience." On the other hand, the obedience of Christ in his death, in passively suffering the pains of crucifixion to make satisfaction for our sin was called his "*passive* obedience." Eventually, some theologians taught that Christ's "active obedience" was for himself, to qualify himself for the work of making satisfaction for sin, but was not a part of that satisfaction. Without it, he would not be the spotless lamb. He must be worthy of making the sacrifice in the end by living obediently before. As Richard A. Muller points out, this view of Christ's obedience and sufferings fits right in with the medieval view of sin and punishment which supported their doctrine of penance. Sinners could be forgiven, but since they lacked the righteousness of an obedient person, i.e., still had not met their obligation to do righteousness, they still deserved punishment.² Christ's life of righteousness, being for himself, could not be applied to them. Hence, men satisfied for this punishment in this present life by penance, or, coming short here, the debt was satisfied in purgatory.³ Protestant theology argued that both the active and passive obedience of Christ were parts of his whole work as the Mediator, satisfying the obligations of sinners both to obey God and to suffer the penalty for disobedience. Reformed theologians taught that it was in fact Christ's obedience in its totality which is imputed to believers in their justification. Consequently, there was no need or warrant for penance or purgatory. On the other hand, Arminian and Socinian doctrine disagreed

² "*Obedientia Christi*" in *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 205-206.

³ It is a great incongruity of medieval theology that a perfect divine Christ had to be obedient for himself, while the saints were able to build up a "treasury of merit" which could be applied to others.

with this. Arminianism confused justification with pardon, denying any real imputation of Christ's active righteousness, asserting that the idea leads to antinomianism. Socinianism denied the imputation of *any* alien righteousness.⁴

II. The Obedience of Christ

At this point we ask, what do we mean by the obedience of Christ. In what respect can we speak of God the Eternal Son as being obedient--to what, for what purpose, and in what way?

A. Origin

Having already established the scriptural doctrine of the Trinity, with its assertion of ontological equality among the three persons of the godhead, it seems reasonable, nevertheless, to believe that the Son's obedience as demonstrated in the economy of salvation, has its origin in that ultimate eternal status of his as the Son of the Father. That is to say, it is not a work arbitrarily assigned to the Son instead of the Father, but because the person of the Son is "of the Father," it is the Father who "sends" and the Son who "is sent" etc., in the pre-temporal inter-Trinitarian compact known as the "Covenant of Redemption." It is here, in the eternal love and delight of the Son for the Father, and of the Father for the Son, with the Father's desire that in all things the Son might have the pre-eminence, and the Son's desire that the Father might be glorified in all things, in the love and delight of the Triune God in the to-be-created "sons of men" and in the utter impossibility that God's image should be permitted to exist ingloriously, that the Father appointed, and the Son accepted, the role of Savior.

What does this mean? The Son took upon himself the task of restoring the moral uprightness of a creation which had been turned upside down by the defection of God's image. Adam would disobey. By his disobedience he, the representative man, would assert that the Creator's authority and right were not ultimate for the creature, that there was a good greater than God, and a wisdom to be had independently of God, and that there was an object other than God more worthy of his love, namely himself. This is the essence of sin, the very meaning of evil--a creature's attempt at independence from the

⁴ The preceding paragraph is a very cursory comment on a much more complex issue and its history. The reader is strongly urged to examine the issues and their development in the following works: Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 458-465; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1873), Vol. 3, 141-195.

God he is by creation bound to love with all his heart, his soul, his mind, and his strength. Surely, the threatened sentence of death must be carried out, punishment must be inflicted or the serpent is vindicated, the greatest vice is no different in its effect than virtue, and the true God is found to be false. Even if the sentence is carried out, there remains a question, how could, or why would, the “only wise God” have made man so wonderful, and entrusted this creature with his glory if the only glory to be gained from him was the glorification of the divine justice of casting him into hell. No, if God is to receive from man the glory which is due from man, more than a penalty must be paid. The “principal” must be paid also: man must demonstrate, through obedience, that God is known by him and regarded as worthy of ultimate love, trust, and honor. All men, as creatures, owe this to God, but no man has, as the psalmist says, given to Him “the glory due to his name.” Unable, having sinned in his representative, and unwilling, his heart and mind corrupt in his conception, man goes astray even from the womb. This is the reason why there must be a *new* man. He must be of Adam’s race because he must be true man to represent men, but not partaking of Adam’s guilt, not corrupted by Adam’s stain. There is one further qualification for this representative man: he must be someone who is not by nature under the same obligation as other creatures. That is, if he is to pay the debt of obedience which men and angels owe, he must not be already naturally obligated to pay that debt for himself. This can be none other than the creator. The creator must assume the obligations of the creature. He who is in the form of the worshipped and honored God “over all, blessed forever” must assume the form of a worshipping and God-honoring servant, in the likeness of sinful flesh, under the obligations of the Law, in a world under a curse. Even though not “formally” considered a part of the obedience, nevertheless the foundation of the obedience of the Mediator is laid here in the Covenant of Redemption.⁵ The Son, accepted from his Father the

