

JUSTIFICATION THROUGH FAITH GIVES INNUMERABLE BLESSINGS

Prof. Martin Hoffmann
Evangelical Lutheran Free Church (Germany)

At this second meeting of the CELC we let the dearest part of faith be put before our eyes: "Justification by grace through faith." It was recovered in the Reformation. The Lutheran Church lives from this source. Everywhere this dogma stands on the front page: in the service, children's lessons, Bible studies, at the work with youth, adults, and elderly people—in the ministerial work in general.

But in spite of all this we are not able to understand the greatness of this message. Our heart is too small to comprehend this marvel. It would like to explode because of this pleasure. And yet, it cannot hold this message by its own strength. We have to hear it again and again—for a lifetime. Let us be guided to this source by a man who was specifically appointed to do so, the apostle Saint Paul. What he particularly explains in the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans one can sum up as the following:

Justification through faith gives innumerable blessings

I. THE RECONCILIATION OF THE CROSS AND ITS BLESSINGS

It created:

1. peace — with God
2. justice — before God
3. reconciliation — from God
4. life — out of God

II. THE MESSAGE OF FORGIVENESS AND ITS BLESSINGS

Because of this:

1. God's love — is poured out
2. Faithful confidence — is awakened
3. Christian love — is kindled

III. THE CHRISTIAN CROSS AND ITS BLESSINGS

Under that:

1. Faith — is kept
2. The good fight — is led

I. The reconciliation on the cross and its blessings

1. Peace—with God

Saint Paul writes: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have PEACE WITH GOD through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ro 5:1). At this point Saint Paul does not mean the peace of the soul or conscience. He does not say that we have given up our enmity against God. Here he says that God has given up his enmity and anger.

Do we know what a blessing that is? We will draw a comparison. A war is going on in the country. Families lose their fathers. Men do not find their wife and children. How much the people would like to have peace! Before Christ died on the cross, there was war between God and us. We human beings had risen against God. However, he did not take it, but punished us sinners. Since that time the earth is full of death. There is no hope that we could ever win this war! We have to admit that it serves us right. We have trampled God's goodness under foot. But our misery is even greater. Our end on this earth is only the beginning of eternal punishment. That already is visible today: infirmities, sickness and epidemics,—war, misery and catastrophes,—hate, enmity and murder are the forerunners of Judgment Day. Nobody can escape from that.

Then God's Savior Jesus Christ stepped forward, died on the cross, and made peace. We were as bad as before. God still was the Almighty, Holy, and Righteous One. Nevertheless, now he holds out his hand. The one who grips it in faith has peace. He still lives in a world which is affected by the war between God and sinners. But he himself does not have to be afraid that even one part of God's punishment will hit him. He is sheltered. Peace was proclaimed from one who does not vacillate in his promise. This promise is not founded on our achievement or our good behavior, but on Jesus' death on the cross! In this way peace is indestructible and everlasting.

2. Justice—before God

Saint Paul describes why that peace is indestructible: "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him" (Ro 5:9). For this reason peace has a steady basis. The holy and righteous God did not simply turn a blind eye. That would be incompatible with his holiness. Rather, he managed a real way out. His Son has balanced our debts on his account: "Having canceled the written code, with its regulations that was against us and that stood opposed to us, he took it away, nailing it to the cross" (Col 2:14). Nevertheless he had to pay in "severe currency." His life was the currency: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45).

Can we fathom what that means? Also in daily life one can fall into debt. Woe to the person for whom the debts get out of control! Such debts threaten misery and stress. Great is the joy if someone substitutes for him. What good fortune to find such a helper! But we sinners could not hope that God would help us! Should he ask his Son to sacrifice his life? And yet he did it! What fortune! But our situation was even more hopeless! The one who has been helped out of debts does not want to make new debts. He would never find a helper for a second time! How could we stand before God? If God would have forgiven our past debts only, we would not have been saved. Who could in the future love God with all his heart and completely keep his commandments? Also we Christians have to admit: "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Is 64:6). What a blessing that Jesus Christ has redeemed the guilt of our entire life. Yes, 2000 years ago he redeemed the guilt even of those human beings who ever lived or will live on this earth. We can always look at the cross. There our guilt was paid. Something that no one would do in daily life—God did it. Does he not deserve the right to expect that we avoid everything that would offend him?

But still we do not grasp everything we won through Jesus Christ. He did not only take on our guilt, but at the same time he gave us his divine righteousness. Now we come before God as righteous ones: "Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous" (Ro 5:18f).

How blessed is our situation! The one who is freed from his debts has reason for joy. But he is also ashamed. All his friends know: he is a poor wretch! His debts were freely canceled. He himself does not have anything to offer! God could look at us in disdain. Because of Jesus we do not have any more guilt before God. What does he think about us? With Saint Paul we have to admit: "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (Ro 7:18f). How miserable are we as we stand in front of God! But something incomprehensible happened. Jesus Christ made us "presentable." He gave us the fullness of his love, righteousness, and holiness. If we in faith step in front of God, we do not appear to him as unpleasant. Instead of filthy rags we wear the white robes of righteousness. This is how we will one day enter heaven. Saint John was allowed to get a glimpse of this: "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. . ." (Rev 7:9,13f).

Is that not a real comfort? Of course, we do not have anything to offer. But what we are missing was given to us. Because of Jesus we have a place in the community of the holy angels and the crowd of the redeemed. We will always cherish this dress of righteousness and will not soil it frivolously.

3. Reconciliation—from God

But it is even more what Jesus did on the cross! He touched the Father's heart! He sacrificed himself for us criminals. He threw his innocence onto the scales for us. In the Old Covenant God allowed animal sacrifices. This was how he wanted to let himself be reconciled. But now no animal died. God's Son gave himself into death (cp. Jn 1:29; 1 Pe 2:24): "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (Is 53:4-7). With that Jesus Christ won his Father's heart for us. Saint Paul states: ". . . when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son" (Ro 5:10). God's enmity against us made way for a new sentiment—not cool neutrality, but loving affection (Ro 5:2). This happened once for all. Now we have free entrance to him (cp. Eph 2:18; 3:12): "Through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand" (Ro 5:2). Now in faith we can step in front of him at any time. Being a Christian also means embracing God's grace and peace.

Can we estimate what that means? With a little bit of good fortune people who failed escape the line of fire. Their debts are paid. They also receive money again. But no decent human being wants to have anything to do with them. Who knows what one will go through with them in the future! That is what could happen to us. Still there is nothing good in us. Everything that we have to show about ourselves is from God. And even that we pull through the dirt. God cannot rely on us. How could God come to like us? But that happened! On account of Jesus he serves us with exceeding kindness. He is attached to us in love. Everything must serve for our best (Ro 8:28)! That will not change in the future because our Savior always stands up for us. For that reason God's friendly sentiment will never change. He, the master of the world and our life, has in mind now and in eternity only what is good for us.

4. Life—from God

Life and blessedness are given to us through Jesus' death: "For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" (Ro 5:10). What the apostle here writes is an important thing! We will be "saved" and "blessed" by God's anger!

But how can it happen that God's anger inflames? How can death and damnation still overtake us? Is not the whole world saved? Is God not really satisfied? Indeed, that is true because of Jesus' sacrifice for all human beings—and that is complete. But one can gamble away salvation. The one who does not take Jesus and his sacrifice in faith, but refuses it with indifference, pride, and unbelief, tramples God's mercy under foot. At the end God's anger will strike him. Instead of finding eternal blessedness, he will be destroyed in hell. God will not let himself be mocked.

This truth scares us. Still, in spite of good intentions, we always fail. We despise God's mercy with not really believing him, with sin, and with a lack of love. Does God not have to push us away? Not at all. Saint Paul comforts us by referring to Jesus' sacrifice. If God was able to do something like that because of his love, we do not have to be afraid that he might be too weak to forgive us. This is even common among human beings. Parents forgive their children. Should God not be able to manage that on behalf of his children? Believing in our Savior we are and we remain saved. The Apostle Paul assures us: "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6).

Our blessedness will remain, brought by our God and Redeemer. Now our time will not be sufficient to describe this blessing of justification in its full splendor. But at least we want to listen to what the Apostle John writes: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away'" (Rev 21:14). Is that not the most magnificent blessing that could be acquired through Jesus' sacrifice?