⁵ The expression “Covenant of Redemption” has received some criticism in recent times. The essential points, however, are succinctly summarized by Charles Hodge:

“suretyship,” or responsibility, for a people for whom he would be Captain and Shepherd, Father and Husband untold ages before a body would be prepared for him and he would say, “Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book” (Heb 10:5-7).

B. The Servant of the LORD

One of the most important themes in the understanding of the person and work of Christ is his role as the “Servant of the LORD.”⁶ He was not only God the eternal Son, but, *incarnate*, he was God’s servant as man, and God the Father was “his God.” As such he was born the paradigmatic, representative man, the second man, the last Adam, and the true Israel, who is identified with his people in birth, in name, in circumcision, in his infant exile in Egypt and in his baptism in the Jordan. So, the Son is the Servant, living his entire life (as recorded in the gospels) in self-conscious dependence and delight in obedience to the will of his God. “I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart” (Ps. 40:8).

This obedience to God’s revealed will was, inward, deliberate, universal, life-controlling, and progressive. This inward delight in the Law of God is an essential quality of obedience. As John Murray correctly observes,

“To be an act of obedience, the whole dispositional complex of motive, direction, and purpose must be in conformity to the divine will. It was not otherwise in the case of our Lord. It was in human nature that Christ rendered the obedience required by his commission and office, and so the psychology of human action was

It is plain, ... that Christ came to execute a work, that He was sent of the Father to fulfill a plan, or preconceived design. It is no less plain that special promises were made by the Father to the Son, suspended upon the accomplishment of the work assigned Him. This may appear as an anthropological mode of representing a transaction between the persons of the adorable Trinity. But it must be received as substantial truth. The Father did give the Son a work to do, and He did promise to Him a reward upon its accomplishment. The transaction was, therefore, of the nature of a covenant. An obligation was assumed by the Son to accomplish the work assigned Him; and an obligation was assumed by the Father to grant Him the stipulated reward. The infinitude of God does not prevent these things being possible. *Systematic Theology*, Originally published 1872. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 360.

⁶ Murray writes,

In delineating the Savior’s expiatory accomplishment, no one passage in Scripture is more instructive than Isaiah 52:13-53:12. It is in the capacity of Servant that the personage is introduced (cf. Isa. 42:1; 49:6) and it is in this capacity he executes his expiatory work (cf. Isa. 52:13; 53:11)... This office implies commission by the Father, subjection to, and fulfillment of, the Father’s will. All of this involves obedience. So already we are advised that no category could more significantly express the execution of his vicarious work than obedience. *Collected Writings of John Murray: Volume two*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 151 .

applicable to him in all the intensity of the demands arising from his unique and incomparable undertaking as the Lord's Servant"⁷

We see it first in his simple, matter-of-fact response to his anxious mother: literally, "Didn't you know that I must be about my Father's things,"⁸ Here was his, as it is meant to be every man's, every child's, "element"—the things of God. Whether in the temple, or in going down and being subject to his parents he was obedient, and continued so, growing in wisdom, and stature, and in the favor of God and men (Lk. 2:40).

He grew in favor with God. How can this be? It can only be in the Father's pleasure in him as he obediently passes through the progression of increasingly difficult and complex temptations of human life. The perfectly obedient child grows into the perfectly obedient man, learning obedience "through the things that he suffered," in his pilgrimage from infancy through childhood, puberty and adolescence and young manhood. By associating obedience with suffering we are reminded that his obedience was that of deliberation, understanding the Father's will, feeling the pressure, counting the cost, and preferring the pleasure of God's approval to any relief or advantage proffered by sin. He learned and practiced obedience to God in the home, in the school, in the synagogue, the marketplace, the carpenter's shop and the prayer closet, until the day when the time for him had come to be manifested to Israel and enter upon his ministry. He is baptized, not for the remission of sins, for he has none, but, as the surety of his people, "to fulfill all righteousness." What was the measure of his life at this time? The Father tells us, "In him I am well pleased," as he will testify again on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt. 3:15-17; 17:5; 2 Pet 1:17). Then, the second Adam is tempted of the devil, not in a garden but in the desolation of the Judean wilderness. This time, however, this "Adam" this Israel in the wilderness, will submit himself to the trial and provision of his God, await the pleasure of and submit himself to the method of his God, and receive a kingdom God's way, even though that way will lead him to a cross (Mt. 4:1-11).⁹ Though there were many things for which he, the Mediator, was uniquely ordained to do and to suffer, his *response* to these peculiar Messianic callings is the

⁷ Murray, *ibid.*, p. 152.

⁸

μ μ ;

⁹ See Thomas Manton's exposition of the *Temptations of Christ* in volume 1 of his *Works*.

response owed by all men to their peculiar callings, obedience to the revealed will of God.

Thus God's "Holy Servant Jesus," as Peter calls him (Acts 3:13, 26: 4:27, 30), enters upon a ministry which is absolutely determined by his understanding of, and delight in, his Father's will: "I came down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him that sent me," "I do always the things that please him" (John 6:38, John 8:29). It is his meat, his drink, and the zeal that consumes him (John 2:17; 4:34). In it he demonstrated not only that he was the expected Servant of Isaiah, the Messiah who comes bringing the kingdom of God (Luke 4:18-20, Mt. 11:2-6), but the Son who is the model for all God's sons, in faith and love, patience and zeal, consistency and constancy. There is no part of the law of God, moral, ceremonial, civil concerning which his enemies can find actual fault, so he can truly say, "which one of you convicts me of sin" (John 8:48). Rather, he fulfills every jot and tittle (Mt. 5:17-19). The call to discipleship is the call to follow him, to think and to speak, and to work as he does, to please the Father (e.g., John 5:19-47). He is the arch exemplar of all his teachings: he models every beatitude, demonstrates every grace and fruit of the Spirit. Paul's grand definition of spiritual love in 1st Corinthians 13 is best expounded from the character of Jesus.¹⁰ His life is the archetype of every virtue, spiritual and social, toward God and man. At the beginning of the last week of Jesus' life, when struck afresh with the sense of the nearness of his death he prays, "Father, glorify your name, and the Father bears him this testimony from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." (John 12:27-28). The Father has upheld him, and the Servant has not grown faint or been discouraged in his mission to establish justice in the earth (Is 42:1,4).

Finally, he comes to Gethsemane to face the ultimate test. Will he trust God, love God, honor God, with the giving of his very life? Will he obey in that which none other will every be called upon to do, to drink into his holy soul the full cup of divine vengeance against the sins of others? Men foolishly talk of being willing to be damned for the glory of God, but here was one man who knew exactly what that meant. He looked into the gaping mouth of hell and all within him recoiled from it in horror. Nevertheless, exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death, sweating blood at the prospect of

¹⁰ See J. Edwards' *Charity and its Fruits* for a brilliant demonstration of this.

it he prays, “O my Father, if this cup may not pass from me except I drink it, thy will be done.” “The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it” (Mt. 26:42; Jn:18-11). Even this is not “passive,” however, but a continuation of that active doing, of choosing to obey God, through all the utter and unparalleled self-denial of the trial, the patience of enduring the scorn, beating, and abuse of sinners, opening not his mouth in contempt, but only to pray for their forgiveness, care for his mother, preach good news to the perishing, to announce the triumphant completion of his obedience, “τετέλεσται”--“It is finished,”--until in one last God-glorifying act of faith, “staying upon his God” against a “frowning providence,” he commits his soul into his Father’s hands.

How profound and high the pleasure of God in this life of obedience. How inestimable is the honor given to God by this Last Adam! What glory now crowns the divine righteousness, wisdom, and grace! Here, indeed, is a treasury of merit sufficient to justify a million worlds of sinners.

III. For His People, and Imputed to Them

To sum up, the whole obedience of Christ’s life as a Mediator, from his coming into the world, the “passive obedience” of the sufferings of circumcision, his virtuous conduct under the common lot of a man “born to trouble,” his faithfulness under the uncommon temptations he suffered from Satan as the Messiah, and his willing acceptance and patient bearing of his solitary agonies as the one bruised and crushed and damned on Calvary constitute the righteousness of his life. However, all this obedience was not for himself, but for his elect, for whom he made satisfaction to the demands of the law: satisfying its requirements by obedience, satisfying its penalties for disobedience by his death. That He was “made under the Law to redeem them that were under the Law that they might receive the adoption of sons” (Gal. 4:4-5) clearly points to the connection between His obedience in life and the privileges of the believer.