Justification through faith gives innumerable blessings

The justification of the sinner which took place on Golgotha through Jesus Christ's sacrifice causes a whole new situation for us. For all people, without any exceptions, a plentiful blessing is therefore brought about.

THROUGH GOD WE SINNERS HAVE A BEAUTIFUL AND INDESTRUCTIBLE FUTURE:

- * PEACE,
- * JUSTICE,
- * RECONCILIATION, AND
- * ETERNAL LIFE.

II. The message of forgiveness and its blessings

This blessing of justification which God brought about 2000 years ago for all the world has to be spread among the people since this is God's will. This is why he lets the gospel of Jesus Christ be preached in the entire world. Saint Paul writes: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. . . . We are therefore Christ's ambassadors. . . . We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Co 5:18-21). That message of our justification brings along with it all the blessings which we just considered. Whoever accepts it in faith is saved. So the Apostle Paul calls to the warden of the prison in Philippi: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household" (Ac 16:31). As the message of our justification comes to us human beings, its blessing develops in our life.

1. God's love—poured out

Saint Paul writes literally: "The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us" (Ro 5:5).¹ What does Saint Paul mean in this section with the words: "the love of God is shed abroad"? Two possibilities are taken into account: first is the love we have for God, and then the love that God has for us. Which is correct can only be shown by the context. The love we have for God arises as an answer to the love we experienced from God. But Saint Paul does not talk about that yet. Not until the next chapter will he deal with that. But at this point and in the following verses Saint Paul presents what God did and still does for us because of his great love. That is why "the love of God" can only mean that love which God himself has for us. So with "the love of God is shed abroad in our heart" Saint Paul says: the message of what God did for us out of love fills our heart. It becomes overloaded from what it hears. It cannot comprehend what love God gave us at a time when God was still our enemy. At this time God tore his Son from his heart. Hearing that, we can only be astonished, rejoice, and worship.

This pouring out of God's love happened and still happens through the Holy Ghost: "the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us" (Ro 5:5). What a marvel that is! Our hearts cannot realize God's love on their own. By nature we are enemies of God (Ro 8:7). If a human heart hears something about Jesus' death, it can only mock it (1 Co

1:18). God's Spirit has to make our hearts capable of understanding (1 Co 12:3). He does that when a scared sinner hears the magnificent message of God's grace: "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Ro 10:17).

Can we realize what a blessing that is? We have not been any different from the people around us. They do not want to know the Trinity. Either they only live for the next day and reject belief in a superior being at all. Or they build up their own gods. For them a sermon about Jesus is laughable and stupid. This is how our heart was by nature. For this reason we belonged to those who fell to God's anger. But then God's Spirit came and opened our heart for the gospel. Then we did not want to mock Christ's cross anymore. Now we can only be astonished at God's love and worship it. The message about Christ's cross is now the biggest treasure we have on earth.

But the marvel is even greater! God did not only send his Spirit through the preaching of justification to kindle faith. He came to stay with us. God's Spirit is poured into our hearts. He has chosen our poor, weak, and sinful hearts as his home. He did not come to punish our sins and infirmities. He came to forgive, to dress, and to hallow us. This is why he strongly attests in word and sacrament that God loved sinners like us in Jesus Christ and that he acquired salvation. From this we become completely sure of our salvation!

2. Faithful confidence—awakened

Wherever God's Spirit enters, nothing stays the same. By nature ungodliness, selfishness, and unbelief ruled in us. But now the Holy Ghost terrifies us through God's law. We recognize our sins. Filled with fear and despair we look for help. Jesus Christ shows it in the gospel. This is how he comforts us and awakens faithful confidence. Saint Paul describes now how the Holy Ghost deeply settles this emotion in our hearts. He allows an important point to become apparent: "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. . . . Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" (Ro 5:6,9).

First the Holy Ghost puts the greatness of God's love in view. For that he produces irrefutable proof. With the words "when we were yet without strength" Saint Paul recalls the former times. Before Christ redeemed us we were in a bad condition. We were at that time by no means heroes in the fear of God, in believing, or in charity. We were incapable: "dead in transgressions and sins" (Eph 2:1). "Hostility" determined our relationship to God (Ro 8:7). Then God sent his Son at the time he previously determined (Ga 4:4). He died for us—then still godless people.