Opponents of this doctrine have often raised the objection, noted earlier, that as a true man he must obey for himself, and hence, his obedience is not imputable to others. The reply, made by many since the reformation, is succinctly summarized by George Smeaton:

The answer to this, as it was uniformly given by the Lutheran, and also by the best Reformed divines, on the ground of such passages as the present, was that humanity

was assumed by the Son of God into the unity of His person, to be an instrument or organ in His work; that it existed only in the person of the Son, and never apart from Him; that the law as such had no competent authority over the Son of God, who was Himself the lawgiver; that His human nature, also called the Son of God, was not under the law but exempt from it in any covenant form; and therefore that He was made under the law, not because He had a human nature, but because He willed to be under it, to finish a work of obedience which might be given away to those who had none. This was meritorious obedience, and given to us as a donation.¹¹

It is important also to stress that the active obedience of Christ was not only *for* his people but it is also imputed *to* them.¹² As John Owen argued, "If it were necessary that the Lord Christ, as our surety, should undergo the penalty of the law for us, or in our stead, because we have all sinned, then it was necessary also that, as our surety, he should yield obedience unto the preceptive part of the law for us also; and if the imputation of the former," that is, the penalty, "be needful for us unto our justification before God, then is the imputation of the latter," i.e., the preceptive part, "also necessary unto the same end and purpose" (5:251). Wilhelmus a Brakel' agrees with this: expounding Romans 5:19, "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous," a Brakel says,

One can only be conformed to the law by fulfilling its demands— by perfect internal and external holiness. The law does not demand *either* punishment or holiness, but *both*. Therefore by removal of guilt the Surety cannot make anyone righteous unless the law has also actually been fulfilled. "He that doeth righteousness is righteous" (1 John 3:7). Since Christ makes His elect *righteous*, He of necessity must subject Himself to the law on their behalf, fulfilling it in *obedience*. Thus, by His obedience He makes His elect righteous.

¹¹ Smeaton, George. "Paul's Doctrine of the Atonement," *The Doctrine of the Atonement According to the Apostles*. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation. electronic ed. based on Hendrickson reprint of 1870 ed. Simpsonville SC: Christian Classics Foundation, 1996.

¹² On justification and the obedience of Christ, see also: Anthony Burgess' sermons "On The Imputation of the Righteousness of Christ Both Active and Passive" in *The True Doctrine* (1654, 284-456); Bunyan's *Justification by an Imputed Righteousness* (1853, 1:301-334); John Brown of Wamphrey, *The Life of Justification Opened* (1695). John Owen's best discussion of the obedience of Christ and its place in the justification of sinners is found in his treatise *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (*Works*, 5:5-400). With regard to this question Owen says, "the obedience whereof we treat, being not the obedience of the *human nature abstractedly*, however performed in and by the human nature; but the *obedience of the person of the Son of God*, however the human nature was subject to the law ... it was not for himself, nor could be for himself; because his whole person was not obliged thereunto. It is therefore a fond thing, to compare the obedience of Christ with that of any other man, whose whole person is under the law. For although that may not be for himself and others ... yet this may, yea, must be for others, and not for himself (5:255-6). See also Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1994), 445-455, and especially, Chapters 5-8 of Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* (Escondido, CA: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990) Vol. 1, 202-255.

After providing a good succinct summary of general reformed exposition of the topic, a Brakel concludes,

Suffering is not righteousness. Christ's suffering was not His righteousness (that is, when considering the definition of suffering), but His righteousness is His perfect fulfillment and performance of the law. If therefore Christ's righteousness is imputed to us and we are the righteousness of God in Him, then His being subject to and His performance of the law is imputed to us.¹³

IV. The Importance of this Doctrine

A. Negatively

Without it there is not a real foundation for justification at all. In his death there is a kind of foundation for the passing over of Adam's debt that we should die, but there is no foundation for the like imputing to us of any righteousness, or of eternal life, or of any of the fruits of justification. At best, we are simply returned to square one, restored to a kind of moral and spiritual neutrality with no positive righteousness imputed to us. Having said this, however, we are immediately struck with the inadequacy of it, for without a covenant, without an agreement that establishes Christ as his people's representative, even his death would be ineffectual to undo what Adam's disobedience had done. On the other hand, granting the existence of the covenant, we see that it is the representative's obedience, all his obedience without qualification, by which "the many will be made righteous."