In a small sentence Saint Paul makes plain how astonishing that was. Martin Luther translates: "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good matter someone might possibly dare to die" (Ro 5,7).² At best human beings risk their life for a "noble thing." Individuals again and again risk their life for their idea of a "righteous world." Doctors, for example, sometimes put their own lives in danger. But they do not do that to stand up for "righteous" people. They help because of a "good thing." They want to save human lives. That happens. But where does anybody sacrifice his life for someone else because the other one is "righteous"? That would happen only if it serves a "noble thing." But with God it was totally different! He risked his Son's life for us human beings. The reason was not a "noble thing." On the contrary! Good and righteous it would have been if he had punished us as godless, ungrateful people and rebels! The reason was not a "righteous human being." We were not righteous, but sinners. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Ro 5:8).

What kind of love God proved! But that is not only an event in the past. This sacrifice is still worthy today and will be forever in the future! This is why Saint Paul says: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Ro 5:8). When the Holy Ghost reveals this godly love to us we cannot hold back because of joy and amazement: "Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation" (Ro 5:11).

With that God's Spirit laid the foundation-stone upon which he can build, to help us out of troubles of conscience, being afraid of the future, death, and despair. Now he shows what results from the deliverance: "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. . . . Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" (Ro 5:6,9). This conclusion overcomes our doubt.

Even when our sins always come into our minds, one thing remains true. Jesus Christ also died for that. He has paid all debts. He gave us life. After his death we are no longer debtors, enemies, apostates, unjust ones—but justified, friends, even God's children. Should not he now more than ever show us his love? Out of his hands—can there come anything else but forgiveness, care, faith, and eternal blessing? If this is so, we do not have to be afraid of God's anger anymore. We can trust him as children trust their father. Then there is no longer any reason to be afraid of death and eternity. Eternal life in God's glory is our future. Saint Paul makes clear the effects of the Spirit in the following words: "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (Ro 8:15-17). So we boast in "hope of the glory of God" (Ro 5:2).

Where the Holy Ghost awakens confidence through the message of the gospel, life looks totally different. Instead of guilt, discord, fear, loneliness, senselessness, powerlessness, despair, and death there is forgiveness, justice, peace, confidence, community, life, and blessings. When Luther recognized in his pangs of conscience God's grace, he felt he had entered paradise after being in hell. As radically as that life had changed for him. What he went through everybody will experience who is brought to faith in the justification of the sinner.

3. Christian love—kindled

When the Holy Ghost shows our heart God's love and awakens confidence in Jesus Christ, then even more blessings come to us. Saint Paul shows how out of baptism grow the strength and motive for a new holy life. Through baptism we are taken into Christ's death and resurrection: "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. . . . For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace" (Ro 6:3f,11f,14).

Just as Christians turned from being God's enemies to being God's children, the Holy Ghost also changed their hearts and lives. They cannot be amazed enough about God's love for them. This love became their rescue. For this they take refuge in faith. They live by this. This has consequences for their lives. They who once fled from God and only lived for themselves and their wishes, turned towards God, now talk to him, thank him, and praise him. Our whole new life can be a thankoffering to God: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will" (Ro 12:1f).

This also has consequences for our association with people. Out of the richness of godly love from which we draw, our heart is able and willing to share. Christians start turning to their fellow creatures for Christ's sake, to forgive offenses, to requite evil with good, even to love their enemies. Where we live out of God's love, love, reconciliation, peace, community, and life come from us. Wherever they can, Christians serve their neighbors with the gifts which God entrusted to us. But most of all they share the message of the gospel with other people.

This is how the “harvest of righteousness” which is given to us for Jesus’ sake shows in life with God and human beings (2 Co 9:10). Are not these glorious blessings of our justification? We do not have to watch silently and inactively how God made us rich in his love. We are allowed to serve him and our neighbors with hearts, mouths, and hands out of sheer gratitude.

Justification through faith gives innumerable blessings

God allows the message of our justification through Jesus Christ to be delivered through the gospel in word and sacrament. Where this message readies our hearts, it works rich blessings.