Furthermore, without it there is not even a basis for any *other* gift of God which in Scripture is attributable to the obedience of Christ. It is not because Christ obeyed by dying, but that he obeyed in "the form of a servant ...even unto death" that he receives the mediatorial glorification and its attendant benefits for his people, the principal of these being the shedding forth of the Holy Spirit from heaven. Without this, there is no union with Christ, no regeneration, no faith, and hence no personal entrance into the justified condition. In short, all the benefits of salvation from election in Christ before the creation of the world to establishment in a state of infallible and perfect glorification hang

¹³ a Brakel, Wilhelmus. *The Christian's Reasonable Service, Volumes 1 and 2 : In Which Divine Truths Concerning the Covenant of Grace Are Expounded, Defended Against Opposing Parties, and Their Practice Advocated as Well as The Administration of This Covenant in the Old and New Testaments*. Published in electronic form by Christian Classics Foundation, 1996. electronic ed. of the first publication in the English language, based on the 3rd edition of the original Dutch work. Morgan PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996, c1992.

upon the successful accomplishing of his appointment as the God-glorifying man who as man and for men fulfills all righteousness.

Consequently, without it there is no, *absolutely* no, basis for full assurance. Indeed, there is no basis for assurance at all, except the groundless assurance of those who ignorantly assume that all they need is forgiveness and the opportunity to make a fresh start.

B. Positively

Objectively, here is the basis of justification. God has been obeyed by a perfect, chosen, non-obligated man for other men. Therefore, be they ever so ungodly in themselves, they may, in union with him, be regarded and treated as having “fulfilled all righteousness.”

Subjectively, the active righteousness of Christ affords the soul with the very highest ground of assurance--at the throne of grace, in the hour of temptation, and, as J. Gresham Machen bore witness, in the hour of death. Here is Joshua, clothed in filthy garments before the Lord. His filthy garments are taken away and he is clothed in other garments. Whence come those other garments? Has Joshua spun them out of his own grace-assisted works? No, he is not given another filthy loin cloth, but dressed in the glorious regalia of a priest.

Jesus! Thy blood *and righteousness*, my beauty are, my glorious dress.
Midst flaming worlds in these arrayed, with joy shall I life up my head.

* * *

A debtor to mercy alone! Of covenant mercy I sing!
Nor fear with *Thy Righteousness* on, my person and offering to bring.

* * *

No condemnation now I dread: Jesus, and all in Him, is mine!
Alive in Him, my living Head, *And clothed in righteousness divine*,
Bold I approach the eternal throne, and claim the crown through Christ my own.

* * *

In temptation, as Satan presses hard to persuade the believer that he may as well give up, his weakness will render his cause hopeless, the Christian may assure himself

that he, in his Savior, has already fought and prevailed against this foe, and so encouraging himself, may carry out his part of the battle, “strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might” with this his breastplate: “The Lord Our Righteousness.”

What is that righteousness with which the Christian is clothed and armored? It is that full life of obedience, that “well pleasing” life--from the obedience of incarnation to the obedience of death. We have a high priest who has prayed, “I have finished the work thou gavest me to do;” and John 17:29, “I do always the things that please thee,” “for their sake I consecrate myself” (John 17:4,17 As the “five bleeding wounds” plead, and the blood that speaks better things than the blood of Able speaks, it is not death only that is pleaded, but a covenant fully satisfied by such a life. All that God could want from sinners, Jesus has given in their stead. Consequently, at the risk of being charged with antinomianism, (and the orthodox preacher of the gospel is *always* charged with antinomianism) we insist that there is nothing to be added by men as to their justification before God, and the fruits of that justification are guaranteed.

V. Conclusion

Finally, this is the source of the highest delight and praise in the child of God, as is clear from the joyous song of Isaac Watts:

Awake, my heart; arise, my tongue, Prepare a tuneful voice;
In God, the life of all my joys, Aloud will I rejoice.
'Tis he adorned my naked soul, And made salvation mine;
Upon a poor polluted worm He makes his graces shine.
And lest the shadow of a spot Should on my soul be found,
He took the robe the Savior wrought, And cast it all around.
How far the heav'nly robe exceeds What earthly princes wear
These ornaments, how bright they shine! How white the garments are!
The Spirit wrought my faith, and love, And hope, and every grace;
But Jesus spent his life to work The robe of righteousness.
Strangely, my soul, art thou arrayed By the great Sacred Three!
In sweetest harmony of praise Let all thy powers agree.¹⁴

¹⁴Watts, Isaac. *The Psalms and Hymns of Isaac Watts*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1998.

Appendix

A Few More Lines from the Letters of Robert Murray M'Cheyne

There is only *One* in all the world on whose face God can look and say, “He is altogether lovely.” Jesus is that One.

Now God is willing that you and I should *hide in Jesus*. I feel at this moment that He is my righteousness. “This is his name whereby he shall be called, The Lord our Righteousness” (Jer. 23:6). I feel that the love of God shines upon my guilty soul through Jesus. This is all my peace. Your tears will not blot out sin. They do nothing but weep in hell; but that does not justify them. Your right views of the gospel will not justify you; you must be covered with a spotless righteousness. Your change of heart and of life will not justify you; it cannot cover *past sins*—neither is it perfect. Your amended life is still fearfully sinful in Jehovah’s sight, and yet nothing but perfect righteousness can stand before Him. Jesus offers you this perfect righteousness; in Him you may stand and hear God say, “Thou art all fair, my love.” There is no spot in me.

Remember, you cannot be fair in yourself before God. Song. 1:6 must be all your prayer: “*Look not upon me.*” Take yourself at your best moments, you are but a vile worm in Jehovah’s sight, and so am I. Remember, you may be “perfect in Christ Jesus.” Allow yourself to be found in Christ. Oh, what will come of you if you are found in yourself? Where will you appear? You will shrink back, and call on rocks and mountains to fall upon you and cover you. But if you are hiding in Jesus—if your eye and heart are fixed upon His wounds made by our sins—if you are willing to be righteous in His righteousness, to lie down under the stream of His blood, and to be clothed upon with the snowy fleece of the Lamb of God—then God will love you with His whole soul exceedingly. The pure, full love of God streams through the blood and obedience of Jesus to every soul that is lying under them, however vile and wretched in themselves.

If you were lying at the bottom of the sea, no eye could see your deformities: so when the infinite ocean of Immanuel’s righteousness flows over the soul, you are swallowed up as it were in Christ. Your blackness is never seen, only His fairness; and thus a God of truth can say, “Behold thou art fair; behold thou art fair, my love. Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee” (Song 4:1–7). Keep this always in memory; and when guilt comes on the conscience, as it will, lie down again beneath the righteousness of Jesus. Never lose sight of this.¹⁵

¹⁵Bonar, Andrew A., and R.M. McCheyne. *Memoir and Remains of R.M. McCheyne*. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation.; Published in electronic form by Christian Classics Foundation, 1996. electronic ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1996, c1947.

The sufferings of Christ for our salvation.

“Save me, O God, the swelling
floods
Break in upon my soul;
I sink, and sorrows o’er my head
Like mighty waters roll.
“I cry till all my voice be gone,
In tears I waste the day:
My God, behold my longing eyes,
And shorten thy delay.
“They hate my soul without a cause,
And still their number grows
More than the hairs around my head,
And mighty are my foes.
“’Twas then I paid that dreadful debt
That men could never pay,
And gave those honors to thy law
Which sinners took away.”
Thus in the great Messiah’s name,
The royal prophet mourns;
Thus he awakes our hearts to grief,
And gives us joy by turns.
“Now shall the saints rejoice, and
find
Salvation in my name;
For I have borne their heavy load

“Grief, like a garment, clothed me
round,
And sackcloth was my dress,
While I procured for naked souls
A robe of righteousness.
“Amongst my brethren and the Jews
I like a stranger stood,
And bore their vile reproach, to bring
The Gentiles near to God.
“I came in sinful mortals’ stead,
To do my Father’s will;
Yet when I cleansed my Father’s
house,
They scandalized my zeal.
“My fasting and my holy groans
Were made the drunkard’s song;
But God, from his celestial throne,
Heard my complaining tongue.
“He saved me from the dreadful
deep,
Nor let my soul be drowned;
He raised and fixed my sinking feet
On well-established ground.
“’Twas in a most accepted hour
My prayer arose on high;
And for my sake my God shall hear
The dying sinner’s cry.¹⁶

¹⁶Watts, Isaac. *The Psalms and Hymns of Isaac Watts*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1998.