OUR HEART RECEIVES NEW LIFE THROUGH THE GOSPEL THERE

* GOD’S LOVE — IS Poured OUT.

* FAITHFUL CONFIDENCE— IS AWAKENED.

* CHRISTIAN LOVE — IS KINDLED.

What a wonderful thing! We realize this much better with a comparison. When doctors are able to help sick people, they come back to life with new strength! Modern medicine is able to do things we once only dreamed of. Is a heart weakening? A pacemaker is given. Is it totally used up? It is replaced by a new one. With that one can compare what happens to us under the gospel. The Bible itself speaks about getting a “new heart” through God’s Spirit (Ez 36:26), putting on the “new self” (Eph 4:23f), “rebirth” (Titus 3:5; 1 Pe 1:3,23).

With that comparison we find: the Holy Ghost puts human medicine to shame! Doctors insert pacemakers to help a tired heart to keep on working. For God our old sinful heart was “dead”; it could only be replaced by a new one. Doctors get their “new” hearts from healthy people who lost their life by a tragic accident. But the Holy Ghost could not fall back on a natural human heart. He had to renew completely our senses by his strength. What a blessing when a human being realizes the greatness of God’s love through the preaching of the gospel, so that he comes to faith and receives a totally new life.

III. The Christian cross and its blessings

Now we have learned from Saint Paul how the blessing of justification from the cross on Golgotha pours out into our heart and gives us a share in real life with God, which will one day find its completeness in eternal glory. But with that, the blessings of our justification before God are not exhausted. They are especially visible in the sorrows and needs of everyday life. Something astonishing happens under the blessing of our gracious justification. Even troubles become praiseworthy: “Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us” (Ro 5:3-5).

People boast about their achievements, their success and their luck. Nevertheless, this boasting has no place before God. What people boast of they either received from God (1 Co 4:7) or is in truth to their shame (Phil 3:18f) because they live in opposition to God. Christians know they boast of something else: “But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: ‘Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.’” (1 Co 1:27-31). We cannot praise our Savior enough for his love and grace and our heavenly home.

This we praise. But to whom would it come to mind to praise the misery that affects him? However, the Holy Ghost shows us that for redeemed sinners even troubles become a reason for praise.

1. Faith—keeping

“Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us” (Ro 5:3ff). With these words the Holy Ghost discloses an error. We think misery takes away courage and leads to despair. But it is different. Whereas the Holy Ghost kindles faith through the forgiveness of sins, distress helps it to get ahead.

We have seen that faith has a glorious certainty: God has given up his anger; sin is eliminated; the debts are paid. There is peace. God is the dear father of his children. No Christian can have any doubt about that, because God raised our Savior from the dead on the third day. From this faith draws its confidence. But it always happens that misery, grief, fear, and pain oppress us. We doubt God’s love, care, and fidelity. How come? The cause is our heart. The human heart is “deceitful above all things and beyond cure” (Jr 17:9). Its old way is still in Christians. It does not want to be under God’s commandments. It thinks it has enough strength to face life. This old heart always gains ground. But at the same time our faith becomes weaker. In this way we place ourselves in grave danger.

Now God comes to our assistance. With his Word he calls us to return. He shows us our sin. Often he underlines this call to repentance with external misery. Frightened by this, a Christian realizes his helplessness. He feels that he cannot escape God’s arm. He considers his life and finds refuge under Christ’s cross. “Hardship helps to understand the message,” Luther translates a sentence of Isaiah (Is 28:19). So in the middle of misery a Christian’s faith is not destroyed but tested and purified. When he has newly found the Savior, he knows that his misery will have an end. Because: “in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Ro 8:28). Above all, the hope of eternal blessedness appears more and more attractive and interesting in front of the believer’s eyes. So happens what Saint Peter places in view for our comfort: “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Pe 1:6f, cp. Ps 66:10-12; Is 48:10).

Do we realize how God helps us especially through misery? We learn from God’s Word and experience it in our life: a Christian’s misery does not destroy faith but purifies and strengthens it. Is that not also a wonderful blessing of our justification?

2. Fights—enduring

“Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us” (Ro 5:3ff; cp. Jas 1:2f). In this way Christians prove good in life: They fight the “good fight of faith” (1 Ti 6:12) and overcome what wants to bring them down.

First of all this applies in hardships. We can make this clear with sacred history: A woman found Jesus and asked him for help (Mt 15:21ff). Her daughter was tortured by the devil. How severe it must have been for her that Jesus did not even seem to hear her! Indeed, he roughly rebuffs her. He would be there only for the Israelites. But she was by nature a heathen. One would not take the bread away from the children to give it to the dogs.

How it must have been in the woman’s heart! She had thought this Jesus would be the promised Messiah. He would not reject “all who are weary and burdened” (Mt 11:28). But Jesus only seemed to increase her misery. Her poor daughter was at home. Here she was turned away. Was her faith a mistake? No, she did not know anyone else who could help her. She had to keep on asking Jesus. Eventually he would listen. The woman was not mistaken. At the end Jesus praised her steady faith (Mt 15:28).

Why then did Jesus hesitate so long with his help? He tested her faith in order that the woman would hold onto him even more firmly and with greater determination. In the end he helped her just the way she had believed he would. How happy the woman must have been. Above all she learned one thing: it pays to pray continuously (cp. Lk 18:1ff). Even Jesus does not help instantly.

He never rejects faithful prayers. So the woman received double help. Her daughter was healthy and her faith came away strengthened from this hardship.

That is also how we can learn patience under burdens. When doubt comes about whether our faith is justified, we look at the cross! That is what Jesus Christ took on for us. Should we ever think he would leave us in trouble? Because of our justification we remain confident even in hardships.

But misery and burdens strengthen us in following Christ also. Saint Peter writes: "He who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God" (1 Pe 4:1f). While Christians in misery give up their own plans, despair of their own power and while they have to adjust to God only, they let themselves be bound firmly to God. They learn that they cannot presume a supposed "right" from God. As sinners they only live by grace. Sheltered in grace they find the strength and will to accept in faith even the dark courses on which they are led by their Lord.

Saint Paul is a good example of that. Three times he had prayed to God with all his heart that he would take the burden off him. He was beaten with fists by the devil's angel. But this prayer was not fulfilled the way he hoped it would be. Instead, he heard: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Co 12:9). There Saint Paul learned: "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." What a great work he was able to do in this way as a missionary to the gentiles!

So also for us, in the end affliction becomes a blessing. And we become useful tools of God through which he can help others in physical and spiritual misery. In the Epistle to the Hebrews it says: "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (He 12:11).

Justification through faith gives innumerable blessings

The justification of sinners through faith is such a sublime possession that even misery and distress become a blessing for a Christian.

TRUSTING IN JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE THE CHRISTIAN'S □AFFLICTIONS BECOME A BLESSING.

THROUGH THIS A CHRISTIAN LEARNS:

- * FAITH — KEEPING AND
- * FIGHTS— ENDURING.

* * *

We have seen what a blessing lies in the sinner's justification by grace. In our justification we received everything we needed: salvation and certainty of salvation. We agree with Stöckhardt when he writes:

"We Christians often think too little of our present possession. We regard our justification through Christ as only the first step on the way to salvation, the final goal lying far distant: . . . But that is not the case. The greatest and most important has already happened. . . . We are reconciled to God through Christ's death, . . . our account with God has been settled, our eternal lot is decided. . . . The essential thing is that God is for us. The other is less essential, whether we joy in our God here amid the tribulations of this time or there in the blessed life of glorification. But the latter will follow since the essential is determined. . . . However, the right way to this goal is not to look forward to the future but with mind and thoughts to become absorbed in the present grace, in the grace of justification. The more firmly we become rooted in this, the closer we are to heaven" (Römerbrief, p. 232).

End Notes

1 JH ajgavph tou~ qeou~ ejkkevcutai ejn tai~i kardivaii hJmw~n dia; pnevmatoi aJgivou tou~ doqevntoi hJmi~n.

2“Nun stirbt kaum jemand um eines Gerechten willen; um des Guten willen wagt er vielleicht sein Leben.”—Movlii ga;r uJpe;r dikaivou ti ajpoqanei~tai uJpe;r ga;r tou~ ajgaqou~ tavca ti kai; tolma~/ ajpoqanei~n.